**NewsWatch Monitor Issue 7** 

Concentrate on media ownership: It's still an issue Robert Hackett March 2001 Even if Black were to abandon the media, Canada's press would continue to be owned by members of the corporate elite and funded mainly by advertising. If anything, basic biases hostile to progressive, democratic values (biases favouring the ethos of private consumption over environmentalism or public go

A democratic media system requires public support both for alternative media, and for government policies to protect the right to communicate for citizens who can't afford their own billion-dollar media empire. Fortunately, there are signs of growing activism. Launched in 1996 as a common front against media concentration, the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom has been gaining new life; there are now chapters in Vancouver and Toronto. (Visit www.presscampaign.org There's still time to sign up before the media giants turn the Internet into a gargantuan shopping mall.

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**Biotech Bravado** Donald Gutstein and Scott Uzelman March 2001

Issues surrounding government approval of genetically modified foods are rapidly rising to the top of the political agenda, yet Canadians do not know enough about this controversial subject to contribute to the debate. A poll commissioned by the Canadian government and published in January 2000 found that only five percent of Canadians said they were "very familiar" with biotechnology and only two percent said they were "very familiar" with the regulatory system for food.

A NewsWatch Canada study found that the commercial press is doing a poor job of informing Canadians about genetically modified (GM) foods. The study compared coverage of GM foods in three newspapers -- the *National Post*, The *Globe and Mail*, and the *Toronto Star*, in 1999.

Looking first at Conrad Black's pride and joy, the National Post, in 1999, this paper:

- Provided hardly any coverage of biotechnology
- Placed most of its biotech reporting in the Business section
- Did not report once on the ethical implications of biotechnology (neither did the *Globe and Mail*)
- Did not report once on protests or actions against biotech developments

• Was unlikely to use advocacy groups such as Greenpeace and the Sierra Club as sources. Overall, biotechnology received little coverage in any of the papers: 49 stories each in The *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star*, and 41 in the *National Post*. Given that the Post published 80,000 articles that year and that biotechnology accounted for about one-fiftieth of one percent, it's little wonder people are unfamiliar with biotechnology.

In both the *National Post* and the *Toronto Star*, over 50 percent of GM stories were located in the Business section, suggesting that for these papers, the issues surrounding GM foods were of concern primarily to investors and the business community. Only 20 percent of the Post's stories were situated in the News section, compared to 60 percent of Globe stories.

negative piece was written by a coalition of scientists presenting arguments against biotechnology, but this was rebutted immediately in an adjacent article by another coalition of scientists praising biotech foods. The second negative piece was not actually an article but a news release from the Sierra Youth Coalition outlining its strategies for a campaign against biotech. It was negated by its headline, "Sierra's Halloween food scare."

Four of the 24 pro-GM pieces were written by neocon Business editor Terence Corcoran, three for his "Junk Science Week." This series of articles dealt with scientific controversies Corcoran claimed were the result of shoddy methods and "politically driven" research.

Douglas Powell, a professor in the department of Agriculture in the University of Guelph, and a tiresome defender of anything genetically modified, contributed another four articles in favour of biotech. Other authors included scientists from other universities, biotech executives and so-called scholars from free-market think tanks such as the far-right Hudson Institute.

The list of pejorative terms provided by the Post for opponents of biotechnology is a long one. They were variously "biotech-bashers," "bullies," "Future Fascisti" (27 Dec 99 A16), "infantile" (14 July 99 C7), "anti-science" (5 May 99 C7), "alarmist" (4 May 99 C7), living in an "apocalyptic and imaginary world" (6 Oct 99 A19), "and scare mongers" (16 Sept 99 C7), among others.

The Post portrayed opposition to genetically engineered foods as a political issue, the product of sectarian and economic interests. Governments, especially European ones, the Post claimed without evidence, were using the issue to mask a clever strategy to erect barriers to international trade. And grassroots movements were nothing more than backward and irrational fear mongers, the product of Luddism and outdated ideologies.

Whew! And that was just 1999. Meanwhile, in 2000 the Post ramped up its propaganda campaign against biotech critics.

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## What they believe, apparently Scott Uzelman and Donald Gutstein

March 2001

And on the subject of editorial opinion, NewsWatch also undertook a study of editorials and opinion pieces in the *National Post*, The *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star*, for the period October 1998 to June 1999.

A Fall 1998 CBC-Maclean's poll ranked the top ten concerns of Canadians. NewsWatch

"[t]he option of private funding for health services, an end to global funding for hospitals, the creation of internal markets to allow hospitals to compete for patients, the creation of medical savings accounts or tax credits to allow Canadians to save for health expenses. All these ideas deserve a well-mannered and thorough debate." (A19)

Privatizing health care was characteristic of most *National Post* discussion. It also is essentially a summary of Fraser Institute policies on health care.

Only two left-wing items provided any balance to calls for privatization. One, written by Council of Canadians chairperson Maude Barlow, called for the Liberal government to restore health transfers to the provinces and to resist the call for tax cuts (4 Feb 99 A18). However, this article was directly rebutted in an editorial four days later that labelled her an "ardent supporter of the status quo" who apparently "confuses equity with simple envy." (8 Feb 99 A19).

In the Globe too, the publicly funded health care system was routinely portrayed as embroiled in continual crisis and just as often privatization was prescribed as the cure. And again, social spending on health care was often portrayed as a threat to the much talked about tax cut. See "The ravenous beast of health care" (17 June 99 A20) or "The elephant is hungry" (18 Nov 98 A26), for example. These items were just two of several written by Globe columnist Jeffery Simpson who, although not as strident in his attacks as the Post, made it clear that publicly funded health care was unworkable and a threat to tax0.24 195...2 v ((179e) 0.2 (2.2 (s) -0u (o 0.2 (a) [ (m)