



# How the Mainstream Media Gathers the News



## I. Mainstream Media Industry Structure Centralizes News-Gathering

Most daily **newspapers** in Canada are owned by one of 6 companies, 4 of which (CanWest Global, Hollinger, Osprey, and Southam) are linked together in ownership and operations. CanWest Global is the largest newspaper company in English Canada, and owns and operates the Southam News Service which is a "wire service" that sends stories written by Southam reporters to the over 30 newspapers in the CanWest/Southam network.

Canadian Press (CP) is another "wire service" for newspapers (TV and radio networks also have access to CP stories). Canadian Press is a collective news-gathering organization funded by a wide variety of media corporations to provide stories to those corporations media outlets.

**In TV**, CBC, CTV and CanWest Global are the largest TV networks, and dominate news-gathering through their main channels, or with CBC through its CBC Newsworld channel and CTV with its CTV NewsNet channel, both of which offer news or news-like programs (for example, talkshows, documentaries etc.) 24 hours a day. In addition, CTV and CanWest Global have agreements with U.S. TV news companies to use stories in their Canadian news shows.

**In radio**, the top 6 radio broadcasting companies own stations that represent about 35% of the total hours tuned in by Canadians. All other stations combined represent about 65% of listening hours. Broadcast News (BN) is, like CP, a wire service for radio stations. Many stations across the country subscribe to BN to receive news stories.

In addition, many media corporations have been cutting costs in the past decade by cutting the number of reporters they employ and increasing their reliance on wire services to fill their newspapers, or TV or radio news shows with stories.

As a result of the concentration of ownership of media in Canada, the reliance on wire services, and cost-cutting at many media outlets, the gathering of news in Canada for the mainstream media has become very centralized. Studies have documented how even small, local newspapers have increased their use of stories from wire services, stories which take up space in the newspaper that in the past would have been devoted to covering local events and activities.

## II. The Day-to-Day Process of Mainstream News Gathering

While the centralization of news gathering in Canada makes it easier for every media outlet to fill its pages or minutes of broadcasting, the 24-hour news channels, talk TV and radio shows, and media websites mean that there are lots of pages and minutes to fill.

Generally, there are 3 kinds of reporters who file the stories that fill the pages and minutes:

1. **General assignment reporters** - who cover whatever the editors/producers think should be covered each day;
2. **Beat reporters** - who cover specific subject areas (e.g. business, police/courts, city hall, sports etc.) but again the editors/producers usually determine what they cover each day, and;
3. **Investigative reporters** - who do not have to file a story every day, and are given time by editors/producers to investigate what is happening behind the day-to-day scene.

How does the media decide what will fill its pages and minutes of broadcasting? The following are the key factors considered by the media in deciding what to cover each day. Please note, these factors may be used to varying degrees, or in a different order, by the publishers, senior executives, producers, editors and reporters at different media outlets, but generally all mainstream media outlets take into account these key factors when deciding what to cover:

1. **"If it bleeds, it leads"** - A story involving suffering is often the first, or "leading" story, in mainstream media coverage. Other than this rule, the media generally defines the biggest news as things that do one or more of the following: 1. affect a lot of people; 2. involve human suffering; 3. involve a hero and a villain; 4. involve waste (usually waste of taxpayers' money, or gouging by corporations) or savings for people, or; 5. are very unusual. In other words, problems get covered, not solutions to problems.
2. **News must be new** - Most mainstream media outlets report things that have happened that day and especially, following one of the factors set out above in the first rule, things that are unusual. As a famous saying goes: "When a dog bites a man, that is not news because it happens so often. But if a man bites a dog -- that is news."
3. **Famous people and things are news** - The mainstream media considers politicians and heads of corporations, movie and music stars, and other well-known or "beautiful" people to be leaders in society, and therefore they get media coverage for almost anything they say or do, no matter how, or how often, they say or do it. Anything that happens to a famous thing (for example, the CN Tower) is also likely to receive media coverage.

Given that around the world every day there are many accidents (along with widespread, systemic human, animal, and environment suffering), bizarre events, scandals (especially sex scandals), political or business leaders giving speeches, stars releasing movies or music or holding concerts, many pages and minutes of media coverage are taken up each day almost automatically.

To fill the rest of the pages and minutes, the media also considers the following factors:

4. **Is the story simple, or can it be simplified?** - The mainstream media, especially TV news, generally do not handle complex stories or issues well, in part because they usually have to report a very short version of the story within a few hours. As a result, reporters and editors naturally give more coverage to simple stories they understand. This means that systemic problems are usually not covered, as they are usually complex.
5. **Is the story from a known, trusted source?** - Editors and reporters are human beings, and like many human beings they trust people (and organizations) they know more than people they don't know, and therefore they give them more media coverage.
6. **Are there interesting pictures?** - This rule obviously applies only to TV media and print media, which love interesting pictures. Radio media love interesting sounds.
7. **Exclusive and/or Live stories** - If a media outlet gets a story that no other media outlet has (known as an "exclusive" or a "scoop") then it will cover that story. As well, more and more, TV news in particular favours stories that can be covered live.
8. **Editors and reporters biases** - While many in the mainstream media claim that they always try to be impartial and objective, the 7 factors listed above create biases in media coverage. In addition, media corporations want to sell advertising, and this usually creates a bias that means stories criticizing businesses (who pay for advertising) are often ignored. Finally, studies have shown that editors and reporters generally have better incomes and more formal education than the public, which often leads them to have very different values, and different views about what should receive media coverage.