

**Does Ownership Matter?
The Effects of Ownership on the Coverage of Political Scandals
In Hollinger and CanWest Owned Newspapers**

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In August 2000, CanWest Global Communications Corp. purchased the largest newspaper chain in Canada, Southam Inc, from Hollinger International Inc. CanWest was founded and is currently owned by the long-time Liberal supporter Israel Asper and his family. The major shareholder of Hollinger was the staunch conservative Conrad Black. The change in ownership had the potential to dramatically alter Canada's media landscape, as not only had ownership changed hands but possibly, the dominant ideology of the newspapers as well. Under Black's ownership, many critics, including Jean Chrétien, claimed that Black's newspapers proliferated a conservative view. Black was accused of using his newspaper chain for the promotion of his own self-interests. This was interpreted as him having little regard for the information needs of readers, and quality, unbiased journalism. Ironically, some of his most vocal critics were in his employ and their dissenting opinions appeared in his newspapers.¹ Despite this fact, charges of owner influence of the editorial control of the papers continued to claim that Black quashed all divergent views with an iron fist. The charges of bias did not decline when the Asper family seized the reins of control over the Southam chain.

At the core of the argument against the sale to the Aspers was that Canada has a high degree of press ownership (over 95 per cent controlled by six chains). Additionally, Canada exceeds its American neighbour in this respect, where in 1998 the largest fifteen chains owned 25 per cent of daily newspapers.² Therefore charges that the Asper family would disseminate their political values onto the public with little respect for objective reporting were abundant. For people concerned about the diversity of opinions in the media changing from a conservative to a liberal ownership does not necessarily offer any additional voices in the news.

¹ See for example, Doyle Driedger "Black All Over: As Others Exit, One Media Mogul Bets Heavily on Print." *Macleans*, 13 May 1996, 42-43; Peter C. Newman "Conrad Black's Private Agenda," *Macleans*, 17 June 1996, 34.

² Walter Soderland, and Kai Hildebrandt "Does Press Ownership Affect Content? A pres and Post-Study of the 1996 Hollinger Corporation Acquisition of Canadian Newspapers." Paper presented to the Meeting of the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States, San Antonio, (2001) 2.

Press owners hold a theoretical power to greatly influence not only what the public knows, but also what they consider to be of importance. It is argued that owners have an awesome opportunity to influence the way Canadians think about pertinent issues and their governance. While many people may have perceived a change in content and slant coinciding with this change in ownership, there is no conclusive empirical evidence to lay truth to these claims. The question remains how frequently, if at all, do owners utilize their enormous power to mould the public's mind?

A magnitude of research has been conducted on this very question, offering inconsistent results. According to Soderland and Hildebrandt, this is partially due to the conflicting pressures on owners. Do owners seek mass appeal and thus, maximize profits? Alternatively, or do they want to use their newspapers as vehicles for the dissemination of partisan political commentary and self interest? The latter option runs the risk of ostracizing their readers and advertisers, resulting in an eventual loss of revenue and profits.³

Clearly many journalists, academics and critics are mindful of the possible threats that a concentrated press ownership poses to the democratic principle of a "free press". Opponents and proponents alike have put forth a number of distinct but related theories on the results of ownership. This paper starts with an examination of the competing theories. It moves to examine whether ownership is at the core of editorial decisions. This question is answered by undertaking a content analysis of Southam newspapers compared with a non-Southam paper during the time ownership changed hands.

Unsurprisingly, chain owners are members of an elite and fortunate class in Canada. As such, it is obvious that their interests and fundamental concerns may not only differ from, but are diametrically opposed to, those of the public. Critics from both the left and right have vocalized their fears about the lack of diversity in editorial commentaries. They see the threat of a capitalist ideology (and hence, the ideology of the owners), being promulgated to the masses as very real and particularly detrimental to a free marketplace of ideas. For example, according to Linda McQuaig, a prominent left-wing writer, one should always bear in mind that,

... all media outlets are owned by rich, powerful members of the elite. To assume that this fact has no interference on the ideas they present would be equivalent to assuming that, should the entire media be owned by, say, labour unions, women's groups or social workers, this would have no impact on the editorial content.⁴

Diane Francis, a well-respected author and Southam columnist, identified with the political right, argues that because most Canadians live in an one newspaper town,

...their window of the world is narrow, their information fed through a biased-cost effective focus ... The iron grip held by a handful of magnates

³ Soderland and Hildebrandt, 3.

⁴ Linda McQuaig, *Shooting the Hippo: Death by Deficit and Other Canadian Myths*, (Toronto: Viking Press, 1999), 12.

is a problem in a country where balance, impartiality and independence from other tycoons such as big advertisers is sorely needed.⁵

One obvious perceived role in media organizations the lack of representation for minorities and the poor and their issues. Gilbert Cranberg, Professor Emeritus at the University of Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication argues that "... the pressure for profits has led newspapers to focus on the affluent readers most desired by advertisers. The consequences are zoned editions, news coverage and marketing targeted at the well-heeled at the neglect of the inner city."⁶ This is a belief echoed by many who feel that the interests of the wealthy are promoted at the expense of not only the economically disadvantaged, but, the average citizen as well.

These notions of a lack of representation and a perceived silencing of diverse opinions are particularly troublesome. It is believed by some that chain owners advocate only one view: that which best serves the interests of the publisher/owner and members of their economic class. Erin Steuter made the case in her examination of New Brunswick daily news coverage compared with the *Globe and Mail* of the 1994-1996 Irving Oil Refinery Strike. The Irving family owns the majority of New Brunswick's dailies as well as the oil refinery. The study found that New Brunswick Dailies' editorials and coverage of the dispute were slanted in favour of corporate interests.⁷ Rather than prove chain ownership to be problematic, the study illustrated a problem with media cross-ownership of other business and subsequent self-censorship. In the same study, however, *The Globe and Mail*, a conglomerate organization, also favoured the owners and management, representing the strikers in a negative light. This finding amplified the concerns of critics. By siding with the owners, *The Globe and Mail* limited themselves to the concerns of corporatists and did little to satisfy the public's need for a well-rounded, unbiased, account of the labour dispute. In essence, the voice of the labourers went largely unheard in both the Irving-owned papers and *The Globe and Mail*. Opponents of chain ownership argue that a democratic society should be able to rely on the illustration of a diversity of opinions and ideas, not only those of the business class.

Sometimes there are positive results of chain ownership. While Cecile Gaziano found American chain newspapers homogenous on presidential endorsements, Gaziano also found bigger chains were less restrictive of editorial freedom (at least about presidential endorsements) and varied in homogeneity according to size, geography and other characteristics.⁸ Contrary to conventional wisdom, readers were not spoon-fed a one-dimensional view stemming from some far off corporate office. Instead they were afforded a view that coincided with their particular geographic and presumably, regional, economic demographic.

Wagenburg and Soderland's 1974 and 1976 studies, coupled with later Soderland studies on the influence of chain ownership on editorial comment in Canada, offer similar results: "... there was no direct link to be found between chain owners and identifiable

⁵ Diane Francis *Controlling Interest: Who Owns Canada?* (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1986) 317.

⁶ Gilbert Cranberg "Taking Stock of Corporate Ownership" *The American Editor*, April (2002), 22.

⁷ Erin Steuter, "The Irvings Cover Themselves: Media Representations of the Irving Oil Refinery Strike, 1994-1996" *Canadian Journal of Communications*, 24, no. 4 (1999), 641.

⁸ Cecile Gaziano "Chain Newspaper Homogeneity and Presidential Endorsements, 1971-1988" *Journalism Quarterly*, 66, no. 4, (1989), 844.

patterns of election coverage on the part of the papers.”⁹ They did, however, find a relatively similar account of the 1979 and 1980 federal elections amongst the studied chains.¹⁰ On the surface, this may imply that the coverage from all of the analyzed chains was slanted—infiltrating the public with a one-dimensional view of the elections. However, these similarities may also be indicative of some sound judgment calls on behalf of all of the chains in question. The trouble with evaluating whether or not these were examples of a limited mindset or an accurate portrayal of the events is compounded by the fact that news is considered a “credence good.” This implies that it must first be consumed in faith, as Bartholomew Sparrow puts it, “... it is difficult for the customer to evaluate the quality of the commodity even after he or she has consumed it.”¹¹

Critics of Canada’s concentration of press ownership agree that coverage and editorial tone is more representative of the elite affluent than the common man. Yet, given the fact that newspapers are businesses and that mass appeal is crucial to their financial successes, many scholars point out the necessity of print media in attracting large audiences. A newspaper would be hard-pressed to find readers if they were to produce a paper replete of high quality journalism or if they were to alienate themselves from the issues and informational needs of the public.

Advertising accounts for 70-80 per cent of all newspaper revenue.¹² As such, a fiscally minded newspaper will attempt to garner a high circulation in order to deliver a large audience to their customers (the advertisers) and sell their space at premium rates. This is a given fact of the newspaper industry; the debate only lies between those who believe papers seek mass appeal and those who see the industry as catering to the “right” audience.

Lance Bennett argues that today’s media moguls attempt to attract the desired demographic audiences in order to generate the greatest profits.¹³ For broadcast news, this demographic is believed to be youth and in particular, young males. Those with higher disposable incomes are considered to be the targeted and most desirable demographic of the newspaper industry.¹⁴ Proponents of this view no doubt look to the perceived proliferation of capitalist ideals throughout the pages of the daily newspaper as the foundation for their arguments. Yet, this promotion of private property rights and corporatism may be little more than a reflection of the values that dominate today’s North American society.

Those that believe the print media to be in search of a sizable audience point out that, for better or worse, newspapers are marketed for mass appeal. According to Doug Underwood; “Today’s market-savvy newspapers are planned and packaged to ‘give readers what they want’; newspaper content is geared to the results of readership

⁹ Walter Romanow and W.C Soderland *Media Canada: An Introductory Analysis* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1992), 274.

¹⁰ Romanow and Soderlund, 274.

¹¹ Bartholomew Sparrow, *Uncertain Guardians: The News Media as a Political Institution*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 101.

¹² Sparrow, 77.

¹³ Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion, 5th Edition*, (New York: Longman, 2003) 85.

¹⁴ Cranberg, 22.

surveys...”¹⁵ Therefore to sway public opinion with commentaries, editorials and content that is out of sync with the current beliefs and values of readers, would only be detrimental to the owners. Critics may have claimed that “... when Conrad Black took over, certain opinions about certain subjects became unwelcome,”¹⁶ however, it is quite possible that these “unwelcome” views were contrary to public opinion. This type of content would only serve to alienate the readers, resulting in an ultimate decrease in circulation and loss of advertising revenue, and considering Conrad Black’s reputation for business-savvy, it is highly probable that muted stories were muted because they threatened the bottom line.

With regards to political coverage, and especially elections coverage, some argue that newspapers are even more determined in the crusade for bias-free reporting. According to Everette Dennis, “Deliberately or even innocently alienating a portion of the audience through unfair and biased coverage of candidates and causes would be self-destructive.”¹⁷ With this in mind, it is possible that Israel Asper’s statement “...we should have one, not 14 official editorial policies,”¹⁸ and the resulting “must-run” editorial policies stemming from a corporate office in Winnipeg, could have been partly to blame for Southam’s dwindling circulation numbers and the speculation that as of August 2001, the *National Post* had lost \$200million and was losing more each week.¹⁹ While the two schools of thought may disagree on the size and demographic of the audiences that are sought after, it is clear that newspapers are businesses and the larger their audiences, the greater their potential for profits.

Some academics and members of the journalism field argue that large chains have a heightened freedom of the press, as they need not fear the loss of a handful of advertisers in the face of a controversial story or opinion piece. It is believed that they are more resilient against these setbacks, as they have a larger share of available audiences and thus, a stronger economic base. Walter Romanow and Walter Soderlund point out that large organizations hold the necessary legal and financial resources to challenge political authority on behalf of society:

Those who challenged President Nixon at the time of the Watergate scandal were not local community radio stations or small-town newspapers. Despite threats, challenges to the president and his administration came from the *Washington Post* and the CBS network, media organizations of considerable size and scope.²⁰

While a vast network of lawyers and a hefty profit margin may afford large chains the opportunity to engage on such adversarial investigative reporting; the notion that chains and media conglomerates are immune to the pressures of advertisers is naïve. In fact, a pulled account can have long lasting effects on news coverage:

¹⁵ As quoted in Bennett, 85.

¹⁶ Mel Hurtig, *The Vanishing Country: Is it Too Late to Save Canada?* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2002) 142.

¹⁷ Doug Underwood, *When MBAs Rule the Newsroom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), xii quoted in Bennett, 110.

¹⁸ Keith Damsell, “CanWest scales back policy,” *Globe and Mail*, 12 February 2002, B8.

¹⁹ Hurtig, 146.

²⁰ Romanow and Soderlund, 265.

In 1970, for instance, when NBC ran a news special on the conditions of migrant workers who picked citrus crops for Minute Maid, Coca Cola (the parent company) pulled its multimillion-dollar account. For at least eight years thereafter, NBC did not produce a documentary on a controversial issue involving an important account.²¹

Editorial content is also easily manipulated under pressure from large accounts. Throughout the early 1980's, Mobil Oil Company induced media companies into withholding stories unfavourable to Mobil and not printing any editorial content that would counteract the favourable publicity the oil industry was enjoying.²² These are not isolated cases by any means; they simply highlight the role that advertisers can play in the three fundamental functions of the media- gate keeping, framing and agenda setting. The influence that major accounts hold over even multinational media conglomerates is astounding. According to Leonard Downie, the executive editor of *The Washington Post*-the same newspaper that uncovered the Watergate scandal: "... few newspapers engage in real investigative reporting, and when they do, private business is almost never examined."²³ Notwithstanding these remarks, the Enron scandal and concomitant investigation into corporate accounting fraud may have proved him wrong.

In general, newspapers may not wish to risk their profits for the comparatively scant gains of a breaking investigative report. Frank Stanton, CBS President acknowledges "... since we are advertiser-supported we must take into account the general objectives and desires of advertisers as a whole."²⁴ The result being investigative reporting that primarily concerns itself with matters outside of the business-realm. It is not too difficult to imagine that a government who regulates the broadcasting industry at arms length and who wields enormous power over the interests of chain owners may too, be considered a priority over the lofty ideals of a socially responsible press.

One of the many theories put forth by those in the industry and scholars alike, is that chain newspaper owners have a great deal of influence over the tone and content of their papers. Considering that owners cannot oversee every facet of news operation, everyday, in every paper they own, this responsibility must be delegated to others. Daniel Chomsky argues that: "... editors are carefully selected for this purpose. It is their responsibility to shape the content of news coverage on a daily basis."²⁵ Chomsky's historical analysis of management mechanisms at the *New York Times* illustrates the emphasis placed on a shared set of ideals throughout the selection process of newly minted editors. Sulzberger, a former publisher of the paper, had previously approved every editorial before it appeared in print. After having appointed Charles Mertz as editor of the editorial pages on the basis of their friendship, Mertz's acceptance of Sulzberger's ultimate authority and their shared opinions, values and ideals, Sulzberger no longer felt the need to oversee every aspect of the opinion pages. This appointment established a precedent at the *New York Times*—no issue was to be discussed or critiqued in the

²¹ Sparrow, 79.

²² Sparrow, 79.

²³ Sparrow, 79.

²⁴ Sparrow, 80.

²⁵ D. Chomsky ("The Mechanisms of Management Control at the *New York Times*." *Media, Culture & Society*, 21, no. 5 (1999), 587.

editorial section, which conflicted with the ideology of the owner/publisher.²⁶ This trend continued throughout the years, often resulting in devastating consequences for those who offered a dissenting view. Pulitzer-prize winning Sydney Schanberg had his column taken away after he critiqued the *Times*' stand and coverage of a local issue, and countless others have faced the brunt end of the axe for offering opposing views.²⁷

Canada's media industry is filled with such ideology-driven hiring practices. After acquiring his Southam newspapers, Black hired some new editorial staff from like-minded think tanks. Some syndicated left wing columnists Richard Gwyn were reduced in many, but not all, Southam papers disappeared from Southam news pages.²⁸ The most publicized example of this type of ideology-driven personnel policy occurred in the summer of 2002, when the Asper family terminated Richard Mills, then publisher of *The Ottawa Citizen*. His exit was prompted by the print of an editorial that criticized Jean Chrétien, despite previous warnings to refrain from such condescending editorial content.

Scholars argue that through the hiring of select editors, owners and publishers can ensure that the "desired" ideology and only this, is disseminated in the pages of opinion. Because editors are hired with the explicit purpose of perpetuating the beliefs of the owners; critics argue that this limits the amount of diverse opinions that are heard. It would however, be a mistake to assume that this is a feature unique to chain papers.

Byron St. Dizier found that editors at independently owned newspapers were just as likely to share the same values as the owners and/or publishers. At chain-owned papers, 49 per cent of the editors said they never disagreed with the paper's owners, while 53 per cent of these at independent papers gave such a response.²⁹ It can thus be assumed that the influence an owner has over the content of their paper, through the careful selection of editors, is an influence shared by all media owners.

Clearly, these are a wide array of opinions on if and how ownership affects content. Unfortunately, the findings from numerous studies on the issue have been inconsistent and hence, inconclusive. It is our hope that by analyzing articles in the *National Post*, *The Ottawa Citizen* and *The Globe and Mail*, we will be able to address the question of whether or not ownership influences content with regards to coverage of political scandals.

Canadian Historical Background on Press Concentration

Concentration of press ownership is not a recent phenomena; Canada's media history is rich with not only a limited set of owners, but also a partisan press. "In the 19th century, newspapers were small operations, locally owned and highly partisan, often

²⁶ Chomsky, 580-581.

²⁷ Sparrow, 93.

²⁸ Hurtig claims that, "Syndicated columnists such as "Dalton Camp and Richard Gwyn disappeared from Southam pages" (142). Searches of Southam papers does find a reduction, but not elimination of Gwyn. However, at the time Gwyn was not picked up at the Southam papers he did manage to become a columnist for the Toronto Star. As for Dalton Camp, he appeared regularly in many Southam papers until his death.

²⁹ Byron St. Dizier "Editorial Page Editors and Endorsements: Chain-owned vs. Independent Newspapers," *Newspaper Research Journal*, 8, no. 1(1986), 66.

relying on government patronage or party financial support.”³⁰ During the 1860’s, editor-politician George Brown of the then, *Toronto Globe and Mail* set out to expand his assets and promulgate his political interests by launching the highly partisan *Western Globe* of London, Ontario. Likewise, the publisher of Montreal’s *Daily Witness* saw it as his personal mission to promote his religious beliefs not only to Montrealers but to all those in surrounding regions.³¹ Thus, throughout the birth and infancy of the Canadian nation, partisan and openly biased newspapers spoon-fed the public their daily serving of slanted news.

By the turn of the century, the emergence of new technologies (i.e. the telegraph and mechanized printing) led to a further proliferation of newspapers and the arrival of two highly profitable and related markets: readers and advertisers. Competition for mass audiences led many papers to bankruptcy and successful owners were able to purchase these faltering operations at little financial cost. By 1920, the Southam and Sifton chains were well established, marking the beginning of Canada’s movement towards concentrated ownership, one that had begun decades before in the United States and abroad.³² Despite the critical, influential and oft cited but largely ignored recommendations put forth in governmental studies such as the Senate Special Committee on Mass Media (The Davey Committee) of 1970 and the (Kent) Royal Commission on Newspapers of 1981, this trend has endured with little prohibitive legislation in its way. In 1995, chains owned 88 per cent of Canadian dailies, by 1999 the number had increased to 95 per cent accounting for 99 per cent of the nation’s circulation.³³

In 1996 Conrad Black, CEO of Hollinger Corporation spearheaded the acquisition of several Southam, Armdale and Thompson newspapers. Additionally, in November 1998, he oversaw the launch of the *National Post*, a competitor to the only other national daily: *The Globe and Mail*. Black’s well-known conservative ideology, in the eyes of many critics, put him at odds with the principles of a free press. Beginning in the summer of 2000 and by August of the following year, ownership had completely changed hands from Hollinger Inc. to CanWest Global Communications.

Hollinger Corp.’s massive holdings expansion in both 1992 and throughout 1995 and 1996 triggered a heightened renewal of criticisms towards the concentration of press ownership in Canada and its effects on democracy. Editorials and columnists in scholarly journals and magazines were quick to cry foul. Peter Newman of *Macleans* made his opinion of the Hollinger purchases quite clear: “There isn’t the slightest doubt that he (Black) intends to use his newspapers to influence public opinion to back his conservative view of life.”³⁴ An editorial in *Canadian Dimension* highlighted the fears of many when it proposed that the consequences of Hollinger’s acquisitions would “...

³⁰ Fred Fletcher and David Taras, “The Mass Media: Private Ownership, Public Responsibilities,” in M. Whittington and G. William, (eds.) *Canadian Politics in the 1990’s*. (Scarborough: Nelson Canada, 1995), 297.

³¹ A. Siegal, *Politics and the Media in Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1996), 135.

³² Fletcher and Taras, 297.

³³ Soderland and Hildebrandt, 4.

³⁴ Newman, 34.

viciously narrow the range of public debate, advancing corporatist ideals while suffocating dissenting voices.”³⁵

In the eyes of many critics, Black’s adversarial relationship with Chrétien served to further justify the questioning of his ability to provide objective coverage. Jean Chrétien had protested the coverage that he and the federal Liberals had faced in the *National Post*, at one point referring to the daily national as *Frank* magazine, a satirical publication.³⁶ Their embattled relations reached a well-publicized climax when in June 1999, Chrétien exercised his royal prerogative in an attempt to block Black’s claim to British peerage. In turn, Black initiated a lawsuit against Chrétien, alleging an abuse of power. The Prime Minister’s open disdain for the treatment he received in the pages of the *National Post* was mentioned as a fact in Black’s statement of claim,³⁷ exemplifying the height of their rivalry and the perceived bias in news coverage. In the end, Black received his appointment to the British House of Lords, but not before relinquishing his Canadian citizenship. Black then sold his Southam acquisitions and later, all shares of the *National Post* to the Asper family.

The sale of Hollinger’s Southam holdings to CanWest in the summer of 2000, coupled with their August 2001 acquisition of 100 per cent of the *National Post*, have only further enraged opponents of chain owners and media conglomerates. The Asper family has deep-rooted ties with the federal Liberals and a well-known, amicable relationship with Prime Minister Chrétien. Critics feared that this personal relationship would infiltrate into their newly purchased newspapers, and not without reason. Following an Asper-initiated, “must-run” editorial directive to all newspapers in the Southam chain, Hugh Winsor of *The Globe and Mail* drew attention to the benefits a political party can derive from allied media owners:

What need for a communications chief when the man who sets the editorial direction of newspapers with 60 per cent of the total country is such a fan that he will not only take on your enemies, such as Conservative Leader Joe Clark, but will be prepared to flagellate your tormentors in his own news rooms as well?³⁸

The acquisition by CanWest of Hollinger’s Canadian daily newspapers in 2000 and the remaining control of the *National Post* in 2001, afford us a unique opportunity to study the affects of ownership on newspaper content. As previously noted, Conrad Black has not only well-known conservative views but an openly adversarial relationship with Jean Chrétien. Alternatively, the Asper family has a history of amicability with Chrétien and deep-rooted ties with the governing Liberals. By looking at the change in the volume of coverage afforded to the federal Liberals’ political scandals in the *National Post* and *The Ottawa Citizen* under Black and Asper’s ownership, respectively, we seek to answer

³⁵ “This publication is not owned by Conrad Black,” editorial, *Canadian Dimension* November-December (1996), 4.

³⁶ Alan Freeman “Controversy over Black, coverage of PM linked,” *The Globe and Mail*, 21 June 1999, A1.

³⁷ Murray Campbell “PM should take stand, lawyers for Black say,” *The Globe and Mail*, 9 November 1999, A1.

³⁸ Hugh Winsor, “Journalism 101: Currying Favour in the New World of Convergence” *The Globe and Mail*, 7 March 2001, A5.

the question of what effect, if at all, ownership plays in newspaper content. We suggest that if ownership truly impacts coverage, it will be most evident here. We contend that this change in not only ownership, but in the differences of the owners' political leanings will make a strong case to test Israel Asper's assertion that "There would be no important editorial changes for the paper, or in its approach to the news,"³⁹ and consequently, the effects of ownership on newspaper content.

If ownership of the newspaper matters insofar as newspaper owners give better or more sympathetic attention to their friends and use the papers to attack their opponents we expect that the coverage of the federal Liberal party will change as a result of the change from Hollinger to CanWest. This will be tested in four ways:

1. Attacks on Liberals will be greatest in the *Ottawa Citizen* and *National Post* when Hollinger is the majority owner of Southam.
2. We expect to see a decline in the attacks on the Liberal government and Jean Chrétien in particular when Conrad Black has only 50 percent control of the *National Post* but the *Southam* chain and *Ottawa Citizen* are wholly owned by CanWest.
3. The third period should see a further decline in attention to Liberal scandals and questions of Chrétien's leadership.
4. The *Globe and Mail* is used as a control variable and should provide little change in attention over the course of the three periods.

Methods

To test the above hypothesis, the study uses a classic "before and after" research design, with manifest content analysis as the primary research tool. Three newspapers *National Post*, *The Ottawa Citizen* and *The Globe and Mail*, (which served as the control paper) were examined from January 1, 1999 through June 30th, 2002. This means that the *The Ottawa Citizen* and the *National Post* are analyzed for twenty months under complete Hollinger ownership. As of August 2000, *The Ottawa Citizen* was purchased by CanWest, thereby providing 22 months of analysis under Asper ownership. As the *National Post* was not entirely sold to CanWest until August 2001, we have only a study period of ten months under complete Asper control. However, for a full year the Asper family owned nearly half of the shares in the *Post*, and we are confident that if ownership truly does matter, there will be a notable difference in criticisms of the governing party and Chrétien as the Aspers' values and beliefs begin to infiltrate the news pages.

We examine headline coverage of three federal Liberal scandals, two of which occur under Hollinger ownership (HRDC jobs-fund and Auberge Grand-Mère) and one under CanWest's ownership (Public Works-Advertising scandal). Headlines dealing with Chrétien's leadership were present throughout the study period, thereby allowing us to look at any changes in the volume of coverage on the issue under both ownerships. A total of 1333 articles were evaluated.

³⁹ As paraphrased by Hurtig, 147.

Content was retrieved through two methods; *The Globe and Mail* on CD ROM and Canadian News Disc for content in the *National Post* and *The Ottawa Citizen*. Searches were conducted by using an “in lead” search feature available in both resources and every article was recorded. In an attempt to achieve reliability, the following terms were used to retrieve content in *The Globe and Mail* CD ROM, and Canada News Disc. HRDC- Job-fund was searched under the terms, Jane Stewart, Human Resources Development Canada, HDRC, Job-Fund (jobs-fund). Auberge Grand-Mère was searched using the terms: Auberge Grand-Mère, Shawinigan, Shawinigate. For Public Works-Advertising we used the terms: Public Works + Advertising, Alfonso Gagliano, and Groupe Action. Jean Chrétien’s leadership’s was searched using the terms: Liberal leadership and Jean Chrétien + leadership. Content that was retrieved but was irrelevant to the purposes of this study (e.g. Shawinigan hockey team scores, paternity benefits) was not included in this study.

Coverage is measured by volume, in terms of the number of stories. Direction of the story or slant is measured by the headline using a 5 point scale of very positive, positive, neutral, negative and very negative. Three coders were used to assess the slant of the story. Each coder was given a third of the stories. Upon completion of the coding coders switched stories and assess each other’s coding. Upon disagreement the entire team was assembled to discuss the disagreements. Stories that could not be agreed upon were coded as ambiguous.

A number of information-providing variables were coded. “Type of Story” referred to: News, Business, Report, Excerpt, Correction, Sports/News. Stories classified as “Opinion Pieces” were: Editorial, Column, Commentary, Letter to the Editor, Business-Commentary, Business-Editorial, Business-Letter to the Editor, Business-Column, Focus, Analysis, Opinionated Report, and Profile/ Interview.

The next variable was “Content Location (Section).” The values for this variable were: Front, Local, Business, Focus, Review, Arts & Life, Feature, Observer, News (second section). The pages numbers of the stories were also noted.

The “source of content” referred to who wrote the article. We noted the journalist’s name, whether the story was from an editor, reader, guest writer or news wire. The length of the story was derived from doing a word count of the story text without the headline or by-line. We indicate the main focus of the story: HRDC, Auberge Grand-Mère, Public Works-Advertising, or Jean Chrétien’s leadership.

Results

Overall attention to Liberal Scandals

Under Hollinger Corp.’s ownership, the *National Post* ran a total of 164 articles focusing on Liberal scandals and Chrétien’s leadership. The *Ottawa Citizen* ran 268 articles, and our control paper, *The Globe and Mail*, 87. During the transition period, where CanWest owned *The Ottawa Citizen* outright and nearly half the shares in the *National Post*, the amount of articles on these issues dropped for both the *Post* and *Citizen*, to 97 and 113, respectively. These numbers were more akin to those in *The Globe and Mail*, which printed 112 during this time frame. From the time the Aspers

obtained complete control of the *National Post* (August, 2001) until June 30th, 2002; all newspapers showed a similar increase in the amount of articles on the issues at hand; with *The Globe and Mail* offering the most with 159 articles, *The Ottawa Citizen* with a comparable 152 and the *National Post* with a close 154. (These include letters to the editor).

For comparison purposes we examine the percentage of stories for each newspaper over the entire time frame analyzed. Table 1 presents the raw numbers and the proportion of attention each paper gave the Liberal scandals over the three time periods. Looking at the percentages a somewhat surprising pattern emerges. For the *Citizen* coverage of Liberal scandals does decline from the time Hollinger owned Southam to the CanWest purchase. In fact, fifty percent of the coverage of Liberal scandals occurred in the first time period. When CanWest took control of the *Citizen* and the newspaper chain coverage of Liberal scandals dropped dramatically to have the amount at 21.2 percent of total coverage in all periods. Yet when Black sold his remaining shares of the Post – which incidentally should have had no impact on the Southam chain—coverage of Liberal scandals in the *Citizen* increases by 7 percentage points from the previous time frame.

For the *National Post* an equally puzzling pattern is found. The highest proportion of stories are seen in the first time period, as expected, at nearly 40 percent of total coverage. Attention then falls to 23 percent when Black has fifty percent control of the paper. However, when Black no longer has anything to do with the paper, coverage of Liberal scandals increases to almost the same levels seen in the first period at 37 percent of total coverage.

Perhaps ownership is not the independent variable here. Perhaps the causal agent is simply the type of news stories that occurred at the time. This is where the *Globe and Mail* comes in to act as a control. For the *Globe and Mail* the first two time periods had roughly the same proportion of attention. The coverage, however, does increase in the third period and accounts for the largest proportion of that newspaper's coverage. This gives some indication that ownership might not be the causal agent in coverage of the Liberals during this time frame. Events occurred that simply made it impossible for newspapers to avoid the story, despite whatever feelings the owners may have had for the prime minister or his government. It is however, premature to dismiss the hypothesis altogether until we examine the coverage in some more detail.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Types of Stories by Newspaper

Tables 2 through 4 provide the newspaper coverage of each story by time expressed as a total percentage. Here we see the most dramatic indication of the influence of ownership on coverage. For both the *Ottawa Citizen* and the *National Post*, the Liberal scandal that had the most attention was the HRDC revelations during the time Hollinger owned Southam. It accounted for 45 percent of the *Citizen's* and 34 percent of the *Post's* overall attention to Liberal scandals during the three-and-a-half year study. In contrast, the HRDC story comprised 24 percent of the *Globe's* coverage. In fact, for the *Globe* the top story was Chrétien's leadership problems in 2001/02 comprising 25 percent of its

overall attention. For the *Globe and Mail* the leadership issue was more important in terms of overall number of stories than was the HRDC scandal. This certainly makes it appear, that in terms of the number of stories on the Liberals, the *Ottawa Citizen* and the *National Post* pulled back on its coverage of the Liberal scandals when the Aspers took control of the newspapers.

[TABLES 2 TO 4 ABOUT HERE]

Direction of Coverage

To examine slant of coverage we assessed the headlines for all news, business, editorials and reports. Letters to the editor were excluded from this analysis. Consequently the number of stories declines for this analysis because it no longer includes letters. For all newspapers the time period with the most negative coverage of the Liberals was during HRDC scandal coinciding with the time that Hollinger owned Southam. Initially the stories were coded on a five point scale from very positive to very negative. We recoded the variables to simply positive, neutral and negative. The newspaper with the highest proportion of negative headlines was the *National Post* with 80.7 percent of the negative coverage. A sampling of *Post* headlines from the period gives an indication of the flavour of the negative coverage: “A growing disgrace,”⁴⁰ “Another Day Another Slush Fund,”⁴¹ “Big Brother Bungles,”⁴² “HRDC programs don't create jobs, they kill them,”⁴³ “Training program spent \$300,000 to train handful of espresso machine trouble-shooters,”⁴⁴

Both the *Citizen* and *Globe*'s negative attention to the Liberals was close behind at roughly 77 percent. For the *Citizen*, there was a large emphasis on the dollar figures involved in the scandal as well as the more salacious details of mis-spending. Some examples include: “Jewels claimed under office furniture: Bureaucrats still on trail of \$20 million from 34 projects,”⁴⁵ “\$11.5M-grant violated rules,”⁴⁶ “\$200M in cheques gets lost in mail: HRDC job grants sent to wrong addresses,”⁴⁷ “\$30M given to unity group despite auditors' complaints,”⁴⁸ “\$720,000 job grant created no jobs: Bloc.”⁴⁹

Similar to the *Post* and the *Citizen* the *Globe*'s headlines were quite scathing and personal. Some of the more memorable from the *Globe and Mail* include: “Chrétien's bid for third term gets raspberry,”⁵⁰ “Dear Jane: Please, please stop helping us,”⁵¹ “Stewart's

⁴⁰ “A growing disgrace,” editorial, *National Post*, 11 February, 2000, A19.

⁴¹ Martin Loney, “Another Day, Another Slush Fund,” *National Post*, 24 January 2000, A14.

⁴² “Big Brother Bungles,” editorial, *National Post*, 31 May 2000, A19.

⁴³ Peter Foster, “HRDC programs don't create jobs, they kill them,” *National Post*, 28 January 2000, B7.

⁴⁴ Ottawa Citizen News Service, “Training program spent \$300,000 to train handful of espresso machine trouble-shooters,” *National Post*, 9 February 2000, A9.

⁴⁵ Jack Aubry and Norma Greenaway, “Jewels claimed under office furniture: Bureaucrats still on trail of \$20 million from 34 projects” *Ottawa Citizen*, 8 January 2000, A1.

⁴⁶ David Stonehouse, “\$11.5M-grant violated rules,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 20 February 2000, A1.

⁴⁷ Rick Mofina, “\$200M in cheques gets lost in mail: HRDC job grants sent to wrong addresses,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 20 March 2000, A3.

⁴⁸ Chris Cobb, “\$30M given to unity group despite auditors' complaints,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 25 April 2000, A4.

⁴⁹ David Gamble, “720,000 job grant created no jobs: Bloc,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 10 May 2000, A4.

⁵⁰ Andre Picard, “Chrétien's bid for third term gets raspberry,” *Globe and Mail*, 24 March 2000 A19.

constituents got more than 700 grants.”⁵² Not surprisingly, this period coincided with the least amount of positive attention to the Chrétien government, but the *Citizen* had the most with 6 percent. The *Post* had 3.6 percent positive and the *Globe* 2.3 percent positive. The *Globe* had the highest proportion of neutral statements at 19.5 percent with the *Citizen* at 16.7, followed by the *Post* at 15.7. In sum, for the first time period both Southam papers and the *Globe* had roughly similar proportions of negative, neutral and positive attention.

Where we see change is in the second time period where CanWest owned 50 percent of the *Post* and all of the Southam chain including the *Citizen*. Here, with CanWest having complete control of the *Citizen* we find that there is a 23 percentage point drop in the number of negative headlines about the Chrétien Liberals. In contrast, while the other two papers also go down, the *Post* goes down 17 percentage points and the *Globe* 16 percentage points. It is puzzling that the paper with the most attacks on the Liberals falls to levels below that of both the *Post* and the *Citizen*. This gives the strongest indication of ownership influence on editorial decisions.

However, by the third time period where Black is no longer a 50 percent shareholder in the *Post* we see no similar type of change. The *Citizen* stays at the same proportion of negative headlines as in the second time frame. The *Post* has a very slight decline in the proportion of negative headlines. The *Globe and Mail* goes up slightly by 2 percentage points.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

We then examined the slant of coverage by the type of news (table not included in paper). This revealed that the *Citizen*'s proportion of negative attention declined dramatically from the first time period to the second. In the first time period the proportion of negative op-ed headlines was 75.6 percent. It went down to 50 percent in the second time frame and went back up to 66.7 percent in the final time frame. For the *National Post* their negative op-eds went up from 81.8 percent to 84.4, but in the final time frame it went down to 73.1 percent negative coinciding with the CanWest full ownership. For the *Globe and Mail* the first period's op-ed's were 83.3 percent negative going down in the second to 60.9 and up again in the third to 79.3. So, even in a non-CanWest paper, the percentage of negative op-eds did decline, but not to the same dramatic extent as the *Ottawa Citizen*.

For the news an equally dramatic change occurs. The *Citizen* in the first time frame has 75 percent negative news headlines, going down to 52.9 percent in the second and the third they go down further to 50.9 percent negative news headlines. The *Post*'s news started at 79.4 percent negative then in the second time went down to 54.8 and in the final time frame went up to 63.2. The *Globe*'s negative news went from 76.9 to 60.7 and in the final time frame went down to 58.1.

⁵¹ Margaret Wentz, “Dear Jane: Please, please stop helping us,” *Globe and Mail*, 8 February 2000, A19.

⁵² John Gray “Stewart's constituents got more than 700 grants.” *Globe and Mail*, 28 January 2000. A4.

In the business section, the negative coverage for the *Citizen* goes from 100 percent to 83.3 percent negative, down to 55 percent negative in the final time frame. The *National Post's* business section goes from 88.2 percent negative to 62.5 to 57.1 percent negative. Yet in the *Globe and Mail* the proportion of negative news on the Liberal scandals remained fairly stable at 80 percent in the first to 83.3 in the second to 75 percent in the final time frame.

Discussion and Conclusion

From our analysis of the headlines of the coverage of Liberal scandals we find a distinct trend in the influence of the CanWest purchase of Southam. The most dramatic changes occurred immediately upon the Asper family purchasing the Southam chain. Where under Hollinger control the *Ottawa Citizen* lead the story on the HRDC scandal with 245 stories in all and 77 percent of those negative. When CanWest gains control the number of stories on the Liberal scandals goes down to 81 and the negative proportion of coverage goes down to 56.8 percent. While the other two papers reduce the amount of negative coverage and the volume of stories it is no where near the same magnitude as the *Citizen*.

For the *National Post* the change is less dramatic. It appears that ownership has less of an impact when Black has 50 percent control, but there is no change in editorial direction when Conrad Black sells the paper outright to the Asper family.

The question remains, is this a change in the staff, the allocation of staff, or self-censorship on the part of staff? There are a couple of implications for these findings. One is that the Asper's made their most dramatic changes in the initial aftermath of the purchase. This can be seen in the staffing decisions at the *Citizen*. Reporters such as Rick Mofina and Kathryn May who combined wrote 51 stories in the first time frame on HRDC write only 7 in the second. In the final time frame they only wrote 4 stories between them. Many of the reporters who filed stories in the first time period would only write one and then others would write different stories in subsequent time frames. Changing the reporters on the beat effectively changed the direction of coverage. It appears that the allocation of staff at the *Citizen* may have been the largest contributor to the change in the direction of the stories. It is unclear from the content analysis who made those decisions to pull Mofina and May from the stories.

Editorially, there were changes as well. Although the editorial direction did not change as dramatically as the news, clearly different voices were heard on the issue. Where in the first time frame the *Citizen* accepted a column from Conservative critic Peter MacKay, in the second period Liberal supporter Warren Kinsley pens three columns.

It is obvious that Black's retention of 50 percent control of the *Post* and editorial direction had an impact on the types of stories covered by the newspaper. Not only did they maintain a fairly high attack level on the Liberals during that time, but having Black stay on as long as he did may have pre-empted changes in the editorial direction of the newspapers. If there was chill at the Southam papers towards criticizing the Liberals, it probably dissipated by the time Black left the newspaper. The immediate impact of the change in ownership occurred in the first 12 months of the deal. Eventually, even the *Citizen* increased its negative attention to the Liberals. It should be noted that this change

occurs during the time the dominant story is Chrétien's leadership. For the *Citizen* to increase negative attention to the *Citizen's* leadership illustrates how the fear of management reprisal may have declined. What should not be forgotten in here is that despite the reduction of attacks on Liberals in the *Citizen* to a lesser extent the *Post*, neither paper completely backed off from their coverage of Liberal scandals. While the volume was down from when Hollinger controlled the Southam chain, the majority of attention was still negative. All that happened with the Asper purchase was that the other side was given an opportunity to defend itself. While that may be seen as a problem for those who dislike the regime and the scandals in and of themselves, one must nonetheless give CanWest Global credit for providing some semblance of balance to these stories. For if nothing else, a free press and the tenets of objective press demand that people be allowed to answer to their critics.

There is not doubt that ownership does have some control on the editorial direction of a newspaper. It appears, however, that the editorial control is seen most strongly in staffing decisions at the newspaper. Not only can change in ownership affect whether staff are retained, or fired, but also what stories they are assigned. Nonetheless, even with 95 percent chain ownership in Canada, there still remain differences in coverage of major stories, even within the chain empires. If nothing else, this paper reveals that the HRDC scandal was a far bigger story for the *Ottawa Citizen* than even for the *National Post*. Further, the *Globe and Mail* showed its editorial direction in that Chrétien's leadership troubles were given more attention in 2001/02 than the HRDC scandal in 2000.

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Table 1

Stories by Newspaper by Time Frame						
	Globe and Mail		Ottawa Citizen		National Post	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Hollinger	114	29.6	268	50.3	164	39.5
50/50	112	29.1	113	21.2	97	23.4
CanWest	159	41.3	152	28.5	154	37.1
Total	385	100.0	533	100	415	100.0

Table 2

	Ottawa Citizen Story type Time Frame							
	HRDC		Auberge Grand-Mere		Public Works		Chrétien Leadership	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Hollinger	245	44.9	0	0.0	1	0.2	28	5.1
50/50	38	7.0	31	5.7	24	4.4	24	4.4
CanWest	5	0.9	10	1.8	60	11.0	80	14.7
Total	288	52.7	41	7.5	85	15.6	132	24.2

Table 3

	National Post Story type Time Frame							
	HRDC		Auberge Grand-Mere		Public Works		Chrétien Leadership	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Hollinger	141	34.0	1	0.2	1	0.2	21	5.1
50/50	22	5.3	50	12.0	9	2.2	16	3.9
CanWest	17	4.1	20	4.8	42	10.1	75	18.1
Total	180	43.4	71	17.1	52	12.5	112	27.0

Table 4

	Story type by Globe and Mail							
	HRDC		Auberge Grand-Mere		Public Works		Chrétien Leadership	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Hollinger	94	24.4		0.0	2	0.5	18	4.7
50/50	22	5.7	41	10.6	13	3.4	36	9.4
CanWest	7	1.8	6	1.6	50	13.0	96	24.9
Total	123	31.9	47	12.2	65	16.9	150	39.0

Table 5

Slant of Coverage - Ottawa Citizen						
	Hollinger		50/50		CanWest	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Negative	161	77.0	46	54.1	74	54.0
Neutral	35	16.7	26	30.6	54	39.4
Positive	13	6.2	11	12.9	9	6.6
Ambiguous	1	0.5	2	2.4	1	0.7
Total	209	100.0	85	100.0	137	100.0

Table 6

Slant of Coverage - National Post						
	Hollinger		50/50		CanWest	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Negative	113	80.7	56	64.4	93	63.7
Neutral	22	15.7	21	24.1	43	29.5
Positive	5	3.6	8	9.2	8	5.5
Ambiguous	0	0.0	2	2.3	2	1.4
Total	140	100.0	87	100.0	146	100.0

Table 7

Slant of Coverage - Globe and Mail						
	Hollinger		50/50		CanWest	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Negative	67	77.0	53	60.9	88	62.9
Neutral	17	19.5	25	28.7	43	30.7
Positive	2	2.3	9	10.3	8	5.7
Ambiguous	1	1.1	0	0.0	1	0.7
Total	87	100.0	87	100.0	140	100.0

Figure 1
Newspaper by Slant of Coverage by Time Frame

