

# SIPP Briefing Note

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## MEDIA AND POLITICS

by John D. Whyte, Lynn Wells, Rick Salutin, Joyce Green and Gennadiy Chernov

*\* Remarks in this Briefing Note were presented as part of a public forum in Regina, SK, on March 9, 2007. The purpose of the events is to explore the influences on our political culture of other vital social institutions that we tend to see as being distinct from, and lie outside of, politics.*

### Introduction

by John D. Whyte and Dr. Lynn Wells

This publication emerges from the third symposium in a series that has been sponsored by the Canada Research Chair in Social Justice and the Department of Political Science, both in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Regina, and by the Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy.

The first symposium in this series explored the relationship between law and politics or, more specifically, the emerging politicization of the judicial function. The second symposium looked at the often uneasy relationship between religion and politics. In the third symposium, the papers from which comprise this publication, the topic was the influence of politics on the news media and the influence of the media on the nation's political life. The purpose of these symposia has been to explore the relationship between our political culture and other vital social institutions that we tend to think should operate apart from political influences and should function according to ideas that are intrinsic to law, or faith, or journalism. These explorations have been grounded in the sense that, even in the face of a strong normative sense of the functional

separateness of these diverse social institutions, there are strong, and possibly damaging, cross-currents between them.

It is, of course, naïve not to understand that the social practices connected to law, religion and journalism carry immense political significance and, hence, attract strategies designed to politicize them and recruit them for political ends. Yet, we reasonably hope that applying laws, promoting fidelity to spiritual insights and divine purposes and communicating the facts of our social and political experience are the kinds of enterprises that can be pursued for their own purposes and with their own values and not seen as useful for the political agendas that they promote or the political interests that they serve. Therefore, without falling prey to excessive naïvety we can properly ask if established boundaries between social functions are not being maintained (at least, to the extent that we imagine they once were) and, if that is true, if we are compromising the integrity and the value of processes we have long relied on for social well-being.

On the other hand, we may live in an age in which we have lost all sense that institutional purity or separateness is possible—or even valuable. Our post-modernist sense is that all is politics—almost all that we do is, in spite of

Saskatchewan Institute of  
Public Policy  
University of Regina  
College Avenue Campus  
Gallery Building, 2nd Floor  
Regina, SK, S4S 0A2



General Inquiries:  
306.585.5777  
Fax: 306.585.5780  
sipp@uregina.ca  
www.uregina.ca/sipp

other justifications, done in pursuit of particular interests, and that we should not be alarmed if we see that law has become politicized, if religious practice has included the attempt to shape politics and its projects, and if the media's role has been reduced to promoting specific political visions.

The particular inquiry of this collection is on the political influences on media, specifically news media, and media's role in shaping political outcomes. This relationship differs slightly from the previous two in this series in the sense that one of public media's traditional roles has been to serve the political process—to disseminate information about public government so that we can better assess its performance and exercise our democratic choice more knowingly. Notwithstanding the honorable roots of the relationship between politics and the media, public cynicism about journalism could not be higher. Its sources barely need describing. Our newspapers have so frequently become mere instruments of political and social campaigns—the campaign to establish Conrad Black's innocence (or his guilt), the campaign to promote the virtues of military combat, the campaign to question the efficacy of public health services, the claim that public safety has deteriorated due to judicial leniency in sentencing, and so on—campaigns to rouse support for reform and campaigns of disparagement. Furthermore, most of radio and TV, it seems, is in thrall to consumerism, celebrity and voyeurism. Media resources have shifted to sport and business, leaving, for politics, coverage that is superficial and partial. It is beyond question that much of the media's function has come to be that of flacking for something—or somebody—and not furthering critical inquiry or political insight.

These may not be new phenomena. Possibly, journalism has never been driven purely by the original concern that a people who live in an information vacuum cannot be self-governing and, so, they must be provided information in order to participate wisely in their political community. This idea of journalism has likely seldom been pursued without the added desire to mobilize popular support for a specific program or interest. What may be disturbing, however, is that the inevitable desire to give force to particular political ends through reporting news has been structurally driven away from some sorts of valuable political analysis and directed towards others, perhaps less important. In this way, the absence of journalistic neutrality has produced a distinct political effect.

One of the valuable social roles that journalists believe they perform is letting people know that the institutions on which

they rely for their well-being consistently fail in their basic tasks. This specific purpose dominates our political news. For instance, we learn that the justice system cannot act effectively to protect us and is too often biased and unfair, schools do not give children the skills they need, health care neither keeps us healthy nor cures us when our bodies fail, office holders do not respect the people they serve and public agencies are most efficient in serving private interests. And so our news goes, day after day. While these are valuable stories, there are deeper trends of politics and society that the media does not examine or report on. These relate to the costs and effects of world militarism, the harms of economic and military empires, the effect on social health and well-being of an economy based in part on the corruption of innocence, the likely results of despoiling our life-space and the potential disruptions flowing from the fragility of our economic structure and the widespread sinking of the social condition in society's struggling layers. Journalism is not always completely inattentive to these challenges but they seem not to be its natural resting place. There seems to be little news value in our deepest challenges or in the slow decline and gradual loss of social solidarity. In this way, the media's lack of critical vision looks like complicity in the interests, structures and choices that should be receiving the closest public scrutiny.

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Journalism, in short, faces the challenge of being sufficiently serious, the challenge of drawing our mind away, from time to time, from the circuses of our age—games and stardom and mean bickering—and toward the question of what world are we choosing to bequeath to the next generations. Is it asking too much of media that it stir our critical responses, our better yearnings and our sense of responsibility? It could be. Media, too, are constructed under the usual constraints of markets and legitimacy. But, it is certainly not asking too

much to suggest that media be aware of its tendency to narrowness in its holding power to account. Of course, this plea only serves to make the media even more political—but political in the mature sense of promoting the deepest sort of understanding and, hence, the strongest possibility for critical review of our current condition and reform.

In none of the inquiries in this series has the purging of political value or influence been an option. The option has always been, as it is also with respect to the relationship between the media and politics, to take on the freedom that comes from political awareness. ∞

## BIO

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Dr. Lynn Wells is an Associate Professor of English and Associate Dean (Research and Graduate) in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Regina.

John D. Whyte is currently the Douglas McK. Brown Visiting Professor in the Faculty of Law at the University of British Columbia and is a Senior Policy Fellow at the Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy.

## Media and Complicity

by Rick Salutin

Keynote speaker, author and journalist

I want to concentrate on ways that media complicity with power has developed, particularly since the end of the Cold War. Much of the media critique familiar to this audience developed before then in the aftermath of the Vietnam war. I recall my own excitement at reading Chomsky and Herman's *Political Economy of Human Rights* in the late 1970s. Around that time I developed my own fantasies about media.

I wanted to go on the radio every morning and read the papers aloud, explaining what the news *really* meant. Say what they were really saying. Or: since I was doing a lot of theatre and work with actors at the time, I wanted to have a radio spot each night at the time the national news aired on CBC. We'd tell listeners to turn their tv's to *The National* but turn the sound off and tune in our radio station. Then we'd provide sound, including voices (I knew actors who did voices well) to tell the real truth about the visuals.

Prior to the end of the Cold War this kind of media critique, or critique of media complicity with power, was a marginal activity. My own first collection of journalism was called *Marginal Notes*, published in 1984. I did my own versions in *This Magazine*, a left nationalist alternate journal, because I'd never have been able to do it anywhere else. That is where I wrote a critique, around 1980, of Barbara Amiel's journalism in *Maclean's*. Peter Newman, her editor at *Maclean's*, waved me over in a restaurant and said, "I'll deny this if you repeat it, but I loved every word." OK, I said, but in that case will you give me a column like she has. "Ohno," he said instantly, without hesitation. I did write for *Maclean's* occasionally. But the regular space of a column was out of the question. Other editors would sometimes call, and say something like, "Would you consider writing for anything as bourgeois as *Chatelaine* or *TV Guide*." I did, I was not on the margins by choice. I continued to turn out those media pieces for *This Magazine* but gradually for *Saturday Night* and the *Globe and Mail* as well.

Since the end of the Cold War, it seems to me, there has been this greater range permitted in mainstream media, precisely because there is less sense of threat to the dominant order, with the "other side" vanished in the maw of history. The Soviet Union and its subsidiaries were parodic and reactionary in their way but they functioned as a genuine

threat, or at least a source of a genuine sense of threat. The reason Peter Newman said “Ohno” so reflexively was largely because of the redbaiting implications, though I don’t know if it was on his mind consciously: soviet agent, Moscow gold, etc. I shake my head now as I mention those terms, but they were used and implied. I didn’t hear it all that often aloud. Redbaiting was like antisemitism: if you’re Jewish you don’t hear it that often unless people don’t realize you’re Jewish. But occasionally it was made explicit. Moses Znaimer at the time said, “The spectrum of opinion that is permissible in the mainstream media runs from A to B, and it’s all right of centre.” Then the Soviet Union vanished, suddenly, and because of that, I believe, things opened up.

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When Conrad Black purchased *Saturday Night* magazine in the late 1980s, he appointed John Fraser editor. Fraser said to me: “You have to write for me, you’re my key to proving to the world I’m not under Conrad’s thumb.” He meant it and the first piece I did for him appeared in 1990, right after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was a critique saying the *Globe and Mail* and the CBC now comprised Brian Mulroney’s ministry of propaganda—the first one we’d had in Canada since World War Two. Of course the basis was Noam Chomsky’s propaganda model. Out of that piece came a media column in the *Globe and Mail*, which transmuted into the op-ed column I currently write. I’d been trying for a mainstream column since the Newman debacle ten years before. I wrote a tv column for Southam’s *TV Times*, which appeared for about a year and a half, then I was fired for criticizing *The Cosby Show*. (Ostensibly. They never tell you the real reason.) I was hired to do a column for the *Sunday Star* in 1984 or 85. I wrote the first one, they even did a headshot, it was set on the page, then the editor wandered in on Saturday afternoon and ordered it stripped from the paper. I wrote a column for *Canadian Business* for a short while, which I wanted to call, “Can We Talk?” I was fired from that. Then a weekly column in the *Globe’s TV* magazine, but only every other week, in case. In case of what, I’m not sure. Then came a newsroom coup, after the free trade election of 1988, William Thorsell took over. He told his staff he’d rather not have “a Rick Salutin” as a columnist, someone figured out that meant me, and I was gone. I spent

the next two years dumping on the *Globe* in *This Magazine*, and *Saturday Night*. Then the *Globe* asked if I’d apply to be their media columnist. I said, No, I didn’t see why I should ask to be rejected, so they offered the job. It was 1992. I wrote my first column defending *Frank* magazine for its contest about deflowering Brian Mulroney’s daughter. My friends said it was my masochism, couldn’t I have waited till the second column to get fired. This way no one would know I had even been there, like the *Star*. But things were different. The piece appeared, I’m still there 16 years later, and I still write each column as if it’s the last, which it will be one day.

But I do think it is one symptom of a more open media, to a wider range of views. I’m not saying the old models have vanished, you still see the news media snap smartly to. But there is also room for alternate views, and I think it is a wider range than there was during the Cold War. Usually provided by freelancers like myself, rather than staff people. No real job, no security, no benefits. The range of opinion available in the mainstream has expanded although the sense of real change that is possible in our society has declined.

Let me illustrate this shift by pointing not just to attitudes in the mainstream, but also in the alternate outlets, using the example of *This Magazine*, with which I was associated for 20 years on the editorial board. In the mid-1980s, the *Globe* ran a frontpage story saying we had been targeted by CSIS as a terrorist organization and that our meetings were bugged. That would have been my dining room, where we met each week. Those meetings ran on the sixties collective model. Everyone read each article and discussed them, then one editor would get back to the writer with a compendium of the collective’s suggestions. It wasn’t the way Peter Newman ran *Maclean’s*. Around the end of the Cold War, those of us who’d been running the magazine pretty much decided to hand it over to another generation and get out of the way. That happened and it’s still operating.

But there’s no more collective, just an ordinary editorial board that meets occasionally and helps out with ideas and fundraising. The editor runs it, more or less as Peter Newman used to run *Maclean’s*. The people on the board, and its writers, used to be involved in political action: in the labour movement, the women’s movement, universities, third world support groups, educational activism. For a long time I was the only fulltime writer, and I always had a second and sometimes third life in union organizing or politics. Our parties were gabfests about campaigns or strikes or solidarity efforts. Since the transition, the parties are attended almost

entirely; the discussion is about how to get magazine assignments or tv gigs, gossip about jobs in the media, etc. Most of us, certainly speaking for myself, wrote for *This Magazine* because it's the only place we could write what we wanted to. During the Cold War years, I would never have proposed most of what I wrote to the mainstream mags. When I wrote for them, it was things that were acceptable to them, even if they were things I believed in. The people who write and edit *This Magazine* now, or *This* as it's known, move freely between the mainstream and the margin, if you can even call it that. Effectively, *This* became part of a farm system for the mainstream. And the reverse also occurs, when editors from the mainstream move to *This*, perhaps to express their own vision of things, or to build a resume.

*This* is still considered left and political, but it lacks the direct political connections it used to have. I'm noting this, not decrying it. Being left has become a job designation, the writers call themselves lefties and feel they are entitled to a certain amount of employment in the mainstream just like the foodies, or artsies or jocks. Maybe not as much but they expect to be there, to have columns in the papers and gigs on tv, where they say things like, "As a good leftie, I love paying taxes." In other words you play a predictable role, it's a living. I don't think it's easy being a leftie in the media today and I do feel the danger of old fartism moving in like an enveloping mist. But if they are limited, and deprived of certain opportunities for advancement, they lack the comforting explanation that this is so because they are a threat, or represent one, or expose the publication or station to charges of being communist or Russian dupes. The very notion today is ludicrous. It's hard to imagine such things happened, much less could happen now. There was something harsh, unjust and yet somehow affirmative about being rebaited, blacklisted or banned. One of the defining traits of the left in the Cold War years was a difficulty in taking its own potential role as seriously as the establishment or ruling class or mainstream media or whatever you called them—gave every sign of taking you.

I don't mean to say there is no political threat from the left today. I have taught a half course at the University of Toronto since 1978 and I've always tried to reassure students that what they missed in the 1960s was more rhetoric than politics, billowing with narcissism and self-delusion, including the delusion that the world could be changed through our efforts in our lifetimes. It's a delusion I would wish for anyone, at least at a certain age but in general I find students today smarter than we were; and the politics of recent times, especially the antiglobalization movement of

just before 9/11 at least as potent and probably more honest and more potentially significant than anything we went through with our high dogma and left romanticism.

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Since I've mentioned 9/11, let me mention in passing some of the impact which that event had on media, in my own experience as a writer. It has meant speaking as if knowledgeable about areas in which I don't feel very competent, but what the hell, I have the platform, and everyone else does it, and one must assume that it is possible on the basis of human empathy and common sense to make meaningful statements about people in other places and situations, like muslim countries or suicide bombers. If I had the temerity to put myself in the skin of immigrant women factory workers or Rocket Richard when he was moving in on the net, then I've already crossed that line. My mail at the *Globe* has changed since 9/11. There was always a lot of disagreement, most of it respectful and thoughtful. But rage, hate and menace have increased markedly since then. I attribute this to fear. And the reactions on the left have not always been impressive either.

But let me turn to the present and future, regarding media complicity with power. This is largely a question of the new media, especially the internet. Let me start by noting that new technologies of communication, as Harold Innis called media, always seem to engender hysterical enthusiasm and overstatement. The introduction of semaphore in 1793 led French revolutionaries to claim it would let "all French citizens tell each other their ideas and desires." They said their new medium refuted Rousseau's belief that democracy could thrive in small communities but not in large nations. In 1858, two Americans predicted that, because of the *telegraph*, "It is impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should longer exist while such an instrument has been created for an exchange of thought between all the nations of the earth." One hundred years ago, Jack London wrote that *movies* would "unite the peoples of the world" and lead to "the inevitable restoration of the human condition." So it's easy to get overheated on these matters. I remind you of phrases like the "500 channel universe" and the "information highway", of a few years ago, which now ring as antiquely as Edsel and Studebaker. As for today's new media:

Take the blogosphere. I'm struck by how hard it is to produce a genuinely alternative point of view to the mainstream media, no matter how earnestly you proclaim it. We had this experience at *This Magazine*. For years we felt the only thing preventing us from exposing the shams of the big media was lack of money. We were often told the newsrooms of the nation were cluttered with suppressed stories that reporters couldn't get their bosses to print. One year we got access to some money and were able to pay decently for a few stories. I think we wound up with one. There just wasn't the trove we'd been told about though of course there were stories that had been suppressed. If you look at the list of censored or suppressed stories put out each year by *Project Censored*, many of them have indeed been printed in mainstream media. Columns of mine—from the *Globe and Mail*—have been on that list. The objection isn't really that they don't appear, so much as that they don't resonate, a different problem and a very interesting one.

In the area of analysis or interpretation, it can also be difficult to strike a truly different note. I'd say that's because we all grow up in the same intellectual milieu and share the same framework of assumptions by and large. You don't escape that just by wanting to. I once tried to list the set of assumptions you're buying into each time you open a newspaper and it wasn't easy. It came down to: merit is more or less rewarded in this society; we live in a democracy, more or less; the economic system we live under is a fact of nature; the population of Canada is 85 people, and: there are no assumptions contained in newspaper stories. It was like performing judo on myself.

There is also the pertinent reality that old media always try to absorb new media, mostly by simply buying them up and controlling them, and with that, impose their old ways of viewing reality on the new media, so that any revolutionizing potential gets subverted. It's also true that the potential can assert itself in turn, subverting the subverter. But this leaves another question: how new a medium is the internet? Harold Innis, whose thinking on communications I have become obsessed with in the last decade, divided all media into the oral and the written tradition. It's quirky: speech as a medium comparable to print. But by his reckoning, what characterizes the oral tradition isn't the use of the voice, as on radio or tv, but interactivity, the potential for dialogue and the emergence of an opinion that no one began with. By that standard, blogging is really in the written tradition, not only because it takes written, printed form but because it amounts only to the sum of individual opinions. What about the give and take on the internet? That mostly amounts to individuals waiting their turn, rather than reaching for a common consensus which is more than the sum of the parts. By Innis's lights (as I understand him) real dialogue only happens in human presence, where all the elements of live speech are engaged: timbre, expression, pause, drama, emotions like anxiety and concern as each party reacts to the other or others—everything that's happening here in this room, now in fact; or that happens in those remaining bastions of the oral tradition: teaching and therapy. Innis felt that the rise of print and literacy had done immense damage to political vitality—quite the opposite of conventional wisdom. But in this light let me make a counterargument—in favour of the internet.

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Keynote speaker Mr. Rick Salutin.

It has an inclination to mimic speech rather than writing. I approve of this since I don't much like the cult of the writer in our time. In spite of all the moaning about loss of literacy and reading, writers are idolized in our society, at least in theory. Yet most writers, in my experience, tended toward writing because they were socially awkward or inept and writing gave them a vehicle which allowed them to avoid direct engagement with other humans. If they were any good at it, they were then rewarded for this avoidance, itself based on a disability, because of the high prestige of print in our society. My own view, inspired by Innis, is that writing is a degraded and inferior form of speech. Speech is immensely more flexible, expressive, succinct, eloquent and nuanced, to name just a few of its advantages, than writing. Writing flattens out and dumbs down almost anything that can happen in speech, which is why speech is the political form of communication par excellence and Sartre refers to theatre, which is part of the oral, not the written tradition, as the political art form par excellence. You get much farther and deeper with speech, though it takes far longer than writing or reading, which are efficient but superficial and clunky.

The internet tends to reintroduce the quality of speech into the written/printed form of discourse. You see this in the icons of expression and other ways that, as Ben Yagoda says, online writing mimics speech. With interjections for example: feh, meh, etc. The internet is comparable in this respect to early printed editions of the Talmud, Judaism's oral tradition. Those first print versions consisted of a central text, going back to prechristian times, followed by commentaries on that by later rabbinic authorities, then around that central column of print—literally around it on the page and down each side, commentaries by later writers, which continued along the bottom, often by later rabbis, which carried on in the margins beyond those surrounding commentaries, and then, if space ran out, in the back of the volume. If you look at one of those pages you see a typographic attempt to recreate the sense of dialogue and interaction, over centuries, which the oral tradition had at its core. The point, as Innis said, is not to choose between speech and writing, but to retain the vitality of the oral, and its aptness to “matters of human feeling and action”, in other words, politics, ethics and the like.

I'd say, speaking autobiographically, that I have almost always tried, and generally not consciously, to find an oral way of writing, a bit like the print versions of the Talmud. I have treasured the times readers said they feel like they are being talked with (or to). Of the three novels I've written, the one that was most successful by normal standards—reviews, awards, etc.—was the one that was the most writerly, as they

say, and least conversational. Over the years, I have more consciously tried to write the way I talk, especially in the column. I used to think this was a sort of democratic pretension, a bit like a prof who uses lingo the kids will relate to—in that irritating way we all know. But I think it was also to do with the greater expressiveness of spoken as opposed to written speech. You can say more and say it better, and go deeper, in a form which tilts to the oral, rather than the written. I think it's also why I began as a writer doing mostly theatre, and continued there for many years, and still miss it. It's not just a matter of the dialogue you are writing, but the fact that it will be played live before other live human beings in the audience, and their reactions will affect what happens on the stage.

*Everyone having a say—on talk radio or the internet—is like voting: what comes out is never more than the total of what went in. Only real engagement and interaction, the essence of the democratic process and of the oral tradition, allows that. It means that all opinions do not count the same, though that is exactly what happens in an election, or on talk radio and the blogosphere.*

I think in a certain way the blogging impulse represents the political impulse in human beings, which is a profound part of us, though it may often be undeveloped. I felt similarly, and hopeful, at the rise of talk radio: a real chance for democracy, I used to think. The trouble with both modes, I now feel, is the absence of true orality in the sense of dialogue, assembly, give and take, and the emergence through all that of a collective wisdom which is other than, more than and better than any of the individual components that go into it. Everyone having a say—on talk radio or the internet—is like voting: what comes out is never more than the total of what went in. Only real engagement and interaction, the essence of the democratic process *and* of the oral tradition, allows that. It means that all opinions do *not* count the same, though that is exactly what happens in an election, or on talk radio and the blogosphere. What happens in a genuine dialogue/debate/discussion is that those present get to test and judge their individual views directly against each other so that some opinions fall away while others rise higher. Often in the end a synthesis or new view is articulated by someone present, not as his or her own opinion but as what seems to be emerging from the collective wisdom of the group. It happens, I've been there when it does, and so may

some of you. That's real democratic politics. I think it's what citizens want. The readers of the *Globe* don't want to know what I think and what Margaret Wente thinks. They want to know what each of us would say to the arguments of the other. The *Globe* tried such a format after 9/11 and in my opinion it was good stuff, but it's vanished.

Let me take an example of this relation between common sense and media complicity, to do with the coming election. Last Friday night, I watched Mike Duffy talking with Craig Oliver and some others on CTV, a network which can barely restrain its enthusiasm for recent polls showing a rise for the Harper government. Their topic was what Stephen Harper would require to go over the top with the difficult constituencies for him, especially women. That night came the news of a Quebec police officer shot to death. "Could this do it for Harper," said Duffy. Women are wary of him but they care about crime, nurturing creatures that they are, and this may encourage him to call an election, as the Boxing Day shooting in Toronto helped him during the last election. Now what are those of us less inclined toward Harper supposed to hope for: that no teens or cops will be shot within hailing distance of a federal election? That someone will report the news with sufficient context to show that there is no correlation between tough on crime policies—or a negative correlation—and the crime rate, which is actually declining? In other words: reporting that would counter the tone on the Duffy show. Or should we hope that people will simply have the wit and wisdom to put these things in perspective and make a wise judgment. But how will they get that perspective? Not from Mike and Craig. And what would be the value of a media alternative—a sort of leftish Mike and Craig, maybe a whole left alternative to CTV—which as a matter of fact, many people on the right think you get on the CBC or in the *Globe and Mail*. Personally I think the alternative would not be leftwing news, but a democratized society in which ordinary citizens actually get to share their views with each other and reach their own conclusions, which I tend to think, would almost always be wiser and more far-reaching than the conclusions reached (or implied) by the denizens of the media, with all the problems of narcissism, proximity to power and short attention span that they've always had and probably always will have. There is such a thing as common sense and democratic judgment, in spite of and in the face of more media complicity than you'll ever be able to shake a stick at, even in the absence of genuinely democratic—in the sense of the oral, Athenian or Iroquoian for that matter—tradition and I'd put my hopes in bolstering that far more than in berating and reforming our media out of their complicity with power.

*Personally I think the alternative would not be leftwing news, but a democratized society in which ordinary citizens actually get to share their views with each other and reach their own conclusions, which I tend to think, would almost always be wiser and more far-reaching than the conclusions reached (or implied) by the denizens of the media, with all the problems of narcissism, proximity to power and short attention span that they've always had and probably always will have.*

Let me conclude with an example that I think we would all probably agree stands as the epitome and exemplar of media complicity: Conrad Black. I concur in this judgment but I also have to confess to having a bit of a strange and complex relationship to the exemplar. This began long ago. I recall being at a leftwing conference at which a leftwing media commentator revealed the fact that Mr. Black has a rightwing bias which his newspapers shared. I found it both obvious and a bit unfair, given that Conrad Black wasn't there to defend himself—and also I suppose a touch self-serving in that environment and I found myself in the odd position of defending Conrad Black. It was around the time I'd begun writing for the Black-owned *Saturday Night* and editor John Fraser assured me that his proprietor made clear his displeasure with the number of times he'd had to read pieces by me in his own publication. There was something admirable in the fact that he complained about it rather than simply shutting the door, which was his to shut. We had exchanges in print over the years. After he took over Southam and owned pretty much all the newspapers in Canada, he announced publicly that the next time an Airbus scandal threatened to taint his friend Brian Mulroney, "we will do better." I wrote in the *Globe* that if I was an employee of his, I would be filling a mix of shame and fear. He wrote a letter to the *Globe* saying that, if I was an employee of his, I should be feeling fear. Again, it was impressive that he wrote a letter to the editor, in fact he often did the same to his own newspapers, including the *Telegraph*, when he disagreed with something in it. Did the real, as it were, Citizen Kane ever do that? When he and Barbara Amiel married, I felt it was the union of the person in the world with the most reason to want to do me harm (based on the piece I'd written about Amiel years before) and the one with the most power to do me harm. When his staff at the *Calgary Herald* went on a bitter strike, I wrote a column supporting them in their exploitation. I got a message from his secretary saying there

was a personal and confidential letter for me from him. I received it too late to get it that day. He was in one of his phases where he was trying to destroy the left by bankrupting it through law suits at the time—and I thought I must have slipped and was going to be sued for the first time ever. I spent a sleepless night. Next morning I got the letter. It began, Comradely greetings from the other side of the barricades. It was a fan letter—from Canary Wharf, where the view of the Black empire must have been rosy and he didn't have much to do so why not engage in some badinage with the leftist at the *Globe*. He wrote that I surely knew he didn't exploit journalists, as I'd written, because he employed so many. I wrote back that I thought employing them was a precondition to exploiting them but I appreciated his tone and would be happy to take him to some commie-infested bistro on my side of the barricades next time he was in Toronto. His secretary called back to say, more or less: He doesn't go out—but he'd like me to come to corporate headquarters at the bank building on Toronto St. next time he was in town. So we met for a jolly cup of tea and gabbed—about how much weight each of us had lost, how do you get it off, how do you keep it off, labour leaders he liked and who I, to a man, deplored, etc.

During his current troubles I hadn't taken quite the same pleasure as many others have. About a month ago I sent him an email inviting him to speak at a halfcourse I teach at the University of Toronto on media and culture on the subject: bias in the media. He agreed. When I told the class you could hear 150 jaws hit the floor and they still didn't believe he'd actually come. When he walked in three weeks ago, you could hear the gasp. He seemed a bit nervous, said some students. I felt he was more subdued than when we last met, but he did a plausible version of Conrad Black, which it's always seemed to me what he does: he plays Conrad Black, as many people play themselves, and he enjoys doing it. One of my students writes for the student paper, the *Varsity*, and his story about the class appeared on the front page of the paper. Some students posted nasty letters on the *Varsity* website and all received a posted reply from Conrad Black. One had written: put the fucker in jail and throw away the keys. He replied: "The Red Queen said it better and with less gratuitous coarseness: the sentence, followed by the verdict, followed by the charge, followed by the evidence (if any). I am relieved that he thinks life imprisonment would be adequate for a suspect; such zealots usually demand death by torture, dismemberment, and public display of body parts. I trust Rob Grant is not representative of how the student body of the University of Toronto thinks our justice system should function. I want to thank Rick Salutin and all who attended for receiving me very hospitably. Best wishes to all,

even the lugubrious Rob Grant, whatever the source of his disturbance. Sincerely, CONRAD BLACK".

This isn't the sign of someone who places money over anything. It's someone who cares about being heard. That doesn't justify anything, it's a characterization of motive. But I've long felt that he uses the greedy persona to camouflage the guy who wants to be taken seriously, like many of those who write or act in public. I've also felt for a long time that Conrad Black is one of those people who could have been on either side. When I mentioned this to my old (in the sense of being 94 and of having known him since my first year in university) friend, John Seeley, who lives in L.A. and continues to practise as a psychoanalyst, he said that was probably true of most of us, we could have been on either side, a thought scary enough that I hadn't faced it though once he said it, it sounded self-evident.

As I sat in the lecture hall, and looked back and forth between Conrad Black, a hand jammed into his jacket pocket at the front, and the students on the ground floor and in the balcony, I kept trying to understand what seemed moving about it. They appeared struck in some way, beyond the fact a famous person was in the room. Perhaps it was that by coming, he gave them a sense that we all do live in a society, which truly exists and contains him and them. In that sense, society is not just an academic construct or something you read about. The moment was a living, literally living, refutation of Black's idol, Margaret Thatcher's claim that there is no such thing as society, and it happened solely because he was there, speaking and reacting to them as they reacted to him. He wasn't the simulacrum of Conrad Black, as the late Jean Baudrillard might have said. The simulacrum had been traded for the live presence. As for his role as a press lord, and lord otherwise, and the embodiment of media complicity, well, I never thought it was a good idea that he owned every newspaper in the country, but I always felt he should have one, I want to know what he thinks. I hope sometime he gets it back. ↻

## BIO

Rick Salutin is a reknowned playwright, author and journalist. He received the Toronto Arts Award in writing and publishing in 1991 and the National Newspaper Award for best columnist, for his *Globe and Mail* column on media, in 1993. He held the Maclean Hunter Chair in Ethics in Communication at Ryerson University from 1993 to 1995 and has taught in the Canadian Studies program at the University of Toronto, since 1978.

## Forum Panellist Response

by Dr. Joyce Green

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Regina

Rick Salutin's gift in his popular writing is taking an idea, as though it were a sculpture, and turning it this way and that, showing what it looks like from different positions. This invites his readers to reflect, to consider, and to engage with contemporary issues and critical thinking. But Salutin is no relativist. He is a careful, cautious commentator, whose ideas are informed by critical theory, a left-ish ideology, and by decades of writing, speaking and *acting* on social and political matters. We need more like him, public intellectuals committed to citizenship as a verb. By his singularity in the *Globe and Mail*, he demonstrates the paucity of critical thinking there and in other media. He makes us want more of it. As one of a very few critical or left-ish thinkers writing for a dominant, credible mainstream Canadian newspaper, Salutin has much to teach us about critical citizenship and about media complicity in hegemonic politics.

Salutin observes that the media seldom produce genuinely alternative points of view, and prefer "cookie-cutter journalism" to exploring new ideas or doing investigative journalism, thus restricting their own freedom. This he takes to be a result of complicity, and he invites us to ask—complicity in what, and why.

There are, to my mind, two parts to this complicity. First, the structural factors of private and concentrated media ownership (documented repeatedly since the 1980 Royal Commission on Newspapers (the Kent Commission) reported on the grave state of newspaper ownership and the implications for news autonomy and for lack of competition) in a capitalist economy foster certain kinds of impulses, discussed later in this note. Second, ideological hegemony shapes both journalists and citizens, screening out marginal and critical stories.

Media complicity need not be a Grand Conspiracy by plotting actors. Complicity emerges in the self-regulating operation of what Ed Herman and Noam Chomsky theorize as a propaganda model of the media. It consists of ideological and economic filters that both exclude dissenting voices and result in the internalization of norms, self-disciplining most remaining voices. And propaganda serves to maintain ideological hegemony, a monotone of political and economic analysis, options, and perspectives. It is so normalized as to be taken as "common sense" rather than as political choices.

This is why, paraphrasing the words of political scientist and economist Mel Watkins, Canada can have 52 brands of light beer but only one economic model.

Herman and Chomsky list five elements of their propaganda model:

- (1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms;
- (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media;
- (3) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power;
- (4) "flak" as a means of disciplining the media; and
- (5) "anticommunism" as a national religion and control mechanism. [In Canada, in the current era, the fifth filter is probably "antiterrorism" as a national religion and control mechanism, together with the uninterrogated belief in the virtues of the "free" market.]

They argue that these filters "fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place, and they explain the basis and operations of what amount to propaganda campaigns" (1988:2).

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And the media provide us with propaganda, in the form of repetition of comfortable myths (like that of our noble peaceful pioneer co-operative heritage, that erases Aboriginal reality); by superficial coverage of important issues; and in its general failure to consider power relations that are part of capitalism and colonialism and are perpetuated via sexism, racism, homophobia, and other forms of exclusion of marginalized citizens. Thus, the media perpetuate ideological hegemony.

The corporate (that is, the for-profit) media are also compromised by objectives of profitability, linked to advertiser approval. This leads to media choosing not to critique particular industries or products or practices, lest doing so cost them advertising relationships and revenue. The corporate media are primarily vehicles for advertising, not for information, and this means that the cost of providing information (such as having well trained and paid journalists on specialist beats) is minimized, in favour of a very tight bottom line and lots of cheap and irrelevant wire-service and videocolumn content. Consider when Conrad Black's erstwhile media corporation bought the Regina *Leader-Post*—and eliminated 25% of its journalists immediately (Winter 1996:32). This “hollowing out” of local newspapers happened across the country, with concentration of corporate ownership. The same takeover and buyout process is concentrating ownership of television, radio, music, movie, and other popular culture industries. This matters because concentrated media ownership potentially puts “too much political and cultural power into too few hands ... concentration multiplies the opportunities for a media owner to impose his (or, very occasionally, her) own agenda on news coverage” (Hackett and Gruneau 2000:55; 61). Citizens are conceptualized as consumers, whose readership and viewership is what the media guarantee to their advertisers. The more superficial media content leads to a dumbing down of citizens who, unless they are diligent in pursuing alternatives, don't get much solid information nor critical analysis.

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The media are complicit in maintaining the hegemonic order on matters of economic and political analysis. Certain of them, especially the *Globe and Mail*, are so influential that they serve to set the agenda for dozens of minor media, who take cues from the *Globe* and a few others on what the real issues of the day are. More worryingly, they also replicate the analysis of those issues, thus eliminating contrary and alternative opinion. They restrict journalism to coverage of a limited main menu of events and people, and they restrict

access to op-ed pages to those who generally support the hegemonic order. However, the appearance of balance is provided by the inclusion of Salutin and a very few others, though their voices are never permitted to be dominant. They do not shape editorial assignments not editorials. They are counterbalanced by the Wentes, the Flanagans, the Hunters, and the Ibbitsons of the journalism world. But the few critical journalists serve the purpose of legitimating the dominant and conservative media by their inclusion, while never destabilizing the dominant paradigms. Thus, Salutin's presence implies the *Globe* is balanced when it is not, actually.

This matters. The mass media are the basis for most peoples' political information. The media claim constitutional rights, primarily the right of access to information and of communication, on behalf of all of us. Rights cannot be detached from obligations, and the mass media have obligations which transcend quarterly profits. They have obligations to the collective political community of citizens. They have obligations to be critical and oppositional—in the words of the journalism nostrum, to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable”—rather than complicit. They have obligations to be thoughtful and informed on difficult matters involving the state and its communities, thus helping us, citizens, to be thoughtful and engaged in public deliberations.

And many times the media “gets it right”, despite enlightened self interest and despite *political* pressure on journalists. An excellent example of this is recounted by CBC journalist Terry Milewski, writing about the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) Summit in Vancouver in 1997. “Thanks to the superb work of CBC cameraman Robb Douglas, we were able to provide an informative look at the conduct of both protesters and police. Robb's videotape of Staff Sergeant Hugh Stewart blinding him and his camera with pepper spray became emblematic of the summit” (2000:144). However, Milewski also notes the pressure that political operatives protecting the image of Prime Minister Chretien exerted on the CBC and on him. Nor were all media covering this event equally courageous (Ibid.) Milewski's story shows us that not all media are complicit all of the time. It also provides proof of why independent professional media are so vital to democracy.

Salutin has invited us to think about media complicity in power relations. Robert Hackett and Richard Gruneau also make a compelling case for complicity of Canadian editors and journalists with the interests of our most powerful elites,

in a process of self-disciplining that is consistent with the Herman and Chomsky propaganda model. News, they say, is manufactured in a process of selection constructed through normative values and experiences, and transformed into stories with appeal to mass audiences (2000:26-27). Complicity is a relational practice, and so if the media are complicit, it behoves us to know more about what it is in relation to.

Like Deep Throat in Watergate said, *follow the money*. The privately owned media are corporations designed principally to create wealth for their increasingly few owners. Virtually all of them do this by framing content for a targeted audience, and then using that content to carry the real money-maker, advertising. Thus, our gaze and our engagement is commodified and sold as a guarantee to advertisers, a guarantee of the medium to present the advertising to a targeted audience that the advertiser wishes to contact. The content is secondary, and the cost of producing it is limited in order to squeeze greater margins of profit from the enterprise. Well-trained journalists with editorial support for investigative and research pieces are limited to the few elite media, like the *Globe*, while most journalists are pressed to do more, faster, thus reducing costs and also quality content. Even the publicly owned CBC has taken on these practices.

Much of what passes for journalism now is generally poor: the content is largely superficial, sensational, and often populist and irrelevant, along the lines of decontextualized crime and violence and pop culture stories from around the English-speaking world, especially the United States. Rather than producing well researched material or investigative journalism on issues of significance to our social, political and cultural wellbeing, most media corporations buy wire

services and syndicated columns and shows. The objective is profit, which is obtained by maintaining “our” interest at minimum cost in order to guarantee access to us by advertisers. Unconvinced? Read James Winter’s *Democracy’s Oxygen* for an analysis of the Canadian media. Winter (1996) provides data and analysis showing how concentration of ownership and the profit motive are gutting newsrooms and hence, news production.

Consistent with the objectives of profitability, the focus of senior media executives is on advertiser approval. This creates an institutional reluctance to critique particular industries, political policies, economic models, and so on. It leads to self-censorship of stories that are arguably newsworthy but which are problematic to those who pay the freight, and the shareholders. In Hackett and Gruneau’s words, “advertising encourages journalists to massage rather than bite the hand that feeds them” (2000:65). While this is rational, it is not exactly the quintessence of journalism in pursuit of truth for citizens. This is not the standard of journalism that motivates students to enter J-schools. Nor is it the kind of proxy-for-citizens journalism that entitles journalists and media corporations to claim that they, the Fifth Estate, act for citizens by obtaining critical information and analysis, the basis of which we use to make our individual political decisions. And yet, the media are understood to be acting for society, and it is because of this more noble relationship that journalists and media have constitutional entitlement to go where most citizens cannot, in order to get information for us *as citizens*.

Moreover, the media are also often propagandists in the service of the dominant political ideology, propagating the dominant cultural myths and misrepresenting ideas and communities who are not part of that privileged composite.



Panelist Dr. Joyce Green and keynote speaker Mr. Rick Salutin.

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The result is the enormous power of the media sustaining ideological hegemony in Canada. Journalists and editors quickly learn that it is prudent to refrain from particular lines of inquiry, and that career advancement is best pursued by being prudent.

Thus, the dominant myths about the nature of our society, our values, our history, and our stories, are perpetuated by the media. For example, few stories take up institutionalized racism, the injustice in the justice system, the serious implications for human health of agri- and household chemicals, and so on.

In the USA, *Project Censored* does an annual list of the 10 most under-reported media stories in an effort to remind both citizens and the media of just what is kept off the public agenda; in Canada, a similar organization, *Newswatch Canada*, performed the same role (see also Hackett and Gruneau 2000:123-164). One of the stories identified by *Newswatch Canada* has particular relevance for Saskatchewan: it concerns military environmental pollution, and the role that Cameco may be playing, with support from the governments of Saskatchewan and Canada, in exporting uranium for use in American munitions that are then expended elsewhere, despite federal restrictions on export (Hackett and Gruneau 2000:134-135). Moreover, environmental stories have been ignored or underplayed for decades (Hackett and Gruneau 2000:168-172). Dozens of small community and alternative media, such as *Rabble.ca*, *Briarpatch* and *Canadian Dimension* attempt to fill the gap, but they lack the economic clout and institutional legitimacy of their corporate cousins.

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Our governments have turned a blind eye to the frenzy of corporate mergers that have led to dangerously anti-democratic levels of media ownership concentration. The media are arguably complicit with corporate and political elites. This is demonstrated in the economic constraints imposed by owners' preferences for advertising over content and in the uncritical representation of a few dominant stories. That said, citizens can and should demand better.

Salutin's columns imply this. We can pressure government to regulate, and to limit corporate ownership, and to adequately fund a CBC with a clear mandate to provide Canadians with news, views, and entertainment. We can support alternative media. We can use our citizenship as a verb, as action. There is no need for us, too, to be complicit. ☞

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## BIO

Joyce Green is associate professor of Political Science and is cross appointed in Women's Studies at the University of Regina. She is a SIPP Research Associate, and has been awarded a SIPP research fellowship for 2007-2008. Her most recent publication is the edited collection *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, Fernwood Press, 2007. She teaches, among other topics, Canadian and decolonization politics and Politics of the Media.

## Forum Panellist Response

by Prof. Gennadiy Chernov  
Lecturer, School of Journalism, University of Regina

I'd like to thank Rick Salutin for his insightful and interesting presentation. However, if we, as panelists, send only kudos to the presenter, then I would choose not to be a member of the audience in such a discussion. Two points are of interest to me here in this discussion of media criticism: proof or facts of what was stated by media critics and alternatives to what has been labelled as erroneous media practices. The topic of the discussion is media complicity with state powers. The idea presented was that mainstream media reflect the dominant point of view and neglect the alternative voices. The clear culprit of supposed wrongs in media-state power relations readily emerged during this discussion: big corporations. Whether they are to blame for something (or for everything) in media-state relations is beyond the scope of this comment because these corporations are not state powers. If we think that they are state powers, we have to prove it; if we think that as state powers these corporations have developed a complicitous relationship with the media, then we have to give the evidence supporting this statement. Rick beautifully weaved the fabric of his talk through a clever and amusing use of anecdotes, jokes and slogans. We didn't hear any facts or compelling arguments, however. The fact is that if we compare the content of mainstream media between now and, say, the 1960s, we will discover that questions of gender and racial equality, societal acceptance of different sexual orientations, and promotion of environmentally friendly policies all found a prominent place on the agenda of main media outlets in broadcast and print. Is the media coverage of public issues perfect? No, and it will never be.

However, gradually, media continue to change. Ignorance of these changes might spawn from snobbish attitudes to media on behalf of media critics. Rick admitted that his involvement in journalism is somewhat peripheral to his excellent literary work; another well-known media critic, Noam Chomsky, is a famous linguist and thinker, who finds time to share his views on the relations between media and society. I have read his works on the propaganda model, but I have read his works on transformational grammar as well. Why does he use facts to support his arguments and take care to make his arguments valid in the latter works, but make mostly slogan-like claims in the former? Does this mean that he considers linguistics to be a serious business, while journalism (and world change as an aside) is a hobby?

Many people often share their strong opinions on how to raise children (not their children, of course) and how to cure diseases (of unenlightened others). Likewise, journalism may seem to some to belong to the same category of public realm and therefore be easily accessed and criticized. I have worked for many years as a journalist; I have been studying journalism both as a Master and Ph.D. student for six years. I have conducted research with my colleagues that demonstrated that commercialism sneaks into the news. We analyzed hundreds and hundreds of newscasts from dozens of local television markets. Our findings indicate that smaller markets often present commercial promotional materials as the news. This trend compromises the integrity of today's broadcast news programming and fails to serve journalism's primary function: to inform citizens about issues of public importance. In response to this criticism of current journalistic practices, we may face the opponent's reply - "So what?". And they will be right. They might argue that the alternative to commercialized news would be to close most of the local television stations, which would have even worse

*[S]maller markets often present commercial promotional materials as the news. This trend compromises the integrity of today's broadcast news programming and fails to serve journalism's primary function: to inform citizens about issues of public importance.*



Panellists Dr. Joyce Green, Ms. Stefani Langenegger and Mr. Gennadiy Chernov.

consequences for the public. Our research will be worth something only if we demonstrate that if the news is deep and interesting, the audience will choose to watch more newscasts than if we insert questionable promotional materials. In other words, our effort can be valuable only when we present a viable alternative.

I am not comparing the media stars like Rick Salutin, and especially Noam Chomsky, with myself. The point is that we should accept their analysis not because of their personal aura and popularity, but because of the strength of their analysis itself. Otherwise, why not commercialize the discussion of media and society by opening it up to the opinions of celebrities, such as Paris Hilton.

It seems to me that we now hear the same adage about what progressive intellectuals and their followers must do that we heard in 60s. The difference is that during the 60s the adage was fresh and accurate to the societal conditions; the current version of it seems to be stale and obsolete. Our struggle for human rights and new ways of improving society has transformed into the struggle for groups' privileges. We call people to follow us, but in fact, the world around us has moved ahead, while we are stuck where we were in 60s. To rigidly follow the old path will strip us of the audience's trust.

*I ask media critics to show us where the media are wrong, prove to us that these wrongs are detrimental to society, and reveal the alternative light that will illuminate dark corners of the current media status quo.*

The other key question we must ask ourselves is: what are the alternatives to the current state of media? I often see the visible irritation from some of my colleagues and journalists who complain that the passive mass audience doesn't respond to the progressive message the way we expect. We often label those who disagree with us "rednecks", "bigots" and "racists". Call people names and they will match their labels; however, they might more closely resemble us than we think. Sometimes, they doubt not the progressive ideas themselves, but the hasty way the ideas could be implemented.

The Left movement in the West is uncomfortable with the socialist alternative of the former Soviet Bloc. Millions of people were slaughtered under the pretext of building a new socialist and progressive future. "Socialism" and "communism" became the words that sounded uglier than many four-letter words for hundreds of millions of people

around the world. In general, progressive journalists and media critics ignore these facts and related sentiments, but others probably don't. Rick was eloquent about what is wrong with the media, but we didn't hear an explanation of the way out. If the alternatives are worse, let's wait for better ones. If they are better, let's follow their light. But if there are no alternatives at all, folks will hesitate.

I am standing here in front of you and I thank my fate that I am in Canada where I can express openly my views, even such risky ones that our criticism of mainstream media is not always accurate, and I am not afraid that I will lose my job, a prospect I would immediately face in the recent past in my former country—the Soviet Union. I, as probably many others, will enthusiastically follow the lead of modern media critics if they show real ways for making society more free and prosperous, but if they don't see the future themselves, or if they envision that it is something like the one in George Orwell's *1984*, then sorry guys, I have been there, and I am happy that I survived.

To sum up my response, I ask media critics to show us where the media are wrong, prove to us that these wrongs are detrimental to society, and reveal the alternative light that will illuminate dark corners of the current media status quo. We are entitled to our own opinions, but not our own facts. Some may disagree, but then we might hear and read the same slogans in twenty years met by an audience with the same indifference. ∞

## BIO

Gennadiy Chernov teaches broadcast journalism and international media at the School of Journalism, University of Regina. He holds the following degrees: B.A. 1987 in English/Germanic Studies, University of Volgograd, Russia; M.A. 2001 in Journalism/Mass Communication, University of North Carolina; ABD 2006 in Communication studies, University of Oregon. Guenni was a correspondent/narrator/commentator for the Russian State Broadcasting Co. Guenni got his international broadcasting experience as a participant of the BBC World Service training program in Great Britain, January-March 1996, and as an intern at the International Desk, CNN in Atlanta, June-August 2000. He is interested in mass communication theory, psychological mechanisms of media effects, and agenda-setting theory. Guenni has taught video production/broadcasting news as well as information gathering courses.

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Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy  
University of Regina, College Avenue Campus  
Gallery Building, 2nd Floor  
Regina, Saskatchewan • S4S 0A2



General Inquiries: 306.585.5777  
Fax: 306.585.5780  
sipp@uregina.ca  
www.uregina.ca/sipp

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