

***Journalists Speak*—Part II of a Two Part Series
on Findings from a COMPAS Poll of Journalists**

The State of Press Freedom in Canada—

- ❑ **Very High and Unchanged in a Decade**
- ❑ **Among Journalists as a Whole, the Biggest Threats—
Ill-Informed Journalists and Uninterested Audiences**
- ❑ **Among 9% of Journalists with Fear of Firing, the Biggest
Threats to Freedom—Advertisers, Senior Editors, and Owners**
 - ❑ **Government Secrecy Volunteered as a Threat,
But Regulatory Reprisal Rarely Seen as Impacting Press Freedom**



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Preface

Like clean air, press freedom is vital to the good life and is so often taken for granted.

Most of the surveys and focus groups that COMPAS undertakes are for a paying client. But this one is not. On February 16-18, we conducted a two party survey of journalists. Released a week ago, the first part explored their assessments of the Danish Cartoon controversy.

This second part elicits journalists' assessments of the threats to press freedom posed by owners, governments, audiences, and journalists themselves, among other factors.

This two-part survey is the first in a series of un-sponsored studies of press freedom, undertaken at our initiative and cost. The purpose is to provide journalists with a platform for conveying their own professionally based concerns about challenges to journalistic freedom.

In this survey, we invited journalists to provide suggestions for future themes. They graciously obliged. Respondents gave us many ideas and themes. We welcome further suggestions as well as any and all feedback about any aspect of this inquiry.

We are grateful to the journalists who participated in the survey.

Conrad Winn
416-598-0310 ext 40.

Toronto
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1.0. Introduction and Overview

Journalists see press freedom as thriving in Canada. They give press freedom an extraordinary 81 score on a 100 point freedom scale. Furthermore, press freedom is not perceived as declining. The level of freedom is the same as 10 years ago, those polled say. Journalists do nonetheless see threats to their own freedom.

In their assessments of these threats, journalists tend to take an ideologically centrist view. Journalists as a whole tend to reject the normally leftwing concern about owners and the normally rightwing concern about government. Some journalists volunteer a concern about owners and concentrated ownership as a threat but their perspective is a minority one. Journalists as a whole also reject the rightwing portrait of government as a major threat arising from its regulatory influence over the profitability of converged media organizations with broadcasting properties. When journalists volunteer a concern about government, it is usually about government secrecy rather than the power to use regulatory or taxing power to intimidate owners.

Concern about owners and governments is dwarfed by journalists' concerns about the performance limitations of their own profession and the apathy of their audiences. Media ignorance and audience indifference, they say, are the greatest threats, followed by interference by advertisers.

When respondents comment on the performance limitations of their profession, they offer a diversity of thoughts. Several journalists attributed the limitations of their profession to declining resources in the newsroom. "There is a distinct shortage of investigative journalism in Canada," said one respondent. "I attribute this to the large number of editors and managers who don't actually know what investigative journalism is for, and why it adds value to news organizations."

Some respondents commented on the isolation of journalists. Journalists are portrayed as cut-off from younger Canadians and certain social segments of society. One respondent offered the following observation:

In a recent speech in the US to a bunch of journalists, the group was asked how many knew homosexuals and how many knew evangelist Christians. Many more knew more of the former than the latter. The point made was the



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mainstream media are out of touch with the realities of the demographics of their country. I would be interested to know how aligned the values and perceptions of journalists in Canada are with the broader population, and thus how our preconceived notions and opinions shape the news compared to how our readers/listeners/watchers see things.

When journalists comment on audience threats to press freedom, they tend to think in terms of two themes—apathy and lack of interest on the one hand, or intimidation by a small audience segment on the other. One respondent said that the press freedom benefits from too little support among the public, which does not understand “how vital it is in a democracy.” The media need to do a better job of “explaining what it is and...defending its importance.”

Few journalists see government as constraining press freedom by intimidating media owners, as evidenced by the low score given this threat in table 1. One journalist who does see government as a threat believes that the problem of government has been worsened by media consolidation:

Cross ownership [is a problem]. For example, the *Globe and Mail* was increasingly cozy to the federal Liberal government. Its parent company, of course, has something at stake from federal regulators (BCE, CTV, etc.).

Most concerns about government were concerns about secrecy. One respondent bemoaned the “automatic clampdown and denial of access to information from less-than-knowledgeable media-phobes or so-called spokesmen and women.” Another respondent singled out government constraints on reporting crime:

I have problems with some publication bans as well as with the Youth Criminal Justice Act. They both restrict the information we're allowed to give to the public. I can understand a publication ban being put in place before a jury is chosen, in order to eliminate or reduce the possibility of bias, however once that jury has been picked, But everything said in the courtroom should be free to report...Some of these young people have been charged with serious, heinous crimes, and the public has a right to know.



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Following inadequate journalistic performance and audience apathy as threats to press freedom is interference by advertisers. Advertisers are seen as a special threat by the 9% of journalists who fear being fired or have a colleague with such a fear. Some comments:

The power of advertisers is under-explored. Say, for example, that Giant MegaCorp is investing in a building project that's suffering from legal issues like underpayment of contractors, or allegations of sub-standard material use. More than a few times, if Giant MegaCorp is an advertiser, the sales department holds the sway over stories. If the ad department thinks it will lose dollars, the story won't run. This is repeated far-too often.

Explore how much pressure spoken or implied pressure exists within the media outlets about what stories could mean to the advertising revenues.

[Advertising is] a huge factor in what does and does not get covered because of fears over losing an advertiser or a manager's affiliation to one.

Potential loss of advertising over a story - it's a huge issue for papers.

Respondents' perceptions of threats to press freedom were measured in their volunteered comments and in their scoring of the strength of a series of potential threats. With rare exceptions, all respondents provided scores for all the potential threats in the series but one—the magnitude of the threat to press freedom as a result of “the possibility of attacks from special interests, community, or religious groups.” A majority of respondents recorded *don't know* in response to this question. It is not clear whether they averted this question because it combined too many different special interests under a single theme, respondents were of two minds on the issue, they wanted to wait for the Danish Cartoon controversy to die down before reaching a conclusion, or for another reason. But a 60% don't know rate is unusual.



2.0 Journalists' Lack of Knowledge and Audience Apathy Are Top Threats according to Journalists as a Whole; Government Intimidation Rarely a Threat; Advertisers, Senior Journalists, and Owners Are Major Threats According to Respondents Who Fear Dismissal

Newsroom limitations and audience apathy are the biggest threats to press freedom according to most journalists, as shown in table 1. In their volunteered comments, some journalists candidly agreed that their profession is often at a disadvantage in background knowledge. "We'd write a lot more if we had more skilled writers to cover more stories," says one respondent. Some of those surveyed blamed budget cuts for the problems, calling them "a far greater constraint on press freedom [than] the political views or business views of the owners." With one eye implicitly on the Danish Cartoon controversy, some respondents spoke of journalists "not know[ing] enough" about a given subject, "ignorance" of the background of a story, or "not knowing how to handle" or "package" a story.

In table 1, the second column records the average or mean score on the perceived threat scale for all respondents. Among journalists as a whole, the highest perceived threat to press freedom comes from "journalists who are not as knowledgeable as they should be" and "audience's probable lack of interest in a topic." Advertisers are another high scoring threat.

The third column in table 1 presents the scores provided by the 9% of respondents who reported a concern about being fired.¹ Almost one in ten journalism has some fear of firing, as shown in table 2. Journalists with fear of dismissal are much more apt than others to single out the economic interests of advertisers, the personal opinions of senior journalists, and the economic interests of media owners as threats to press freedom than journalists as a whole (table 1).

¹ These are respondents who respond "often" or "sometimes" rather than "rarely" or "not once" in response to the question, "During the past year, to what extent did you or a colleague where you work think about the possibility of being fired over a story you were thinking of writing or actually wrote?"



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Table 1: (Q1) Please score each of the following possible barriers to press freedom on a 5 point scale. “5” means a major barrier that leads to under-reporting, misreporting, or ignoring an important story and “1,” the opposite. [RANDOMIZE]

	Mean, All Respondents	Mean, Fearful Respondents ²	5	4	3	2	1	DNK
Journalists who are not as knowledgeable as they should be	3.4	3.2	20	26	32	14	6	2
Audience’s probable lack of interest in a topic	3.3	3.2	20	28	26	14	13	0
The possibility of losing advertising	3.1	4.1**	20	17	24	20	16	1
Personal opinions of senior journalists and managers	2.9	3.8**	11	22	29	21	17	1
The possibility of attacks from special interests, community, or religious groups	2.8	3.0	11	20	25	27	17	58
Media owner’s business interests (other than advertising)	2.8	3.6**	12	16	29	20	20	3
Personal opinions of the media owner	2.8	3.9*	15	17	23	22	21	2
Other media aren’t covering the story (yet)	2.2	2.5	43	18	18	15	5	1
The possibility of reprisal from government as media regulator	1.8	2.2	5	6	12	16	58	2

** Statistically significant difference at the 0.01 level.

* Almost significant at the 0.05 level.

² See preceding note.



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Table 2: (Q2) During the past year, to what extent did you or a colleague where you work think about the possibility of being fired over a story you were thinking of writing or actually wrote? (%)
[ROTATE POLES]

Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Not Once	DNK
2	7	26	64	3

3.0 Freedom Unchanged in Decade

Comparing their ability to publish today with that in the mid-nineties, those surveyed say press freedom remained steady with a score of 81 out of 100, as shown in table 3.

Table 3: (Q3) On a 100 point press freedom scale how would you score the freedom of Canadian journalists to report what they believe should be reported?

When	Mean	% DNK
Today	81	4.1
10 years ago	81	7.7

4.0. Harper Not Much of a Threat

Almost all respondents perceive the Harper victory as not affecting the degree of press freedom. Two percent say that freedom increased and 8%, decreased. From their volunteered responses, the handful of respondents perceiving freedom to have increased after January 23rd appear to see journalism as suffering from a left-liberal bias. The greater number (8%) believing the Conservative victory to be a threat to press freedom are among



the minority who perceive reprisal from government as media regulator as a threat in general.³

As reported above in section 2.0, very few journalists share the normally rightwing concern about the government’s role as regulator as a threat to press freedom. Paradoxically, those journalists who are concerned about the Harper government’s election as a threat, perhaps because they themselves tend to be leftwing, are the respondents who most embrace the normally rightwing fear of government in this instance.

Table 4: (Q4) Did the recent federal election results affect the amount of press freedom in Canada? [ROTATE POLES] (%)

Increased	No Change	Decreased	DNK
2	84	8	7

4.0. In Their Own Words

When asked to elaborate on what they saw as the greatest threat, many journalists said that court imposed publication bans were interfering with the public’s right to know. Other said that government stonewalling was preventing them from seeing the documents at the heart of the story.

Journalists on both sides of the political spectrum took aim at each other for what they perceived as biased reporting. According to one, “The left-liberal political bias of the majority of journalists working in Canada today is a barrier to accurate and balanced and contextual reporting on world events, particularly U.S. politics.” Others accused U.S. news networks of kowtowing to the Bush administration.

³ Their higher scores on government reprisal as a threat is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.



5.0 Verbatims

Young Offenders Act—Verbatims

I have problems with some publication bans as well as with the Youth Criminal Justice Act. They both restrict the information we're allowed to give to the public. I can understand a publication ban being put in place before a jury is chosen, in order to eliminate or reduce the possibility of bias, however once that jury has been picked, everything said in the courtroom should be free to report. The same thing with the Youth Criminal Justice Act. Some of these young people have been charged with serious, heinous crimes, and the public has a right to know.

The right to identify violent young offenders.

The Young Offenders Act seriously limits the ability of the press to accurately and timely publish the news. Protection of privacy limitations placed on the RCMP have the same effect.

Freedom of Information—Verbatims

The biggest barriers to freedom of the press: a) weak freedom of information laws easily and repeatedly exploited by government bureaucrats to withhold information; b) low staffing levels in newsrooms, leaving less time for meaningful journalism or investigative reporting. Also, unhealthy reliance on public relations / communications specialists

More attention needs to be paid to Freedom of Information laws, which are supposed to be an avenue for better public access, being used instead by government as a barrier to access -- particularly when it comes to government dealings with the private sector. This is the MOST IMPORTANT



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freedom of the press issue in Canada, for without better access to this information our freedom is restricted.

Automatic clampdown and denial of access to information from less-than-knowledgeable media-phobes or so-called spokesmen and women — either in government or private sector.

Limited disclosure policies of government and corporations, particularly in enforcement of public stock market operations.

Government abuse of freedom of information laws --
Government barriers on access to court documents (i.e. lack of electronic access, high cost of accessing individual files, etc.).

Political Bias--Verbatims

The question could have been asked about how press freedom was affected by the [federal election] campaign itself. A "fairness" chill may have limited some news organizations, in that they were required to give equal time to all parties on all issues, even when such equity was not warranted in news columns.

The left-liberal political bias of the majority of journalists working in Canada today is a barrier to accurate and balanced and contextual reporting on world events, particularly U.S. politics.

American media have been cowed by the Iraq situation and Bush White House. Organizations such as Fox News have undermined the reliability of the press by being overtly sympathetic to Administration policies. This has a chill effect on others

Journalists and media organizations routinely pull their punches because of a desire not to deliver news that might be hurtful to a minority group. That the West is now in pitched conflict with the Muslim world certainly heightens the



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tension. But even in little ways the manner in which we interpret events is aimed at not offending minority groups, more so now than ever.

The trend of modern press using their own personal beliefs (either left or right wing) under the shield of freedom issues. The publishing of these cartoons was, and still is a protest against Islam, but editors claim freedom of speech to mask their contempt of the religion.

The small-l liberal bias which pervades most newsrooms and tends to colour most coverage of most issues

A deliberate lack of balance in the mix of newsroom staff. Too many journalists of the same opinion/political stripe. Not enough dissent, deliberately.

Resources—Verbatims

Budgetary constraints on the newsroom – having the theoretical freedom to pursue stories you want to follow, without having the experienced staff and time you need to do so, because of budget cutbacks is really no freedom at all and a far greater constraint on press freedom in my view than, for example, the political views or business views of the owners.

Complexity of an issue and time/resources required to cover it.

Well, there is a distinct shortage of investigative journalism in Canada, in both print and broadcast journalism. However, I attribute this to the large number of editors and managers who don't actually know what investigative journalism is for, and why it adds value to news organizations.

Lack of resources: We'd write a lot more if we had more skilled writers to cover more stories. Media downsizing and convergence has means less digging, and more re-distribution of the same stuff.



Convergence and Ownership—Verbatims

There are fewer voices being heard in mainstream media. True understanding of an event depends on being able to hear differing versions or angles on the same story. Concentrated ownership and convergence makes that difficult in mainstream media. Only on the internet can alternative views be found.

The biggest threat to freedom of the press in Canada is blanket media ownership. Owners of various outlets have let be known in the past which stories they do not want covered. I see no reason to believe that is going to change in the immediate future.

More deeply: the role of advertising in news. It's a huge factor in what does and does not get covered because of fears over losing an advertiser or a manager's affiliation to one.

Cross ownership. For example, *The Globe and Mail* was increasingly cozy to the federal Liberal government. Its parent company, of course, has something at stake from federal regulators (BCE, CTV, etc.)

Libel Chill—Verbatims

Threat of legal action from subjects. While, of course, the law protects the media from spurious attacks, there's nothing to protect journalists from the costs of litigation.

Ultimately, much the "censorship" is driven by subtle pressure from private interests. Threats of lawsuits from story subjects are another example.



Miscellaneous—Verbatims

Fundamental lack of youth access to media results in extremely homogenous content. Young people need to be offered a greater editorial role, especially in determining what stories get covered. Editors' own lack of perspective, due to age and milieu, cause many stories to go under-or-unreported in Canadian dailies, and often only achieve recognition when published in better-managed American papers.

Increasing danger of covering Insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Should press be embedding themselves with military as the only safe way to report?

The public's perception of freedom of the press -- there have been too many negative comments, usually based on lack of knowledge and how vital it is in a democracy. How the press/media can do a better job explaining what it is (including the difference between press freedom and editorial direction), and a better job defending its importance.

6.0. Methodology

A random sample of 221 journalists were interviewed February 16-18, 2006. Samples of this size taken from the general population are deemed accurate to within approximately 7 percentages points 19 times out 20. In the case of smaller populations such as journalists, the margin of error would be smaller.

7.0. Contact

Conrad Winn, Ph.D., is the principal investigator on this study. He can be reached at 416-598-0310 ext. 40.

