

EXTRA! EXTRA!  
Public Education Chokes on Cup of Campbell's Soup

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ANTH 516

December 12, 2003

## Introduction

In June of 2001, the Liberal party, led by Premier Gordon Campbell, announced financial cuts to the BC education system. The cuts have impacted all aspects of the public school system and resulted in hundreds of school closures across the province. The changes have affected students, teachers, parents and administrators alike. In the fall of 2002, UBC professor Charles Menzies presented his graduate students with a challenging assignment: research the impacts of the recent political and funding changes on the Vancouver School District. Those students looked specifically at special education programs and the overall impact as experienced by students, teachers and parents in Vancouver's West End and the Inner City areas. Some of the themes that emerged included an ineffective rhetoric, power structure, the silent voice, division, a lack of choice and uncertainty about the future. Results indicated that the cuts affected people, young and old alike, from all walks of life, in a complex and complicated network. Lastly, it was clear that there was a need for informed public discussion. This past September, Charles Menzies again decided to encourage his students in this year's graduate ethnographic methods course to research the effects of the changes, as experienced 16 months after the cuts were first announced. Students were divided into four groups to contain the scope of the project to the following areas: Special Education, Inner City Schools, English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs, and the Media Representation of public education. Our particular group was assigned the Media topic.

We began by limiting our research to print media in the Lower Mainland of Vancouver, more specifically the Vancouver Sun, the Province and the Courier as presented from September 1<sup>st</sup> 2002 to November 30<sup>th</sup> 2003. We decided to interview not only those responsible for reporting the education "beat", but also those involved in the dissemination of education stories as well as newspaper readers. The purpose of this ethnographic research project was to provide students with 'real time' research experience while producing socially meaningful research that has a wider benefit beyond the classroom. The research experience and concluding results proved to be remarkable. Our participants indicated concerns regarding the structure of the papers, the content of the stories and headlines, and a silent, yet powerful corporate agenda. They also suggested that they felt that the "fair and accurate" information presented in the local papers is sometimes not always exactly that. In general, it was clear that there is still a need for

informed public discussion, however, there is an equal need to approach print media coverage on public education with a critical eye.

### **Research Team**

As a research team, our backgrounds are varied. Within our team are academic backgrounds in Anthropology, Psychology, Journalism and Museum Studies. We bring professional work experience within communications, social policy in the federal government, the federal penitentiary system, the non-profit sector, mental health research, and public programming. We are residents of Vancouver, Whistler and Bellingham, Washington and are both parents and non-parents. Among the three of us we have been educated in the public system, the private system, and Canadian, British, and American Catholic schools. The diversity of our backgrounds allowed us to access a wider breadth of subjects while simultaneously bringing a rich assortment of experience to the table.

### **Points of Access**

As professor Charles Menzies initiated the project, a number of our initial contacts were provided through this avenue. However, as we began to familiarize ourselves with the journalists working on the education beat, we began to explore our own individual leads. At first we found it challenging to access and meet with individuals involved in the media since such involvement tends to be commanded by a lack of time and tight deadlines. However, our persistence paid off and eventually we were able to interview 2 journalists, a media consultant for the non-profit sector, a teacher, a school trustee with the Vancouver School Board, parents and a public education communications professional. Those reporters covering education for the Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Province and Vancouver Courier were given the opportunity to participate in this research project. In the end, the diverse background of our participants resulted in the accumulation of information from a variety of different perspectives.

### **Methodology**

The research methodology used to carry out this investigation of the media coverage of education issues included a comprehensive review of education stories printed in the media over a limited time period, September 1<sup>st</sup> 2002 to November 30<sup>th</sup> 2003, in the Vancouver Sun, the Province and the Vancouver Courier. In the case of the Vancouver Courier, stories on education covering the time period of September 1, 2002 to August 31, 2003 were downloaded into a Word-formatted document. The stories contained in the document were analysed using a method of counting the frequency of specific key words and comparing the results against each other. The primary research method was in-depth interviewing of those persons who consented to be interviewed. Interviews took place in a variety

of formats: in person where the dialogue may or may not have been electronically recorded, over the phone where the dialogue was documented with notes and, finally, some participants were interviewed using email and recorded their responses in a self-written text message. The research team corresponded by email and met in person on several occasions to strategize research methods, update team member on interviews and dialogic content, share and discuss key findings, develop the format for the oral presentation and prepare the final paper submission.

### **Research Context and Theoretical Background**

The context of this project is placed within the framework of graduate student research in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and media studies. While initiated by the need to practice real ethnographic research, we also felt the need to place our work within a larger philosophical sphere. Hence, we provide our project with theoretical meaning through the work of noted writers and theorists Louis Althusser, Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall, Noam Chomsky, Clarence Lippman and Benjamin Walter.

We begin to explain and understand society through Louis Althusser's work, which was based upon Marxist theories. Althusser proposes that societies are composed of two levels: the infrastructure, which is the economic base, and the superstructure, which has a politico-legal level (the law and the state) and an ideological level. For Althusser, the superstructure cannot exist without the infrastructure; hence societies are structured by their economic means of production. The economic forces of a society are maintained by the state in the interests of the ruling classes. A state can control people in two ways: the first is by force and second is through persuasion or ideological hegemony. Althusser notes that ideology does not refer to the means of production but the relationship to the means of production. Social ideology is controlled through Repressive State Apparatuses and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). It is the ISAs that are relevant to our particular research project. ISAs are specific social institutions such as the church, schools, family, legal, political, cultural and communication systems that function to maintain a particular hegemonic force. Schools work specifically by teaching children skills that will allow them to engage in "the reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology" (Althusser 1971: 132), or, the reproduction of the capitalist ruling labour power. Likewise, communication systems (the media) also work to uphold a specific ideology that sustains a capitalist mode of production. Althusser makes two points that ring loud for our project: that the most powerful locations in social reality are the places that claim themselves as neutral or non-political, and that the ISA's are the sites of continual class struggle.

In order to expand on Althusser's use of the notion hegemony we turn to another Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci works from a slightly different angle than Althusser in the sense that he proposes that when looking at a specific society in a specific timeframe, society cannot be understood through the reduction of social relations to

the economic infrastructure alone. Rather, society is a system of complexly articulated layers of economic, political and ideological forces (Hall 1986: 421). Additionally, social hegemony is a historically specific, multi-dimensional movement in the life of a society encompassing the economic, administrative, cultural, moral, ethical and intellectual fields of leadership (Hall 1986: 424). Hence, there is a need to complexify our understanding of society rather than attempt to simplify it.

So now that we have a general understanding of the place of schools and media in society, as well as the notions of ideology and social hegemony, we look to find how we could apply such concepts to our own particular context. Stuart Hall proposes that we need to examine western popular culture, which emerged between 1880 and 1920 when there was a profound transformation in the culture of the classes resulting in what we call post-modern society. This shift was represented by ties to material relations and conditions, new forms of technology and labour processes, new types of distribution, and a mass global market. At this time, a new major form of cultural expression also emerged: the media. Here, we return to Althusser and Gramsci's notions of the media as an ISA that works to maintain social hegemony. In order to understand the specific role of media in capitalist hegemony, we turn to John Downing's The Media Machine. Downing states that modern media asserts hegemony through its continuous and persuasive output, ability to define social categories, entrenchment in leisure activity and time, the variety of forms of media and its intrinsic relation to other mass hegemonic institutions. Essentially, the media propagates itself in all aspects of our lives – a fact that we cannot escape. Thus, the media works to sustain state power by formulating a social reality through a supposedly neutral and non-political stance. Or, in more localized terms, papers like the Vancouver Sun and the Province, controlled by capitalists monopolies such as CanWest, grant an authoritative or official voice to certain government and corporate powers to define a western Canadian social ideology.

Lastly, we look at modern media critics for an additional perspective. Marshall McLuhan states, "After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western World is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time." (McLuhan 1995: 3). It is time that we become aware of the role of media in our lives and approach such discourse with a critical eye and ear. In Media Power in Politics, writer Walter Lippman asks if democracy can exist when information is so tainted? Is there such thing as objectivity? Increasingly, there is a need to bring light to the hidden facts in society and recognize that the news and the truth are not the same thing. However, in a diplomatic fashion Lippman points out that the modern media is not inherently wicked, rather is it not able to carry the burden of presenting the illimitable complexity of contemporary society (Lippman 1994: 42). Finally, Lippman points out the difficulty in finding journalists who can see what they have not been taught to see. This point brings the relationship between schools and the media closer, since it is essentially the schools that are teaching a social ideology, which is then perpetuated through the media when such children grow up and choose a career in journalism.

So what can we do? Are we powerless victims of state power, hegemonic forces and a circular mode of economic production? Not necessarily. The key to understanding the role of contemporary public education and mass media is to be informed – critically informed. Stuart Hall suggests that we begin by deconstructing the popular, the

common sense, of society as it is within this accepted norm that true power lies. We can also become critically informed by accessing information outside the parameters of mass media. Writers such as Paul Freire, Henry Giroux and Noam Chomsky work to deconstruct both education and media. Freire presents the reading of the word and the reading of the world as a circular relationship and states, “that in order to access the true and total meaning of an entity, we must resort to the cultural and political practices that mediate our access to the world’s semantic field and its interaction with the word’s semantic features” (Chomsky 2000: 11).

But to return to public education in the Lower Mainland of BC and our own particular research context, we return to one of the class’s first readings this semester by Walter Benjamin called “The Storyteller”. In this piece, which reflects on the works of Nikolai Leskov, we are shown how as young anthropologists we must remember to be both a talented storyteller as well as an attentive listener. Whether presented in a local newspaper or an anthropological report, “a story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time” (Benjamin 1969: 90). Hence, it is vital to listen to our project participants with open ears but also to be continually aware of our authoritative role as writers “shaping the social reality” (Anonymous project participant).

### **Research Findings**

Our research explored factors that influence *how* public education is reported in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland in the city’s two major dailies, The Vancouver Sun and Province, and the Vancouver Courier, a bi-weekly. We found that the following factors have a significant effect on news decisions of what public education issues are covered and how they are reported: the physical format of the newspapers, the structure of the media organizations and their target audiences, reporters’ perceptions of news value, and the challenges they face when covering education.

While most journalists acknowledge that identity and life experience influence how one sees the world and that total objectivity is not possible, reporters remain steadfast that fairness and accuracy drive their reporting. Hence, the stories they produce are unbiased. However, other project participants indicated that circumstances such media ownership, corporate agendas, professional and personal relationships at the executive level, and the work of public relations professionals dictate the editorial positions of the newspapers and news decisions. This presents a reality that is essentially skewed and not representative of the larger social consensus.

#### **1. Media Content Analysis**

The BC School Trustees Association is one of many government entities and organizations monitoring the media coverage of public education issues in the province of British Columbia and the sophistication of these media monitoring methods ranges from simple to complex. Some pay for a service to track “mentions” of public education in the media while others go so far as to have staff read newspapers and log their observations. The BC School Trustees

Association monitors national, regional and local media by having staff read newspapers and enter into a database story headlines, subjects of articles and the stories' location or prominence within the newspaper. Jean Ciriani, Director of Communications for the BC Schools Trustees Association, shared this database with our group for research purposes.

It should be noted that this monitoring system, like many others, is subject to human error and therefore is not an all-inclusive account of education-related print media coverage. Yet, the data from the 2002-2003 school year and from this fall, allowed us to draw the following conclusions about recent education content in the Vancouver Sun and Province:

- Both newspapers run hundreds of education-related stories each year
- The vast majority of those articles deliver negative news for public school students
- Most stories are reactionary, meaning that the coverage is prompted by an official announcement (funding cuts, strikes, lawsuits) from involved parties (government, school board/trustees, parent groups, unions, etc.), a policy decision or an occurrence of crime
- The Vancouver Sun runs more front-page education stories than the Province
- When the Province runs front-page education stories, they are usually crime-related
- Top education issues most frequently covered by the two papers in the last year and a half include: education cutbacks/funding/reform, cuts to extra-curricular activities, graduation requirements, walkouts/strikes/unions/teacher contracts, bullying and violence, drugs and civil rights, class sizes, homosexuality, teen drivers and junk food in the schools

Ultimately, solid education reporting comes down to good sources and the ability to work fast; the education beat provides few shortcuts when the issue is complex and long-term. Based on our own electronic content analysis of the Vancouver Courier, a word search of 156 education stories over a one-year time period showed most words and symbols '\$' suggested a concern with funding and bi-partisan civic level politics. The longer-term impacts of changes in the education system were rarely present in this analysis.

## 2. Format, Audience and Structure Dictate Content

The above content analysis led us to research the reasons for the above stated news decisions, which led us to an analysis of story format, perceived audience, and the actual structure of the newspapers.

The Vancouver Sun and Vancouver Courier are broadsheet newspapers that allow for longer stories that can begin on the front page and continue or "jump" to inside pages. On the other hand, the Province maintains a tabloid style and runs only one story per day on its front page. Because of the physical format of this newspaper, all stories in the Province must begin and end on the same page. The Province's longest new story is one per page with a photograph – about 800 maximum words. A feature story covers two pages as an inside spread (two facing pages), and in the words of a Province reporter, "is a fairly significant commitment for the paper and the reader". These features usually run between 1,600 and 1,800 words at the maximum with one photograph. The ability to write

complex stories, then, is constrained by the structural limits of the paper that tries to correlate to the needs of its audience. This leads to tighter writing and the tightness of the writing creates genuine intellectual constraints on what any reporter can and is able to write – a task not made any easier by a complex subject. And education, it happens, is just one of those complex subjects.

Yet, audience is the lifeblood of the newspaper business: advertisers buy advertising space so a newspaper audience will be encouraged to buy their products. All newspapers as businesses, then, target specific audiences. In the case of a local paper such as the Vancouver Courier, a free paper printed twice weekly for Vancouver area residents, its story coverage is generally specific to issues that appear most relevant and may directly impact residents within the municipal boundaries. On education issues, for example, a recent Ministerial funding decision or Ministry of Education policy change on curriculum will be particularized to the Vancouver School Board and its area school, and generally not beyond the geographic domain of Vancouver. Naoibh O'Connor, education reporter for the Vancouver Courier, says that in addition to deadlines, audience fatigue factors into the depth of coverage. She sees no point in writing countless stories on budget cuts or squatter's rights for example, if nobody is going to read them. The Courier is a community paper and as such must continually be aware of what is newsworthy yet interesting to its audience.

Wendy McLellan, who covers education for the Province, says that both the Province and the Sun run significantly different types of stories – even when covering the same issue. She worked at the Vancouver Sun before switching to the Province in 1992. At the Province she worked a general assignment reporter and also covered health and medicine for seven years. For approximately the last three years, she has been writing almost exclusively about education for the Province. The two newspapers have divergent demographics that comprise their target audiences, which partially accounts for the differences in education coverage between the two dailies McLellan explains. McLellan states that the Province's target audience is commuters. Because this audience's time is limited, except perhaps on Sunday, McLellan says the Province's stories must be short and fast-paced. Research shows the Province's audience has an average education around the grade-12 level. The Province's readership extends beyond the Lower Mainland's borders more than the Sun's does. The Sun is more concentrated on the downtown Vancouver area, which is why McLellan covers the Vancouver School Board and 60 school districts, which changes the flavor of her reporting. "I try to make my stories more BC-driven, so I always try to call three or four school districts on an issue if I can find the time to make the issue the larger because the paper goes out beyond the borders," she says. The Province publishes two editions, a BC edition and a Lower Mainland edition. Often McLellan's stories are pulled from the Lower Mainland edition if they concentrate on issues beyond its borders.

### 3. Perceptions of “Fair and Accurate”

In the May 22, 2003 edition of Newsweek, Jonathan Alter said that the American press is in danger of drifting toward more of a European or 19<sup>th</sup> century American partisan press, where political agendas and opinion seep into news coverage. Many North American journalists agree that objective reporting is not possible but that it is worth seeking under the adage that media reportage must be fair and accurate. O'Connor with the Vancouver Courier classifies this as writing a balanced story that gives people on both sides of an issue the opportunity to respond. On the other hand, McLellan from the Province says that while everyone has biases, she is still able to provide an accurate, fair and objective story. She states, “My biases should never be in my stories. I try to very hard to make sure that doesn't happen. My concerns about the education system, not opinion about them, should be there”. McLellan has a 12-year-old child in the BC public school system and says she does not join her son's PAC to avoid any conflict of interest, “If there was an issue at my child's school, I wouldn't cover it. I would pass it on”. Operating under this ideology, McLellan says the newspaper's corporate ownership has little, if any, involvement in her day-to-day reporting and news coverage.

Both the Province and Vancouver Sun are owned by CanWest Global Communications Corporation, which also owns 11 English-language major metropolitan daily newspapers in Canada including the National Post, Montreal Gazette and Edmonton Herald. It owns numerous weeklies such as the Westerly News in Port Alberni, Abbotsford Times, Richmond News and the Vancouver Courier eastside, downtown and westside editions. CanWest Global Communications Corporation's ownership extends to television with 11 stations, including Global Television.

The Province and Sun are located in the same building in downtown Vancouver. Reporters at both papers share resources such as the corporate library but they “never” collaborate and do not share news tips and information. McLellan says that although the papers are different, a competitive spirit exists among the two newsrooms. “It's totally not real as far as the ownership of the newspapers go. I think it's a matter of pride for the reporters. We'd like to maintain our integrity and our separateness,” she says. McLellan says that she has never had any interference at her level and believes that most involvement is focused on the editorial/opinion page. However, McLellan says that this not always the perception of readers.

Two project participants indicated that they feel otherwise. Both had cancelled their subscriptions to the Vancouver Sun, stating that the content and the political slant of stories on the education issues did not reflect the wider social reality. One respondent noted a local BCCPAC meeting where a reporter from the Sun was present. However, the story that was published in the paper was so “dramatically different” from what she had experienced that it provided her with proof of the “hands on manipulation of stories” that is happening in the newsrooms. Another respondent indicated that it was not so much the lack of objectivity in local reporting so much as it is the right-wing stance that the editors and reporters come from. While they present their stories in a manner that is objective, their socio-political understanding of such issues stems from a certain perspective that is not able to understand, and hence incorporate, all areas of the political spectrum.

According to the consumers of news, particularly stakeholders directly invested in education, depth of coverage is limited. One school trustee who diligently tracks education coverage expressed an opinion that the reporters' stories lack depth. She says that reporters cover funding cuts, but not necessarily the impact of the cuts. She states, "Education is not about acute intervention like our health care system is, so it takes more work to explain who suffers when cuts are made and what the longer-term impacts on the kids, the families, the community is." Generally, she says that she respects and understands, with a level of empathy, the work of the reporters. This empathy though does not cloud a level of cynicism about the business side of the media, which she views as operating under a 'sell-sell' formula: She states, "The vast majority of education stories I've read have answered the three big questions: who wins, who loses, who cares." One issue that this school trustee and another stakeholder both demonstrated profound anger about and hostility towards was the annual rankings by the Fraser Institute.

While most reporters are adamant that mass media ownership does not influence their coverage, they acknowledge that some corporate decisions affect content such as editorial board choices on the opinion pages. At the Province, one of those corporate decisions is to run the Fraser Institute's annual "report card" on schools' performance in its entirety each fall. The problem with this story is that because it runs in a newspaper, it is presented under an authoritative guise of objectivity.

The school trustee had this to say on the Fraser Institute rankings: "This advertorial they do with FSA scores via the Fraser Institute is disgusting and should be illegal." The other stakeholder was more candid in his views on this subject and had much more to say on this issue. His primary concern was with the corporate relationships and ties to the owners of the paper and a perceived connection to right-wing political parties, particularly the Canadian Alliance Party of Canada. He states, "The Fraser Institute Board has David Rattler on it, who was a co-owner of Hollinger with Conrad Black until they sold it to Izzy Asper. The Fraser Institute you know, is a public so-called research institute who has probably around 280 corporate donors. You know, they don't call themselves corporate, but they are some individuals who are highly tied in with the corporations. Now I feel that it is biased and weak research. Now how do they get on the front page of the Sun or the Province – which is sometimes a six-page report card? It is because of their link to those newspapers themselves. They share a common agenda." He also expressed concern with the perceived flaws in the ranking system of the Fraser Institute. This issue, he added, had clear links to socio-economic factors and the issue of hegemony of the wealthy over the lower earning working class segments of society. "Now they want to rank all of the schools without taking into consideration the socio-economic status of the catchment area of those schools... There is a link to that – to school performance, you might know that as well, people who come from money and aren't doing well in school – they can hire a tutor – no problem. Working class students with families who have lower minimum wage, the working class who have two or three part time jobs – the so-called latch-key kids – they aren't going to do as well as most of them. Perhaps the odd one might be able to figure out how to do it. But the Fraser Institute does not take that into consideration and they also promote the further decimation of social programs at the same time that they champion schools in the public system that have these scores." Hence, the publication of the

Fraser Report presents a type of social reality that in fact may be misleading.

Typically, editorial boards do not comment on news events on their opinion pages until the newspaper has covered the issue as a news story elsewhere in the paper. With this understanding, it is the intent that editorial boards do not drive news coverage. It is rare for a newspaper to publish a report or study in its news section without concurrently providing context and diverse perspectives from experts who support and criticize its purpose and findings. However, our research found that the editorial sections of papers are allowing for government officials to respond to editorial comments and essentially have the “last word” on a particular issue. Additionally, it was noted that the editorial sections of a number of different papers, located in geographically separate places, often comment on the exact same issue, using strikingly similar language and vocabulary, within a period of several days. How is this possible? A coincidence? Possibly. But one project participant felt that it is more likely evidence of a wider agenda as set by media forces. Further research is needed to examine the magnitude and frequency of other corporate news decisions and to explore the backgrounds and agendas of those who sit on the editorial boards at the Sun and Province as well as the extent of influence that such individuals wield on those papers’ opinion pages.

#### 4. What Is Education News?

While our research confirmed that format, audience and structure impact news content, the journalistic standard is to utilize the following criteria to determine news value: timeliness, proximity, prominence, impact, conflict and novelty. The stronger the combination of these criteria, the more news value that is placed on the story. Education news does not often become big news unless it is bad news. For example, McLellan says that education news rarely makes the front page unless it is about a violent incident. Funding cuts to education would not likely make the front page because they are not sensational enough.

In the case of a school stabbing or other breaking education news, McLellan is assigned to cover these occurrences by news editors. Otherwise, she is 90 percent self-assigned and calls principals and others at the schools frequently to stay current with what is happening. McLellan says that in addition to her own story cultivation, people with story ideas and requests often approach her. She assesses these ideas based on their news values to readers and on the credibility of the news source.

Education issues attract various stakeholder groups with media interests. For example, within the Ministry of Education is the office of the current Minister Christie Clark and then a bureaucratic entity that implements the decisions of the current political regime. Outside this provincial political arena are the school boards, such as the Vancouver School Board, and trustees who act at a municipal/city level. Trustees are elected and often tied to civic political parties, which themselves may be linked to provincial and federal political parties. Additionally, individual schools include stakeholders of principals, administrators, teachers and students. Principals and teachers may or may

not be represented by unions and professional associations. Finally, students are linked to parents and guardians. Other entities also have a stake in media coverage, including policy institutes such as the Fraser Institute, a right-wing think tank tied to conservative political parties; university researchers; and other educators. In short, education consists of a wide and fragmented plethora of interests. It was pointed out by a local reporter that there appears to be a continuum of interests, varying motivations and degrees of skill by the different political players to access and use the media for their political purposes. Thus, not every group is as effective at getting its message across and manipulating the media or there may exist structural constraints. She says, “While some trustees always make themselves available for comment, others don’t seem to be in a rush to return calls. We work on tight deadlines so it’s an issue for us. The trustees in the critic role (those from political parties that don’t hold the majority) are often the most interested in getting press. Some senior staff is difficult to reach. It can be a big problem because they provide the background information that trustees aren’t necessarily familiar with – financial info, district history, etc. Teacher unions respond quickly to any questions, but they provide the union perspective. I assume there are some teachers who don’t back the union, but they likely wouldn’t comment on the record. It’s often too much trouble to go on school grounds to talk to students unless I’m working on a longer cover story because of the consent issue. I work on deadline and often don’t have the time to accommodate the delay it takes for parents to sign forms.”

Deborah Carty, Communications Manager for the Vancouver School Board, says that she has worked in the last year to get several messages out to the public via through the Vancouver media. Among them is a lack of funding in the district, SARS education and information about asbestos in the schools. Her office uses media releases, interviews with reporters and other community-relations efforts to meet these communications goals. Groups without public relations professionals working on their behalf are at a disadvantage when looking to have their messages published by the media. Public relations professionals work to package the information so that it meets the news criteria that journalists seek, conform to meet the reporters’ deadlines and for the most part, make themselves accessible to the press.

McLellan describes BC-government communications regarding education as very strong, but says that the BCC PAC is quite political and not easily accessible. The individual PACs are not particularly media savvy, nor are parents, and often the trustees are not because they are elected from within the communities in which live, she says. Although they are politicians, they are not at the same level of media awareness as provincially elected officials.

A Vancouver School Board trustee says that the provincial government has a great number of “PR people” whose job is to make sure their issues and positions are out there. Consequently, she feels that parents and school boards that do not have access to those resources feel frustrated because they cannot get their message out. Additional research in this area is needed to examine the various concerns of parents, teachers and administrators, and the varying success of their media relations efforts.

## 5. Challenges to Reporting Education

If Wendy McLellan at the Province is any indication, reporters find that covering public education is much like the fixture itself: challenging, bureaucratic, complex and impersonal. McLellan says that education is not her ideal beat, explaining that the newspaper has a short attention span and editors want something that will make a difference today or tomorrow or yesterday, and education just does not work like that. She says, “a change in a math program in grade ten won’t be good or bad for five to ten years until we determine whether the kids are more successful or less successful at math at a university-level or after graduation. All these things take a long time to evaluate. I find that I’m often conflicted about how to report on those kinds of education stories and I tend to not do a lot of those because I can’t really evaluate them, don’t know what to make of it and it’s hard to know what to give the reader so I end up covering more of the policy stuff, which I don’t find as interesting.”

As mentioned elsewhere in this report, the complexity of issues and working in a constrained format with tight deadlines pose a significant challenge for local education reporters. Reporters often find accessing the official voice of the government, school board or union proves less difficult than finding people directly impacted by the issues who are willing to have their first and last names printed in the newspaper.

On budget stories, McLellan says she focuses on who and what will be impacted; “I try to not to do too many of those big picture budget stories because no one understands what \$20 billion looks like, \$20 millions looks like...it’s easier to do it with a program at a time.” McLellan says aboriginal education and special education are also challenging issues to cover. The difficulty with special education stories, she says, is getting parents to publicly tell their stories because many feel that if they make a fuss that there will be repercussions for their kids. She continues by stating, “the stories are very individual, too, which is another problem for newspapers...We want to quantify everything, but with special needs kids, every one of them has a different need generally and a different requirement for assistance...The ones who have the most significant concerns are the ones the least likely to phone you. I really haven’t had enough stories on this.”

Regarding access to the people on her beat that McLellan needs as sources for her stories, she says that while getting access to some isn’t a problem, that “teachers are also fairly muzzled right now, not able to speak out about problems in the classroom – they have been told by the Ministry of Education and their respective school boards that their employment will be in jeopardy if they publicly criticize their employer. So that’s a pretty heavy hammer, so I’m forced then to go through the union generally for teacher stories.” However, McLellan feels that principals are fairly easy to access as well as parents, but only through the PACs. Parents generally work and McLellan says it is difficult for many parents to get back to her before her day ends, which is usually the deadline for a story. On the other hand, teachers’ unions are always quick to respond, as is the government and the trustees, she says.

According to another education reporter, “I cover a lot of education stories, some of which are interesting – others are a little dry but need to be reported. The ones that are more people-centered rather than centered on officials are probably the most interesting. Any beat can get routine after a few years, however. A lot of the same issues come up over and over again. I mostly like writing in-depth features through our cover stories. I have more time to research and write them, so they’re more complete.” Selectivity in education coverage is driven by necessity and reporters who

gauge what they think the readership is willing to read. This challenge is not made any easier by the layered bureaucratic nature of education, which leads to generally surface-level coverage on topics and often stories prompted by policy rather than the accomplishments or actions of individuals.

Additionally, a school trustee acknowledges that like public education, education reporters are under resourced. “They need pro-d days, too, and support to learn more about what is a dazzling array of associations, unions, boards and non-profits all engaged in education. You could put 50 reporters on it and still not pick up all the stuff that’s happening at the school and district level.”

Changes to policy or society typically do not happen overnight as a result of media coverage, but McLellan hopes that her reporting will have a positive impact. If McLellan wasn’t facing all the challenges outline in this report – if she did not have to be concerned about access, format, story length and other considerations, the one issue she would like to write more about is Aboriginal education. She says that there has been a significant amount of discussion about Aboriginal graduation and achievement rates, but there has not been an exploration of why this is this is the case. It is all very sensitive and huge, and there is a lot of resistance from the community to explore issues, especially outside of the Lower Mainland, she says. “Nothing has really hit me as a way to tell this story,” she states, explaining that is must be compelling, colourful and for such a massive issue, fit into the amount of space that people are willing to read it.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

1. Expand the scope of the project to include broadcast and digital media: this project focused on three papers, one bi-weekly and two dailies. Many forums exist for media research, including the Internet, radio and television. There are also local papers that provide news to specific ethnic groups, such as, Jewish-Canadian, Chinese-Canadian, Indo-Canadian, and several Aboriginal audiences.
2. Conduct additional expert interviews: a wider number of stakeholders should be interviewed and this should be done systematically, possibly incorporating some quantitative methods to generate statistically powerful findings on the public perception of media coverage.
3. Explore specifics issues:
  - The Fraser Institute Reports: this issue appeared sensitive to both reporters and stakeholders alike. The findings/rankings of the yearly report and its use of indicators are arguably flawed.
  - Minority Groups, especially Aboriginal students: exploring some of the concerns of ethnic minority and sexual minority groups coverage (or a lack thereof) would give some valuable insights into the effects of marginalization and distance from the media. One possible theoretical avenue would be to look at this through the uneven spread of social capital among various segments of the population.
4. Document the apparatus of government and corporate communication systems. One of the members of the research team who previously worked in a government directorate that delivered program funding on a politically

sensitive social issue noted that the PR machinery, i.e. ‘spin-doctoring’ was a major concern. In the opinion of this team member, there was a consistent, concerted and deliberate effort on the part of the bureaucracy to get specific thematic messages out to the public via the media. Bureaucratic entities invest heavily to promote a certain kind of favourable corporate image.

### *Conclusion*

From the perspective of a school trustee and other project participants, the Vancouver media should rightfully act as the central forum for discussion and debate over the fate of public education. She is dismayed at the lack of involvement in this discussion. “If we were having the kind of public debate we’ve seen raging over health care happen over education, I think that would do the issue justice. Here we have three big provinces (Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario) totally ripping the guts out of education by funding it at ridiculously low levels, yet no public debate has happened to say, well OK, it’s fine with me if kids can recite a pizza pop tune but not know the title of a single work of Shakespeare.” As we have seen from the perspectives of project participants who consume and report education news in Vancouver, numerous challenges exist to creating this type of public education debate in the media, which in its current state, this trustee and other give a failing grade.

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