



This “thought sheet” is produced as a service of the L’Arche Canada Foundation to the Canadian public. We offer it as a contribution to the public conversation about values and the shaping of the social ethos in which we live. Our perspective comes from two broad sources: (1) from thirty-five years of living together in community as a diverse group of people, differently abled and from various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds; and (2) from contemporary thinkers who are open, fresh and responsive to the human spirit and are reflecting deeply on the individual and society today. Our goal in this publication is to strengthen the experience of human solidarity in Canada by making available some of this combined wisdom and reflection.

The vision and confidence to create a healthy Canadian society lies in the nexus where humanistic thinking and spirituality cross-fertilize. Indeed, today the best spiritual thinking engages contemporary culture with a view to the good of human society and the best humanistic thinking integrates spiritual values. We believe it is possible to live consciously in the gap between an ideal society and everyday reality and to make choices that contribute to the closing of that gap. It is a hopeful view, based on human and spiritual values embodied in daily life.

# A Human Future

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## *The Media and Society: An Interview with Linden MacIntyre, Host of CBC’s Fifth Estate – part two*



COURTESY OF CBC

Linden MacIntyre has produced documentaries and stories around the world. Many have influenced Canadian society for the better. His penetrating work in broadcast journalism has garnered Gemini, Michener and Sinclair Awards. Prior to joining the CBC in 1976, he worked with *The Halifax Chronicle-Herald* in the Ottawa parliamentary bureau, and in Cape Breton, and with *The Financial Times of Canada*. At the CBC he hosted *The MacIntyre File*, worked on *The Journal*, and was host of CBC Radio’s *Sunday Morning* before moving to *The Fifth Estate*.

*In this second of a two-part interview, prominent investigative journalist Linden MacIntyre reflects upon journalism and the media in Canada today. Part One of this interview appeared in our September issue and may be accessed on our web-site, where new readers may also subscribe to this free e-publication ([www.larchecanfoundation.org](http://www.larchecanfoundation.org)). – Beth Porter, ed.*

**BP: What would you say to young journalists starting out?**

LM: There are two media: the corporate institutions that increasingly are controlled by folks who have no concept of public service, and at the other end of the continuum, reporters and writers. To the young journalist I would say, first plant in the forefront of your mind that journalism is a public service. It doesn’t matter who owns the medium, the CBC or the National Post, you frequently have to work at serving the public against the interests of people paying your salary. This is an ancient and revered tradition. A journalist needs to be willing to get fired if necessary.

Journalists are increasingly coming from social and economic classes that identify with the management. And they tend to take themselves too seriously and place more emphasis on what they do than what they are. In journalism, you have to start by knowing your own nature and extracting from it a sense of what you should do. It’s not a job as much as a vocation.

It helps to have some background in history, philosophy, the social sciences, economics. It’s trite maybe, but you

## Eric Alterman



Excerpted from “The Media is the Message: Notes on our decadent press,” a review by Gene Lyons of Eric Alterman’s *What Liberal Media? The Truth about Bias and the News* (Basic Books, 2003), *Harper’s Magazine*, November 2003.

*Today’s Washington press corps has grown as decadent and self-protective as any politician or interest group whose behavior it purports to monitor. [At the same time it claims] the moral authority of a code of professional ethics it idealizes in the abstract but repudiates in practice. In theory the press is supposed to function in a free market of ideas, a self-regulating and relentlessly competitive quest for what the old Superman comics called “truth, justice, and the American way.” (Clark Kent was, after all, a newspaper reporter.) ....*

*In Washington, “truth” in the journalistic sense, is determined largely by the institutional prestige of those first staking a claim in a given story. By the time major news organizations and individual reporters come to have a stake of their own, even the most compelling evidence can be rearranged as necessary to keep a story alive. Anybody who diminishes a tale’s value by debunking its premises isn’t seen as a rival so much as a vandal.*



can learn everything you would learn in journalism school in about three weeks working on a community paper—one that’s not part of a chain. This is the place to start for anyone who wants to be an investigative journalist. You go to council meetings, learn the local politics, meet the police, and just know your community. When I was working in north-eastern Nova Scotia, I found that because I had visited and learned about the steel plant and coal mines, when there was a story I knew how to ask questions. Knowledge is an important foundation. Then people will tell you things.

### **BP: Do Canadians see the media as a public service?**

LM: People who are in really difficult situations have a strong sense that the media should be a public service. There’s a notion that all you have to do is get your story in front of other people and everything’s going to be okay. It’s interesting which programs cause that to happen. Some years ago, after a two-hour special about parental verbal abuse, we had 3,000 responses. Canadians have an intolerance for injustice, and they get especially upset about wrongful convictions.

The Truscott case created a ground swell. Within 24 hours the police decided Truscott did it. In the area where he lived there were 5,000 armed forces guys walking around, about whom the police knew nothing. We only found out years later that the place was crawling with sexual offenders. The police never looked at any of them. They went straight to this kid because he gave them two things: he was not military and he was not civilian. If they’d arrested a young air force guy, the local community would have demanded, Get that base out of here! If they had arrested an adult civilian, because the victim was the daughter of an officer there would have been God knows what kind of reaction. But a 14-year-old kid? Who cares!

### **BP: Do you think it was calculated?**

LM: I think it was either calculated or too juicy an idea to not go with it. We have a cynical expression in journalism, “a fact too good to be checked.” You go with tunnel vision. It



GOVERNOR-GENERAL  
*Adrienne Clarkson*



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*Uncovering wrongs is a very important part of the journalistic tradition. It is the first step in righting those wrongs, so that we become a better place, a better society. It also helps us to be more aware and on the look-out the next time something bad seems to happen.*

*But I [do think] that public service in journalism should be broader. It should also include, for instance, the way elections are covered. Are the electors informed in such a way that they can make their decisions freely knowing their many options? We are deluged with information, particularly at times of elections, and we must have the kind of reporting which leads towards our being able to understand where the public interest lies.... Journalism in itself will not bring about reforms, but it will be the impetus for the reforms to happen.*

(From Her Excellency the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson's Speech at the Presentation of the 2002 Michener Award for Journalism, an award recognizing the public benefit generated by journalistic work not only of individuals or teams but of the networks, newspapers and magazines behind them.)

happens all the time. I think the police are prone to this. I don't know how often I've come up with tempting conclusions myself early in a story. You have to fight to free yourself from that.

**BP: What helps you to look beyond?**

LM: I work in a wonderful unit. It's a culture – we force each other to do that. *The Fifth Estate* is a hangover from the 70s when things were more vigorous. There was a notion that the media could make a difference, reinforced by Watergate, Vietnam, the Pentagon Papers. The credibility of the media surpassed that of public office by such a degree that it was frightening.

**BP: What's your sense of the health of the media in Canada today?**

LM: The media is under so much pressure. The profit and loss model has become dominant. Newspaper offices and TV newsrooms have been so downsized that there is virtually no latitude for reporters to exercise initiative, or do research that costs money. It becomes a scramble just to fill the space. Some places have a quota system – four stories on the desk at the end of each day. The only way that's possible is to be totally superficial.

Meanwhile, a massive, sophisticated profession of Communications has evolved. It has nothing to do with journalism, nothing to do with truth. It has to do with creating an impression that will serve the interests of clients who tend to be the rich and powerful, and suppressing anything that's going against these interests. Every public servant, every corporate officer now has standing between him or her and the public, somebody whose whole job is to filter everything. You used to be able to reach people who actually knew a subject. Now, somebody who knows nothing about the subject will undertake to find the information you're asking for and then decide how much is appropriate for you to know. It's insidious! I call it "the sixth estate." There's the fourth, which is the print media, the fifth, which is the electronic, and now this sixth estate, which is just a very wet blanket on top of everything else.

**BP:** What can people do to help restore the health of the media?

LM: Keep an eye on ownership and management. The growing concentration is a serious problem, because it promotes the business model. Big chains like CanWest want to be able to own as much as they can. They also want to raise American money, so selling a chunk of our media to Americans appeals to them. They want foreign ownership limits lifted.

There's a lesson to be learned from the Americans. Until 1980, American networks had to demonstrate every time their licenses were renewed that they were performing a significant public function. They did that by pointing out their news and current affairs departments, which were considerable. When General Electric took over NBC, they went to their friend Ronald Reagan and said, We don't want to do this public service crap. The rules changed, so the American networks no longer have to demonstrate public service. And look what happened! With one or two exceptions, their programming's garbage. In Canada, the CRTC still requires that there be some public justification, but they are under constant pressure to go the same way. *A Human Future* is edited by Beth Porter



*The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 121 communities of L'Arche on five continents, 26 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with developmental disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.*

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## FOR REFLECTION

"Part of the journalist's mandate, as I see it, is to rock the boat. This is done by seeing what is in the spaces between received wisdom and reality, and by putting into public view hard-won information that authorities would prefer to hide.... Elected people pay close attention to the newspapers on their doorsteps. If we had a whack of Canadians who were outraged by our high level of homelessness, for instance, how long would we continue to tolerate it in this prosperous country?... This is precisely how change happens."

*June Callwood, 2002 Dalton Camp Lecture, CBC Ideas.*

## SOME FEEDBACK

"I really appreciated the last Thought Sheet because it deals so closely with issues faced by our community right now." *Rabeel Raza, journalist.*

## FOR YOUR INTEREST

- On the Steven Truscott case:  
[www.cbc.ca/story/view/CBC/2000/03/30/truscott000330](http://www.cbc.ca/story/view/CBC/2000/03/30/truscott000330)  
Julian Sher and Theresa Burke: *Until You are Dead: Steven Truscott's Long Ride into History*, (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001)
- Web-site of investigative journalist Julian Sher:  
[www.journalismnet.com](http://www.journalismnet.com). See also his internet column, "How the web is changing journalism."
- On the contest in the U.S. between journalism as a business and as a public service: "The Age of Murdoch," by James Fallows, *The Atlantic*, September, 2003.
- Canadian Journalists for Free Expression: [www.cjfe.org/](http://www.cjfe.org/)
- The Public Eye (American media monitoring web-site)  
[www.publiceye.org/main.htm](http://www.publiceye.org/main.htm)
- Site for library on Journalistic ethics:  
[www.questia.com](http://www.questia.com)
- Four stories the media missed last year:  
[www.cqj.ca/mediamag/fall2002/retrospective.html](http://www.cqj.ca/mediamag/fall2002/retrospective.html)
- An independent on-line Canadian news source:  
[www.straightgoods.com](http://www.straightgoods.com)
- John Miller: *Yesterday's News: Why Canada's Daily Newspapers are Failing Us*, (Fernwood, 1998)
- *The Walrus*: [www.walrusmagazine.com](http://www.walrusmagazine.com), a new, high quality Canadian magazine of public debate.