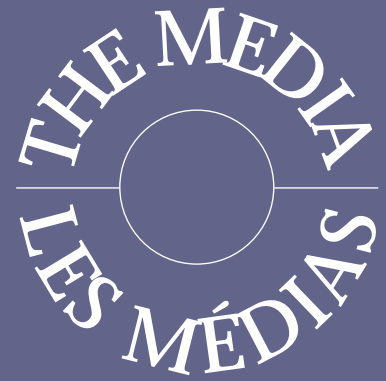


# FROM INK-STAINED WRETCHES TO TALKING HEADS: A SHORT HISTORY OF THE PRESS GALLERY

Blake Andrew and Stuart Soroka



In a McGill University study of Parliamentary Press Gallery membership from 1950 to 2004, the authors found a gradual decline in the number of print reporters as broadcasting became the dominant medium. Since the proceedings of Parliament were first broadcast in 1977, and increasingly since their availability on cable and the Internet, some news organizations have reduced their presence in Ottawa. Their reporters can cover breaking news, though they cannot provide background and analysis, off television. A quarter century ago, the Kent Commission on Newspapers predicted an acceleration of concentration of ownership and fewer individual papers, resulting in a downsizing of print gallery members. Events have borne out that grim prediction, and then some. Prime Minister Harper's skirmish with the Press Gallery is a story as old as Confederation, a struggle for who controls the agenda.

Après avoir examiné l'évolution des effectifs de la Tribune de la presse parlementaire de 1950 à 2004, Blake Andrews et Stuart Soroka ont constaté que la progression de la radiotélévision a entraîné une diminution graduelle du nombre de journalistes de la presse écrite. Depuis la première diffusion des débats du Parlement en 1977, et plus encore depuis l'arrivée de la télévision par câble et d'Internet, certains organes d'information ont réduit leur présence à Ottawa puisque leurs journalistes peuvent rendre compte des nouvelles du jour hors télé, mais pas en situer le contexte ou en faire l'analyse. Il y a 25 ans, la Commission Kent sur les journaux avait prédit que la concentration de la presse et la disparition de certains titres feraient décroître l'effectif de la presse parlementaire. Les événements ont plus que confirmé cette sombre prédiction. Les escarmouches opposant le premier ministre Harper et la Tribune de la presse témoignent d'une lutte aussi vieille que la Confédération pour le contrôle de l'ordre du jour du Parlement.

**T**he Parliamentary Press Gallery is responsible for much of what most of us know about public affairs in Canada. Since Confederation, its members have provided the bulk of news and perspective on everyday politics in Ottawa. It has been regarded as an “adjunct” to Parliament by a former prime minister, an “inner temple” in a Royal Commission report, and a “gatekeeper” of Canadian public affairs by a federal government task force.

Given the significance of this group of journalists, it is striking how little attention has been paid to the composition and role of the gallery in Canadian politics, at least until Stephen Harper's recent territorial dispute over who controls the microphone and the list of questioners. Effective democracy requires well-informed citizens, after all, and the gallery is clearly an important source of critical information. We should ask, certainly, about the access the Press Gallery has to politicians and information.

We should also ask about the representativeness of the Press Gallery. For instance, it seems important that Maritimers can hear about news in Ottawa from a Maritimer, or Albertans can hear about news in Ottawa from an Albertan. And of course, geography is just one kind of diversity we might like to have in the Press Gallery. Not just information, but a diversity of views, is what makes for healthy news content, healthy citizens, and a healthy representative democracy.

**T**o illustrate some of the issues regarding the reporting of political news in Ottawa, we present here an analysis of the composition of the Parliamentary Press Gallery from 1950 to 2004. We find that the structure of the gallery has changed significantly. A good number of smaller Canadian dailies disappeared from the gallery during the 1990s, and the proportion of broadcast journalists grew sharply. The



Montreal Gazette archives

The “Hot Room” of the Parliamentary Press Gallery as it looked in 1940, when print ruled, and television didn’t even exist. Here, Charles Bishop of the *Montreal Star* dictates copy to an unnamed stenographer, while the legendary Bruce Hutchison, *Vancouver Sun* columnist and biographer of Mackenzie King, works on his notes, and Grant Dexter of the *Winnipeg Free Press* is pounding the keyboard in the background. In their time, they were the Lords of the Gallery.

latter is a consequence of basic market forces; the former, we believe, is a consequence of shifts in newspaper ownership. The analysis serves, we hope, to illustrate the need for increased attention to, and consideration of, the ways in which mass media gather information about politics in Canada.

There has been a major shift in the determinants of Parliamentary Press Gallery membership since its foundation. During the first half century of the Press Gallery from 1867 to 1917, membership was the exclusive privilege of journalists from large circulation daily newspapers. Members of the Press Gallery were sent from newspapers that delivered politics through a narrow

prism of partisanship. Canadian dailies at the time were largely owned and edited by networks of former, current, and aspiring politicians. News reporters entered the Press Gallery with implicit and perhaps explicit expectations to focus their attention on events relating to their newspaper’s party of preference.

This ethos of partisanship likely contributed to the development of networks within the gallery itself. A journalist sent to cover a particular party could logically be expected to consult and share information with other journalists in a similar position. Thus, although ownership of newspapers during this period was quite

diverse by today’s standards, the organizing principle of party politics naturally limited the range of opinions flowing from the journalists.

Gallery membership during these years was also widely perceived as a stepping-stone in the career of a newspaper journalist. Long-time member Arthur Ford called it “postgraduate school for newspapermen” in 1950; indeed, for many from this era, including Ford, it was a springboard to more prominent positions on their newspaper. This pattern meant that by the 1920s many newspaper editors counted themselves as alumni of the Press Gallery. The blend of intense partisanship in the context of this elite “train-

ing ground” has led others to remark on a “clubbiness” in the gallery during this period.

In 1917, the advent and admission to the Press Gallery of the Canadian

entered the gallery, broadcast journalists outnumbered newspaper journalists. The growth of broadcast media representation in the gallery coincided with the arrival in the late 1970s of an electronic version of Hansard — the

more precipitous outside Ontario and Quebec, suggesting the concentration was regional. Third, it observed that the sheer number of members was steadily growing. Thus, despite the ascension of broadcast media as the most prominent medium in the gallery, the number of newspaper journalists also continued to rise.

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Press (CP) marked a period of transition (1917-1959) in the dynamics of membership. Newspaper journalists slowly opened the gallery to members without overt partisan attachments. The presence of the CP in Ottawa served to neutralize the Press Gallery in two ways, as Arthur Siegel noted in his 1996 book, *Politics and the Media in Canada*. First, it neutralized the process of news gathering itself. CP members were expected to cover public affairs in a more unbiased manner and to deliver a new product without interpretation. Second, the extension of membership to the CP neutralized the supremacy of newspaper journalists in the gallery. By 1942, the proportion of newspaper journalists was further diluted as members from magazines and weeklies — *Maclean's* and *Saturday Night*, for example — were admitted. Indeed, the erosion of newspaper journalist supremacy as a proportion of total membership has been a consistent trend ever since.

A third stage in the evolution of the Press Gallery (1959-1981) was marked by the entrance of broadcast journalists and characterized by an overall professionalization of members. In fact, within 15 years after they

record of parliamentary proceedings — which is available on live television and the Internet. In addition to the growth of broadcasting, this period also marked a transition to a younger and more formally educated membership base. That development, along with a proliferation of newspaper chains and pooled new service, contributed to a broad shift toward objectivity in Canadian public affairs reporting. What has traditionally been referred to as the “wall of separation” between opinion and news appeared to crystallize during this phase of the Press Gallery.

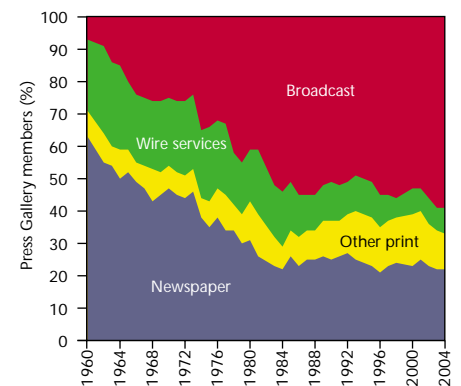
By the end of the 1970s three trends in Press Gallery membership provoked the following conclusions in the report of the Kent Royal Commission on Newspapers, published in 1981. Chaired by Tom Kent, senior policy adviser to Prime Minister Pearson and founding editor of *Policy Options*, the report highlighted, first, the increasing dominance of broadcast media, particularly television. Second, it noted a sharp decline in the number of daily newspapers represented. This was one indicator, the report suggested, of editorial concentration in the gallery. The decline in newspaper representation, however, appeared to be

The goal of our study is to assess these trends in Press Gallery membership during the 25-year period following the Kent Commission. Our observations are based on an analysis of the membership list in the Canadian Parliamentary Guide from 1950 to 2004. The full data set tracks aggregate change

in individual membership across a variety of news organizations such as daily newspapers, television, wire services, magazines, and freelance membership. It also captures trends in the number and proportion of mass media organizations represented in the gallery over the 54-year period to 2004.

As illustrated in figure 1, the shift that began in the 1970s from newspaper journalists to broadcast journalists has solidified over the past 25 years. Since 1979, the overall percentage of broadcasters in the gallery, including crews,

FIGURE 1. COMPOSITION OF THE PARLIAMENTARY PRESS GALLERY



Source: Authors.

rose to an unambiguous majority position from 45 to 59 percent of total membership in 2004. Print journalists' representation has declined from 39 to 33 percent over the course of this same period. Note that print membership includes magazines, freelancers, and other publications. The decline is more pronounced if we consider representation of newspapers exclusively, which dropped 8 percent from 30 to 22 percent of the overall membership. Indeed, this confirms the trend toward broadcast media first noted by the Kent Commission in 1981.

While newspaper journalists have dropped as a proportion of the total gallery, the total number of newspaper journalists has been rising over time, at least until very recently. From 1979 to 1992, for instance, the total number of newspaper representatives rose from 64 to 84. The story after 1992 is somewhat different. The 1990s marked the largest decline ever in the number of newspapers in the Press Gallery — coinciding with major shifts in the concentration of newspaper ownership. A concentration of newspapers was foreseen in the Kent Commission report at the beginning of the 1980s; the decline that occurred in the 1990s, however, was more precipitous than the one

predicted in that report. The shift is clearly evident in figure 2, which shows the total number of newspaper journalists in the gallery.

Perhaps the most obvious answer is that the changes in membership reflect a broad shift in the consumer marketplace for public affairs news in Canada. From this perspective, the erosion of newspaper supremacy in the gallery would be expected to correspond roughly with a shift in Canadians' preferences for broadcast news instead of print news. In other words, the growing proportion of broadcast journalists in the gallery makes sense, because increasingly Canadians are seeking their news from broadcast media (especially television) instead of print media (especially newspapers).

In the post-1992 period, we show results both with and without the *National Post*. Results without the *Post* better capture the downward shift, independent of the relatively rare event of a new national newspaper. Even with the *National Post*, however, the gallery appears to have shrunk in recent years — the *Post* initially contributed 11 members (12 percent) to the overall total of 90 newspaper journalists, but by 2004 it had reduced its representation in the gallery to just 3 members.

The shift is even more evident in figure 3, which shows the change in the number of newspapers represented at the gallery since 1950. Notice that the number of papers dropped sharply in the 1960s, but steadily climbed back up during the 1970s and 1980s. The

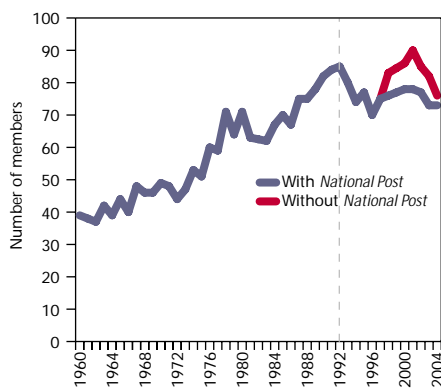
1990s, however, mark the beginning of what can be called the second and strongest wave of newspaper decline in the gallery. Between 1989 and 1999,

the number of newspapers in the National Press Gallery dropped from a record high of 24 to a record low of 14. As of 2004, nine papers involved in that decline had not since returned. Three no longer exist; six simply no longer had journalists in the gallery.

How do we make sense of these compositional changes in Press Gallery membership? Perhaps the most obvious answer is that the changes in membership reflect a broad shift in the consumer marketplace for public affairs news in Canada. From this perspective, the erosion of newspaper supremacy in the gallery would be expected to correspond roughly with a shift in Canadians' preferences for broadcast news instead of print news. In other words, the growing proportion of broadcast journalists in the gallery makes sense, because increasingly Canadians are seeking their news from broadcast media (especially television) instead of print media (especially newspapers).

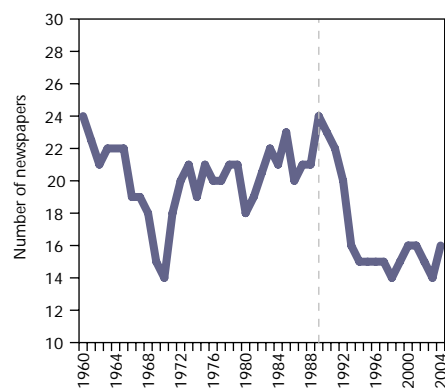
By extension, this approach suggests that the declining market share of newspapers contributes to ownership concentration, pooled representation, and reliance on chain news service. If politics is selling less papers than before, it is rational for owners to reduce and economize their coverage of national affairs. It is also conceivable that the smaller papers have decided to shift their focus to provincial politics and leave the

FIGURE 2. NUMBER OF PRESS GALLERY MEMBERS (NEWSPAPERS)



Source: Authors.

FIGURE 3. NUMBER OF NEWSPAPERS



Source: Authors.

federal political scene to television and the largest circulation dailies. Or, perhaps, there is simply a declining demand for the in-depth coverage of Canadian politics that newspapers are known for. These are all reasonable explanations, of course. They suggest that either the equilibrium shift in gallery membership is indicative of a shift in the Canadian public's preferred medium for politics, or that the public's taste for detailed coverage has simply dissipated.

Another way to make sense of trends in Press Gallery membership is to look at changes in the process of news-gathering itself. A process-oriented explanation suggests that technological change has driven the retreat of newspaper journalists from the gallery. Electronic media simply make it easier and perhaps more efficient for newspapers to cover federal politics without a large staff in Ottawa as full-time members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery. The introduction of Hansard, for instance, made it possible to report and interpret events in the House of Commons from remote locations. News from Ottawa now travels instantly to editorial desks across the country. Arthur Siegel's 1996 assessment of the Press Gallery's role notes the "growing trend for politicians to use the electronic media to bypass reporters." Indeed, it has become common practice for ministers and political parties to send press releases directly to daily newspapers via the Internet. By contrast, it stands to reason that more television and radio journalists need to be physically present in Ottawa. They are expected to provide regular interviews with politicians and report live from Parliament Hill. The bottom line is that membership trends in the Press Gallery may also owe something to profound changes in the way news about politics is gathered by newspapers.

That economic and technological explanations can account for the shifts in the Gallery does not mean that we should not consider whether these

shifts are positive, however — for the quality of political news, and for representative democracy. Consider some of the following issues: Do journalists in the gallery tend to write articles that are different, reflecting those journalists' newspaper and/or regional affiliations? If so, how much does it matter that readers of the *London Free Press* (for instance) will get more and more of their national news from reporters with affiliations and experiences outside south-western Ontario? How much does it matter that an increasing proportion of the gallery could be from central Canada, for example, or from a few large newspaper conglomerates? Or, more

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broadly speaking, how much does it matter if there are 50 journalists in the Press Gallery rather than 100? Fifty journalists, that is, in charge of interpreting and disseminating information from Parliament, rather than 100 journalists doing the same.

We cannot currently answer any of these questions. They do seem to be worth pursuing, however. They are certainly relevant to our ongoing consideration of newspaper ownership in Canada — the extent to which we support, or are nervous about, shifts in the newspaper owner-

ship. These questions are also particularly relevant now, at a time when the prime minister's relationship with the media has pushed the gallery onto the front pages (this time as the story rather than just by-lines). Indeed, Harper's recent reluctance to deal with the Press Gallery is directly linked to the broader questions asked here. If Prime Minister Harper's actions are partly motivated by a desire to have more control over the government's message, they seem rather hard to justify. Hard to justify, that is, provided the gallery is sufficiently objective in its reporting of facts and diverse in its interpretation of those facts. That is,

important information — both good and bad — should be conveyed to the Canadian public as objectively as possible. And when this information is interpreted — in opinion pieces by Press Gallery members, for instance — media should capture a number of diverse interpretations. Harper appears to believe that this is not currently the case. This is an empirical question, however; and, empirically speaking, we have thus far spent little time examining the relationships between journalists, newspaper owners, and news content.

Regardless of whether his actions are justified, we can be thankful that the prime minister has brought these issues to the fore. We hope that politicians, journalists and citizens will embrace the opportunity to think further, both about how politicians interact with governments, and — more broadly — about the extent to which representative democracy is dependent on a reliable, diverse, and informed mass media.

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