



News media has considerable influence; enough power to displace public officials, shape policy agendas, and inform public opinion. But what happens when news media only illuminates the wrongs of yesterday, and leaves aside positive views of tomorrow? **BY DAVID BEERS**

A truly influential question: What might go right tomorrow?

THE HOLY GRAIL OF MANY NEWS EDITORS is the investigative piece that brings down a government official. In B.C. this year, for example, the Webster Award for journalistic excellence went to reporters for the Victoria Times Colonist who uncovered bad management in the Ministry of Children and Family Development. The story caused the minister to resign. Now that's the news media wielding influence!

Yes, but what kind of influence? A department got a "shake-up" and the new regime, hopefully, will try to put the books back in order. But the message received by the public was depressingly familiar: government is incompetent, or corrupt, when it comes to improving lives. After enough such stories over time, the public begins to believe that neither government, nor our sensationalist, scandal obsessed news media can influ-

ence long term social change for the better.

That perception of the news media is borne out by some recent surveys. The Pew Research Center found barely a third of Americans believe the media help society solve its problems. Half believe the media get in the way.

In Canada, a recent similar poll found our public is only slightly less pessimistic about the role the media plays in helping citizens think through solutions to shared challenges.

Here's a big reason, I believe: Too much news media focuses on what went wrong yesterday; not nearly enough focuses on what

might go right tomorrow.

Blame it on the cultures of newsrooms: reactive, deadline driven, and, frankly, anti-intellectual. A reporter or editor who talks up new social

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experiments or the latest academic thinking quickly becomes suspect.

Which is too bad. Because that leaves it to professional hypesters to frame our futures for us. There are now more public relations pros than journalists in North America. It's a huge, expanding industry, a network of political think

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tanks, advertising firms, and influence experts are paid big bucks to lay out their masters' scenarios for public consumption. Behold the product, the military strategy, the economy of the future! The greatest spinmeisters make us believe their version of tomorrow is inevitable. Now that's *true* influence.

And yet, in my 20 years in journalism I have found a hungry audience for fair, clear, well researched articles exploring possible new approaches to problems like drug addiction, failing schools, declining fish stocks, etc. When editors do green-light those stories, the results allow citizens to imagine and debate alternative futures, and to mobilize support for the versions they support.

A good approach to such stories is to begin with a small experiment going on in your own backyard. An article on the safe injection site in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, for example, might point the way towards broader harm reduction applications. Or the stories might be found on the other side of the world. Way back in

1990, I reported on safe injection sites and other harm reduction strategies being tried in Holland and Liverpool and asked: Is this a workable alternative to America's "War on Drugs"? Sometimes our future is occurring right now, somewhere else.

A big obstacle to this kind of journalism, I believe, is that so much of our news media is controlled by a few mega-corporations heavily invested in *their* self-interested version of the future. This is why, a little over a year ago, I founded The Tyee, an online source of news and views for British Columbia. Here, where two big companies own most of the mainstream news media, what if we had a news source founded on different values, far less dependent on advertising, able to reach all corners of the province and beyond? What if that news source allowed comments after every story, its reporting a catalyst to democratic discourse?

That is exactly the experiment you will find at *The Tyee*.

You will find there as well, on many days, the

future-focused journalism I have been advocating in this article. In fact, this month we are launching the Tye Fellowship for Solutions Reporting, a charitable fund to promote more reporting that investigates that crucial question: What might go right tomorrow?

If we at *The Tye* are successful, our measure of influence won't be the number of times our reporters said "gotcha" to some official. The measure will be the discussion we promote around innovative approaches to the challenges faced by British Columbians.

If we are truly successful, others will emulate

our model, creating independent on-line news media in other regions of Canada and beyond. If so, by our very existence we will have offered a compelling, alternative vision of the future. A vision very different than offered by Big Media, with all the influence it can muster. ■

For More Information

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- *Alexandra Gill, Globe and Mail*

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"In this junkfood media culture, it's like a mental colonic." - *Author Lynn Coady*

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