

DEMOCRACY'S OXYGEN: How Corporations Control the News

by James Winter

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Reviewed by PEG TITTLE

James Winter's *Democracy's Oxygen: How Corporations Control the News* is, quite simply, mandatory reading for anyone who subscribes to a daily newspaper.

As a sort of companion book to Winter's previous *Common Cents*, which explains *how* the media distort the news, *Democracy's Oxygen* explains *why* the media distort the news.

The simple answer is 'because corporations control the news'. And they don't want to print any stories that make corporations look bad. Why? The simple answer is 'because they want to make large profits'. Why? There's where I hit a brick wall.

It is rather outside the scope of Winter's book, but as I read his case study of Southam News, as I read how prior to purchasing Regina and Saskatoon papers in 1995, then six eastern Canada dailies, then six more Ontario newspapers, and owning papers in Israel, London, and Chicago, part of Key Porter Books, and *Saturday Night* magazine, Conrad Black had owned Massey Ferguson and Dominion Stores--as I read all this, while sitting on my dock watching the loons on the sun sparkling water, feeling the breeze on my face, and thinking it's time to dive into the lake again--I wondered 'Why?' With all that responsibility, Black's 'things to do' list must be never-ending--when does the man *enjoy life* (or at least, the fruits of his labour)? So why does he go after more (and more)? I mean what could you possibly need \$300 million for? Just thinking about the decisions involved in responsibly managing that much money overwhelms me. I'd rather watch the loons. But as I say, this is beyond the scope of Winter's book.

In addition to his close look at Conrad Black, Winter gives us a good look at Ken Thomson and Paul Demarais as well, thoroughly documenting the path taken toward the current newspaper monopoly in Canada--"With 60 out of 104 dailies, Black now reaches 2.4 million Canadian

households every day: 43 percent of the national total" (xi).

From time to time, Winter treats the media corporation as a model of what's wrong with corporations in general. (For starters, consider the tax breaks and government subsidies they get at the expense of education, health, and social programs.) (And "just what is it that Thomson does, personally, to earn one-third of a billion dollars in a year?" [13]) However, he considers corporate control of newspapers to be especially bad, because "their 'product' is information and ideas" (xiii) as opposed to, say, cars. Having read Joyce Nelson's expose of television (the shows are just a way of delivering an audience to the advertisers), I thought that view a little out-dated.

Why doesn't the government correct the situation, Winter asks. The simple answer is 'because corporations control them too'. Amazingly enough, sometimes the *same* corporations. In the course of connecting the media with the government, Winter also gives a passing analysis of our 'democratic' government, which is, to say the least, non-representative.

I especially appreciated the *specifics* of corporate control--from ownership (conservative, concentrated), hiring (like-minded toads), firing (too few journalists left for too many stories to do any *real* investigative reporting), and management influence (what gets covered, in what context, with what emphasis, using which sources, with what headlines, on what page, etc.) to self-censorship and 'Media Think'.

The latter is Winter's name for "a form of group think on a vast scale which permeates the lives of elites, news workers, and much of society at large. It stems from a socialization process that begins at birth...a value system which stretches...across generations and races, classes and genders" (116). Winter goes on to list fifty-four specific opinions he considers examples of Media Think. My favourites are "When it comes to corporate size, the bigger the better" (116) (though I'd go even further to say 'When it comes to *anything*, the bigger the better'); "A company has to make profits. The more profit it makes, the better the company" (117); and "Environmental 'problems' are largely invented by hysterical members of radical groups such as Greenpeace" (117).

When I worked at a very small local paper (and yes, it was owned by Thomson or Southam), I was more floored by the lack of critical thinking among my 'superiors' than by any control by the

conglomerate. I was told by my editor once to go cover the fire at the hospital and 'take your camera'; not wanting to capitalize on, let alone sensationalize, other people's suffering, I asked 'Why?'; 'Because it's news' was the very best he could do. So while I appreciate the Media Think analysis, I think Winter passes too quickly over the suicidal absence of critical thought in our society.

For people who have never heard of Project Censored, I recommend Chapters seven and eight. (I'm hoping Project Censored will publish a monthly magazine soon, in addition to its annual book.) Not surprisingly, Winter finds that most under-reported stories had to do with economic interests--neoliberal/corporate economic interests.

The upside of all this conglomerate control--I found this particularly chilling: Southam and Black have a 12.5% share of Coles Bookstores which merged with SmithBooks to form Chapters Inc., which has only 9 buyers for about 400 stores, which "leaves publishers with no national alternative if Chapters shows little or no interest in a book" (23)--is that it opens the door for independent cooperatives, catalogues, distributors, what have you. Winter also informs us that publishers have to pay \$1500-3500 per title for front-of-store, cash desk, and end unit display, so "...no matter how good a book is, if the placement fees are not paid it will be relegated to the back shelves" (23). Again, an upside--it escalates the value of book reviews, especially when they're published in magazines like this where they're not 'edited' for conservative/corporate correctness!

Almost absent from Winter's all-too-brief discussion of what to do about all of this is 'CANCEL YOUR SUBSCRIPTION!' There is life without a daily newspaper beside your coffee cup. Believe me. I'm proof. If you really must have your info fix, watch the 6:00 news (and save a few forests while you're at it): television news is no worse now than newspaper news--neither offer completeness or commentary. For that, you'll need to read the alternatives (Winter provides a list in one of his Appendices, but it's woefully incomplete)--like the one you have in your hand.