

Conscientiously Advising Strategic Endurance – A North Country CASE Study

Rapidly emerging technologies, expansive information availabilities and hyper-active global dynamics are increasingly affecting everyone and everything. Reflections around the distinctly bounded ecosystem of the Canadian media industry and the Toronto *Globe and Mail* can inform deeply held convictions about responsibility and professionalism, anywhere and everywhere. Critical awareness is positively motivated through integration of many divergent, potentially conflicting pressures and influences.

Enforcing an emphasis on determined strategic responsiveness, the realizations offered by John Stackhouse in *Mass Disruption* demonstrate a nuanced mastery – apparently acquired systematically over time through immersive discovery and dedication. Not everyone can balance an impressive range of raw experience with both empathetic acceptance and discretionary detachment. A well-calibrated integral commitment requires steady and ongoing refinement – avoiding any monolithic or singularly preconceived convictions otherwise energetically asserted and persistently reiterated.

John Stackhouse arrived back in Toronto with his family in 1999, following a successful ten-year assignment as a foreign correspondent for the *Globe* in Asia and Africa. The collapse of the Soviet Union had initiated a decade of repositioning regarding the order of international alliances and interdependencies, deserving particular attention. Previously, the *Globe* was already established as a preeminent Canadian national newspaper, following an example of what the *Wall Street Journal* had done in the United States, transmitting daily content by satellite to geographically dispersed printing facilities nationwide. A robust coverage of Canadian business, an attentiveness toward well-educated, influential, well-to-do households, and a moderate stance regarding government and politics might characterize the nature of the *Globe* publication.

An aggressive competitive antagonism arose suddenly, when the outspoken business provocateur, Conrad Black, decided to launch the *National Post* in 1998. Immediately, the *Globe* attempted to become more capricious and appealing, in reaction to the impressionistic novelty displayed by the *Post*. The accustomed profitability of the *Globe* fell by thirty percent between 1998 and 1999, declining to a much greater loss by 2001 and continuing for the next several years. Conversely the *Post* had grown rapidly, virtually matching the circulation figures of the long-standing *Globe*, before it, too spun down with especially stunning losses, also declining further year after year. Meanwhile, Conrad Black had sold his ownership position with the *Post* in 2000, as part of a package including a number of additional Canadian newspapers. So, that singular threat seems to have been relatively short lived. Still, multi-million dollar losses are never welcome, and an especially patient kind of ownership is necessary to sustain viability in a challenging business environment.

Someone like Conrad Black can be portrayed as a dramatically colorful and controversial character, so it would be all too easy to spin off on an elaborate side-excursion tracking extravagant personal exploits.

Here the author is demonstrating an admirably strong sensibility of purpose and focus. John Stackhouse avoids any such diversion and stays on-message, keeping with business.

Anyone wanting distraction can search the Internet and find an article by Christopher Hitchens in *Slate* from 2007, for example, delivering an energetic invective about Conrad Black being convicted and sent to prison for fraud and obstruction of justice. Respectfully, John Stackhouse does not go there. In the acknowledgements at the end of *Mass Disruption*, he gives credit to his book editors for conditioning some amount of purple prose. And in the notes, he makes reference to certain direct discussions and communications with Conrad Black in 2014 and 2015.

It may be revealing that more paragraph space is spent on the plight of a chronically homeless street citizen named Billy Jack, in Toronto during the year 1999, in preference over activities of reckless or privileged celebrities. With some situations, there will be no quick answers or solutions. More humanity would be displayed by escaping from the comfortable enclave of European foreigners in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to encounter a humble and resourceful Dr. Tizazu Ketema at a makeshift, improvised dental clinic. John Stackhouse had found himself in Berlin, when the wall was being taken down in 1989. He had found himself in Kabul, Afghanistan, when the Taliban took control of the city in 1996. He could observe how simple it had become for anyone to get on the public Internet casually in Ahmedabad, India, during the massive religious Kumbh Mela festival in 2001. A well-informed discretion is in evidence, about what may be really most essential for a knowledgeable audience to want to know.

Still, one should not assume that a strong, individualistic personality is necessarily considered an undesirable trait. John Stackhouse expresses admiration for the writings of Ryszard Kapuscinski, a noteworthy Polish Communist journalist from the Cold War era. Objectivity can be an elusive quality. If one is not immediately aware of Ryszard Kapuscinski, he might be imagined like an earlier version of Hunter S. Thompson – maybe without the drugs and dynamite. But in the notes toward the end of *Mass Disruption*, John Stackhouse cites claims that Ryszard Kapuscinski routinely fabricated facts and circumstances to enhance his writing.

Throughout the turbulence during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the wealthy Thomson Family of Canada remained committed to supporting the continuity of the Toronto *Globe and Mail*. A full reconnaissance of the Thomson financial holdings would be an extensive undertaking, in and of itself. Probably the best-known related business entity right now would be Thomson Reuters, which was formed in 2008.

The timeline may go something like this. Thomson Newspapers Limited had appeared as a public company in Canada in 1965. Thomson acquired the *Globe and Mail* as well as the Winnipeg FP Publications group in 1980. The Thomson Corporation is formed in 1989, when Thomson Newspapers merges with Thomson International Organization Limited, separately owning oil and other various enterprises in Britain, Scotland and the United States.

The *Globe and Mail* is sold to become part of Bell Globemedia (BGM) in 2001, while The Thomson Corporation initially maintains a twenty percent ownership in the ambitious new Canadian multimedia conglomerate. Next, The Thomson Corporation sells the twenty percent stake in Bell Globemedia to the Woodbridge Company Limited in 2003. Previously, Woodbridge had been set up as a private Canadian holding company exclusively managing the Thomson Family investments, and Woodbridge had also owned about ten percent of BGM directly.

Later, Bell Globemedia was split, spinning off CTVglobemedia apart from Canadian Bell in 2005. By 2006, Woodbridge apparently owned up to forty percent of CTVglobemedia. After CTVglobemedia was dissolved in about 2011, Woodbridge had managed to re-acquire an eighty-five percent stake in the *Globe and Mail*, and it subsequently acquired the remaining fifteen percent from the Bell Communications in 2015.

Strategically, the essential understandings would revolve around the intention and motivation inspiring the successive mergers and acquisitions and divestments, at least from the position of the *Globe and Mail*.

The early years of the twenty-first century brought an economic recession in the United States and Europe, the dot-com investment crash and the tragedy of September 11, 2001. While Canada somehow managed to avoid recession just then, the effects of international events would still have an unremitting impact. Digital technologies were rapidly emerging. Broadcast radio and television would be radically implicated. The consumer demand for printed newspapers was in decline. Cellular phones were replacing legacy wired land lines. Telecommunications companies were reinventing infrastructure. The Internet was quickly gaining widespread acceptance. The protocols for WI-FI transmission were being formalized. Ideally or conceptually, it would seem to have made good business sense to try to combine television and news content delivery with updated communication platforms and emergent Internet capabilities. Additionally, Canadian executives may have wished to protect against overwhelming technological invasion from elsewhere.

The unified contrivance of Bell Globemedia proved to be excessively ambitious and unwieldy. John Stackhouse has a great deal of insight to share regarding the entrenched attitudes and practices that could not be easily reconciled. Inside of the *Globe* enterprise, a digital news team was formed, but the instantaneity and immediacy of the Internet represented a drastic divergence from the accustomed incumbent standards for the printed newspaper. Since there had been a longstanding strength with investment and business reporting, it was natural that some early success would come from offering financial data and information through online formats. But it would be a mistake to believe that simple transposition of newspaper articles onto a website would be an adequate approach for digital presentation. Internet audiences preferred interaction and personal selection over and above strictly predetermined delivery of content.

The internal cultures of the CTV television organization and the *Globe* newspaper organization collided without much cooperation. Prime-time TV advertising remained profitable. Feature shows and reality programs remained popular. There was little actual incentive for collaboration or innovation. Serious errors in the financial structuring of the Bell Globemedia enterprise quickly became apparent. Vastly expensive arrangements involving the Teleglobe satellite company and the Lycos Internet search engine proved to be excessively burdensome. As a publically-held corporation, Bell Canada was not well situated to carry speculative economic losses. The Bell executive who had masterminded the venture, Jean Monty, resigned and was replaced by Michael Sabia. For a while, Bell retained a minor interest in the downsized CTVglobemedia entity that emerged when Bell Globemedia was disassembled.

In his own words, John Stackhouse mentions a few first-hand lessons from the challenge for modernization and consolidation. For any number of newspapers, “. . . a quiet struggle emerged between those who wanted to blow up the news model and those who saw digital as a continuation of that model – a new form of distribution, in other words for old form of content. . . . Survival instincts had trumped creative instincts.” (MD P. 65) That kind of challenge would not be unique to information or media companies. Any business enterprise attempting to adjust for digital possibilities would confront similar conflicts, even before the newer smartphones and tablets arrived with a vengeance. The inherent organizational tendency represented as *The Innovator’s Dilemma* should be seriously confronted; “. . . established companies rarely innovate because they are too busy looking for answers to their customers’ old problems – or simply trying to preserve their business models.” (MD P. 69) “Technology and tradition were not the only enemies to change. Deep-seated cultures lurked in the shadows. Or maybe it was just organizational ego.” (MD P.70) “Who knows what would have happened had the divisions been forced to work together and destroy the old TV and newspaper models. Who knows what would have come from an emphasis on activating new content rather than digitizing the old.” (MD P.72) At the time, there was simply no ability to undo comfortable, well-practiced working habits and to recognize truly creative and forward looking new possibilities.

In keeping with the unfolding trajectory of events, Google, Amazon, eBay, PayPal, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are taking form over in Silicon Valley. The Apple iPhone and iPad are being invented. Otherwise, the callous and careless practices of irresponsible financial investment companies will trigger the onset of the Great Recession in 2008 and 2009. The distressingly extended war on terror in Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Middle East will continue to be prolonged on and on indefinitely.

John Stackhouse became editor-in-chief for the Toronto *Globe and Mail* in 2009.

A few contingencies about the running of a newspaper are worth knowing. Different responsibilities – of ownership, of managing publication as a business, of generating topical editorial positions, and of orchestrating the day-to-day necessities –are generally kept separate. The editor-in-chief will necessarily have to balance a considerable variety of influences. The style and personality of each individual will make a difference.

As long-standing publisher, Roy Megarry handled the business management aspects of the company between 1978 and 1994. Although Roger Parkinson served in this capacity between 1994 and 1998, there is no mention of him in *Mass Disruption*. He was succeeded by Philip Crawley, who remains as publisher still today in 2017.

As president of The Woodbridge Company, Geoff Beattie represented the Thomson ownership regarding the *Globe* from 1998 to 2012. David Binet became the next president in 2013.

The editor-in-chief has certain discretion on the overall tone and tenor of the array of ongoing newspaper-related efforts across various formats. William Thorsell performed in this capacity from 1989 to 1999. Richard Addis took the role during the heat of the *National Post* threat between 1999 and 2002. He was replaced by Edward Greenspon, who served until 2009 when John Stackhouse accepted this position through to 2015.

Mass Disruption contains careful perceptions about the manner in which these various individuals guided the enterprise decisively, acting as managers and leaders. John Stackhouse clearly knows how to relate a story very well, and he knows how an exacting attentiveness toward detail can convey more character and color than just textual descriptiveness alone. As with any business or political transition, any number of rumors and speculations can fly all around concerning supposed tension or conflict or justification. Little or no unsubstantiated telling of this nature will be found here. "Through the revolving door of owners over the twentieth century, the *Globe* maintained a remarkably consistent editorial position, perhaps reflecting the moderate nature of Canada." (MD P.96) Historical continuity is of value here. The ending notes include references to many personal interviews that were conducted in preparation for the book, as well as many citations to credit other reliable source.

Several especially fun, fast moving, first-person narrations provide intermittent breaks, inserting engaging interludes off and away from the more seriously business-oriented discussion: going undercover to appear like a homeless derelict in the streets of Toronto, cooperating with U2 rock stars Bono and Geldof to produce a feature edition on Africa, or playing hockey with Vladimir Putin following a staged media conversation in Moscow.

Regardless of whatever specific industry, any ongoing business must be able to coordinate revenue and audience appreciation with resource management and expense control. *Mass Disruption* covers all of these differing dimensions fluently. Ultimately going forward, John Stackhouse believes that an informed, intelligent combination of many factors, appropriately blended together, will prove to be more successful than keeping disparate interests separate. Especially, the fundamental purposefulness and integrity of dedicated journalism has to be sustained for the benefit of society and civil well-being.

Pressures that have been challenging the *Globe* are also confronting every other news and media enterprise worldwide. For the sake of storytelling, John Stackhouse describes the discussion from inside a series of strategic industry sessions in Asia, Europe and the United States.

There was an event sponsored by the prestigious British Ditchley Foundation, in early 2013, when representatives of the *Economist*, *London Times*, *Guardian* and BBC joined with counterparts from *Le Monde*, *New York Times*, *New Republic*, *La Presse* and many others. A concise conclusion by Sir Peter Stothard is readily available online, entitled “Is serious journalism still possible?”

There was an international gathering in Bangkok a few months later for the WAN-IFRA 65th World Newspaper Congress, when John Stackhouse spoke about the new metered paywall for the *Globe*. There too, Guy Crevier spoke about a new free subscription model exclusively for digital tablets for the French-language news source *La Presse+* in Montreal, since that firm was committing impressive resources to support a radical transformation. *La Presse* continues to demonstrate extraordinary vision and courage, potentially intending to abandon a printed newspaper version entirely. Everyone across the industry is struggling with the imperative for change.

“Between 1998 and 2011, readership among 16- to 24-year-olds in Canada had dropped 45 percent. Among 25- to 34-year-olds, it was down 54 percent. Among those 35 to 54 down 33 percent. The only glimmer of hope was among readers 55 and older: up 27 percent.” (MD P. 181)

Later the same year, 2013, John Stackhouse expressed a few compelling talking points at Oxford University during a landmark anniversary of the Reuters Journalism Fellowship program. In his presentation he would advocate a specific strategic direction for the *Globe*. Every day, editors work together with marketing and advertising teams to deliver on business priorities. Digital analytics provide color coded indications about live experiential responsiveness to online content. It is understood that readers individually choose to experience content in regular, repeatable ways, and delivery can be engineered to reflect those habits and preferences. He concludes, “. . . Simply producing great journalism would not ensure the future of great journalism.” (MD P.259) Statistics offer unmistakable evidence that smartphones and mobile devices represent the only growing component currently reshaping journalism. Going against common expectations, diligent readers will even appreciate serious, long-form material delivered on the small screens of their devices. There may be some irony associated with an announcement of the imperative for rapid transformation, amid the staid unchanging medieval halls of Oxford.

The *Globe and Mail* had undergone successive stylistic redesign exercises around 2007 and 2010. The publisher, Philip Crawley, signed an eighteen year contract with the Transcontinental printing firm for German-made presses enabling glossy paper and color on every page. And John Stackhouse presided over an initiative to remake the demographic orientation in keeping with updated realizations about gender and diversity. But by 2013, it was necessary to eliminate twenty-five million dollars in excess costs to continue as a going concern. Some decisions would be easy, and some decisions would be painful. Predictably, there are interesting and amusing public reactions following every modification.

Then at one point, Geoff Beattie shared details of a proposal for selling the Toronto building and property in order to develop an impressive world-class commercial center.

A whirlwind tour of modern media offices in New York and London illustrates an array of contrasts. At *Bloomberg*, everything emphasizes efficiency and immediacy above all else. By comparison, the *Wall Street Journal* retains a relaxed atmosphere stressing the production of the next daily paper for tomorrow. The architecture at the *New York Times* was expansive and inspiring, if extravagantly expensive. The East Coast headquarters for Google was most impressive, in striving to encourage and embody creativity.

The visit to London included the locations for the *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, and *Times*. While some appealing architectural conceptualizations would emerge out of the adventure, the financial implications would still require deliberation and hesitation.

Specific impressions about newsrooms could also be generalized to describe just about any operational business environment, regardless of the industry. “There were plenty of other differences in culture between digital and print, even within the same newspaper. Digital newsrooms worked in teams. Print newsrooms thrived on solo artists. Digital outfits cherished ‘iteration,’ the idea that you launched first, perfected later. Print outfits preferred to perfect, then launch, understandably so given the reputation and legal costs of a printed mistake. Digital media opened every door and window to outside contributors. Newspapers worked as a closed shop. We were a theatre troupe that preferred audiences stayed off the stage.” (MD PP. 141-2) Such characterizations about divergent emerging behaviors and work habits would also apply for any business where cultural transformation is going to be inevitable.

Google’s annual Zeitgeist events are described as intimate gatherings of top global thinkers and leaders. From the point of view of media, “Google had become what many newspapers once were, only a lot more. In the first six months of 2012, the company booked more revenue than the entire US publishing industry.” (MD P. 157) What Google and others are doing with aggregation of information will continue to promote drastic strategic upheaval, over and above effect of disintermediation and deflection of attention. The recommendation for the media industry from Google, “. . . come to grips with another fundamental choice: to go big or go small. The middle ground would be quicksand. . . . The future belonged to global media and micro media.” (MD P. 165) An expansively broad reach or else an intensively focused specialization may be the only reliable paths to survival.

Mass Disruption covers an extended spectrum of understandings, regarding the changing nature of journalistic reporting. Emergent forms of social media exert an increasing impact. Other rampant digital phenomena carry unanticipated consequences. At one end, timely formal pronouncements about political editorial positions represent an ongoing public expectancy, reaching beyond just reacting to news events as these may unfold. John Stackhouse spends a considerable amount of effort in tracing the cautiously qualified decision by the *Globe* to endorse Steven Harper as the Canadian prime minister in 2011. The editorial board, not the editor-in-chief, actually crafts the logic and wording of editorial statements. Regardless of any recommendations that become formally asserted by the paper in print, people will respond however they want, using whatever formats they prefer.

Elsewhere along the spectrum, three additional newsworthy situations are narrated with a considered diligence, implying the radically unremitting, drastic influence of new technologies. One instance concerns the civil disruption that occurred during the G8 and G20 summit in Toronto in 2010. Another instance concerns the awkward behavior of Rob Ford as Mayor of Toronto in 2011. Yet another concerns a random shooting near Parliament Hill in Ottawa in 2014.

Large street demonstrations and occasional acts of vandalism were not unusual during the highly charged atmosphere accompanying the international recessionary collapse beginning in 2008. Meetings of powerful government officials provide a natural target of focus for grievance and protest. While the intent of many protesters normally may be peaceful, the presence of a limited number of dissidents inclined toward violence can be unavoidable. John Stackhouse discusses the G8 and G20 experience in Toronto in 2010 in relation to public perceptions about the meaning and implication of contentious events. Initially, the mainstream media portrayed violent activities as isolated occurrences, which could be reasonably controlled through exercise of force by police. As confrontations continued, a few highly regarded and well-known reporters experienced direct assaults by individual police officers and also witnessed excessively brutal police tactics. These were now being observed and announced openly and instantaneously in real time through digital channels of communication. Social media can be notoriously unreliable in conglomerating fact and exaggeration. The respectability offered by television and newspaper journalism will still remain relevant in providing accuracy and gravity and authority assessing important public affairs. Carefully considered news reporting still makes a difference.

“The subject who is truly loyal to the Chief Magistrate will neither advise nor submit to arbitrary measures.” (MD P. 93)

Rob Ford remarkably remained as Mayor of Toronto between 2010 and 2014, in spite of outrageous publicity contending a long history of substance abuse. The *Globe and Mail* deployed an experienced investigative reporter, Greg McArthur, on an assignment to look into circumstances behind the scenes. For a newspaper, supporting an investigative reporting team is a very expensive and very unpredictable proposition that continues to become increasingly difficult in view of relentless economic pressures. John Stackhouse emphasizes the long standing institutional policy of avoiding anonymous, unattributed sources of information in news stories. A determination to move forward and to publish well-documented and credible evidence without naming personalities was an irregular and courageous move. Reactions were ultimately triggered, in part, by preemptive activity of the rogue tattletale Gawker Internet website. The deliberations in *Mass Disruption* reinforce protection of the journalistic integrity of the newspaper as being of paramount importance. Again, John Stackhouse judiciously avoids reveling in the more lurid and salacious aspects of scandal. Those folks needing to know more about the recent implosion of Gawker can look for the lengthy piece by Jeffrey Tobin in the December 19 and 26, 2016, issue of *The New Yorker*, “Gawker’s Demise and the Trump-Era Threat to the First Amendment.” Inquiring minds may possibly want to know how a character like the professional wrestler known as Iron Sheik is implicated in both the Rob Ford saga and the Hulk Hogan saga.

John Stackhouse, “. . . you are a disgusting human being.” (MD. P. 235)

The unprovoked random shooting of a soldier guarding the Canadian National War Memorial in Ottawa in 2014 provides a scenario for documenting more of the effects and consequences of social media. Breaking news can spread rapidly in ways that were never possible previously. Suppositions and unfounded impressions can also be expected to proliferate faster and more expansively than ever. If viral attention can dissipate as quickly as it starts, it is left to traditional journalism to ask serious questions and provide serious answers. Ideally, citizen journalism and professional journalism will realize the need to coexist together responsibly.

Implications from these episodes can be inferred broadly across any variety of professional disciplines and not limited exclusively to journalism. "One might ask the same about Canadian books, beer and banking." (MD P. 164) But the selected instances also happen to illustrate disruptive conditions observable everywhere and not only meaningful specifically to Canada. Transferable or even transcendent kinds of intelligence should be understood as having an importance in ways not always generally comprehended, extending beyond narrowly focused local situations and circumstances.

The final chapters of *Mass Disruption* provide perceptions regarding a number of newly emerging digital business models that are proving to be successful. *Huffington Post*, *Buzzfeed*, *Vox* and *Business Insider* can be specifically mentioned as examples. Not one of these ventures carries the formidable physical weightage that has traditionally characterized newspaper and television production. "High traffic, low cost and lots of attitude" might convey the main virtue of this approach. (MD P. 268) *Quartz* and the *Atlantic* have been experimenting with digital presentation of long format prose, sometimes blending elaborate product descriptions within a narrative form. A different variation encourages legitimate serious content with direct corporate sponsorship, though some may see a potential conflict of interest inherent in financing a news feature this way. Several well-known brand names have decided to offer their own media channels. The danger lurking within much of this can be the tendency to emphasize superficial antics and to avoid authentically important journalistic responsibilities. The non-profit foundation for supporting the *Texas Tribune* may represent another promising alternative direction.

In his opening remarks, John Stackhouse had suggested a full ecosystem of constituencies necessary to allow democratic journalism to continue to flourish. Owners need to back their ventures with patient capital. Advertisers need to reflect and revalue both brand benefit and long-term economic potential. Governments need to understand the civil impact of the decline of professional news organizations. Journalists need to see their work as entrepreneurial and competitive. Readers need to accept the cost of news in terms of effort and attention, as well as monetary terms. These several points of argument return again with the ending conclusion.

The social atmosphere for appreciation of collaboration would naturally accompany the aspiration to innovate and to create in any other industry or in any other setting, not just contemporary news media.

The social relevance would certainly not be limited only and exclusively to the nation of Canada. “Lastly for journalists, the challenge ahead is to be polymaths, able to study and work with audiences, manage active databases, curate other content, and work closely with digital engineers and designers to make it all sing. They need to be more entrepreneurial in their work arrangements, allowing the collective agreements that once ensured jobs for life to morph into new deals that reward journalists for their output as well as their input, and allow their news organizations to move staff more quickly when the market change.” (MD PP. 284-5) This statement registers decisively, as it is easily rephrased to be broadly applied toward leadership of any contemporary enterprise that chooses to confront the necessity for ongoing progressive reinvention and transformation.

John Stackhouse left the *Globe and Mail* in 2014. In 2015 he joined the Royal Bank of Canada as an advisor for the executive leadership team regarding strategic trends and directions.

John Roth
Palm Springs, California
Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday
January 16, 2017