

## THE NOBODIES OF CORPORATE MEDIA: POSTMEDIA'S PURCHASE OF IRVING MEDIA IS NOT GOOD NEWS FOR NEW BRUNSWICK'S WORKING CLASS

Tracy Glynn and Aditya Rao

Roger LeBlanc, like many of his generation, left New Brunswick to work. LeBlanc blamed decades spent underground in mines in Ontario and northern New Brunswick for putting poisons like lead into his body that later in his life he had to pay to have removed. LeBlanc spent his retirement savings on workplace detox, travelling to Ontario to receive expensive chelation treatments. LeBlanc's story is not well known in New Brunswick even though he is a hero to those who walked beside him in his struggle for workplace compensation. His story never made the front pages of the Irving newspapers, and yet LeBlanc's story is both remarkable and familiar. Hearing LeBlanc's story conjures up the kind of heartbreak for humanity one feels upon watching Michael Glawogger's 2006 documentary, *Workingman's Death*.<sup>1</sup> Viewers see Ukrainian miners crawling into cracks of old coal pits to scrounge for winter fuel, Indonesians walking long distances down a fuming mountain slope with back-breaking loads of sulphur on their shoulders, and Pakistani workers risking being blown up as they dismantle carrier ships for scrap iron.

LeBlanc's story is familiar because he reminds us of our grandfathers' bodies poisoned and disfigured by their workplace, our grandfathers who died young, never having come home to their children from a work shift, our grandfathers who travelled far away from their families to work in places where they were not welcomed but nevertheless persevered.<sup>2</sup> Their bodies tell stories of profound inequality, exploitation, oppression, trauma, and injustice even if the tribunes of the day never gave them a voice.

Dying September 2021 at age seventy-eight, LeBlanc was a miner who often dusted off his hard hat and work boots to make a statement on the steps of the New Brunswick legislature.<sup>3</sup> Every few months in the last years of his life, LeBlanc made the four-hour drive from Eel River Crossing to Fredericton to demand justice for himself and his fellow miners.<sup>4</sup> LeBlanc said it was too late for many of them; they were already dead.

Some media outlets covered LeBlanc's first protest, but the media quickly lost interest. LeBlanc continued his protests, often with only his wife, Yvette, by his side. The NB Media Co-op, the Conservation Council of New Brunswick, and David Coon, New Brunswick's Green Party Leader, were among the few who continued to greet LeBlanc at the legislature. Coon's office and the *NB Media Co-op* tried repeatedly to arrange audiences with the media when LeBlanc came to Fredericton but eventually it was just us there to stand with him. At our last encounter with LeBlanc at the legislature, he told us that he had inherited his late grandson's oxygen machine. Suzanne Gallant, LeBlanc's daughter, later told us that LeBlanc's grandson, her nephew, Adam Wright, was a graduate of St. Thomas University's journalism program who died just before his twenty-fifth birthday.<sup>5</sup> Last month, Gallant fulfilled her mother's wishes and left us the coroner's report on her father. Her parting words were sombre: "Thank you. My parents didn't have an education."

LeBlanc may not have graduated from high school like so many of his generation, but he had a working-class education and dignity, the kind of dignity being displayed in today's migrant workers in New Brunswick's forests, farms, fish plants, and long-term care sectors. Migrant workers are telling us

about their struggles to stay and work here. They are refusing the flights back home bought by their employers who would rather fly them back home than pay the workers the wages they are owed or deal with discrimination and harassment happening at their workplace.

Inka Milewski—New Brunswick's Rachel Carson to many—supported LeBlanc through his struggles while she was the science adviser with the Conservation Council of New Brunswick.<sup>6</sup> The marine biologist gave LeBlanc legal support when no one else would, representing him in court after New Brunswick's Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission and a subsequent appeals tribunal rejected LeBlanc's bid to get compensation for the chelation treatments he felt that he needed as a result of his twenty years working at the Brunswick zinc mine near Bathurst.<sup>7</sup>

LeBlanc's failure to have the commission, tribunal, and court recognize what he felt in his bones to be true haunts Milewski, who has a difficult time talking about LeBlanc. While Milewski did more for LeBlanc than anybody did, we are left to wonder whether the outcome would have been different if LeBlanc had a union backing his cause or a lawyer to face off against the lawyers employed by Xstrata, one of the world's largest mining corporations at the time, and New Brunswick's Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission, all determined to not set a precedent that compensated miners for treatment of workplace disease.

The retired miner's protests at the legislature may have been mentioned once or twice in one of the Irving-owned newspapers, but his story was never given the coverage it deserved. In fact, the Irving papers editorials have a long history of expressing hostility toward workers like LeBlanc and the labour unions that represent them. That should come as no surprise. The Irving empire includes corporations that have long been blamed for harming workers and woodlot owners, for pollution, and for tax avoidance.<sup>8</sup>

Having had a major stake in media ownership in New Brunswick since 1968, the announcement of Irving's shedding of its newspapers might have been welcome news if the purchase were not made by Postmedia Network Inc. Media watchers in New Brunswick, including the NB Media Co-op,<sup>9</sup> have long criticized the Irving group of companies' cross-ownership of media and various industrial interests in the province.<sup>10</sup> Media critics have noted that Postmedia's purchase of Irving's newspapers on 17 February 2022 means that New Brunswick will be subject to conservative, anti-worker, and racist rhetoric that has made papers like the *National Post* infamous. The purchase means even less accountability and coverage in a news desert.<sup>11</sup>

Postmedia was founded in 1998 by right-wing media baron and convicted fraudster Conrad Black. U.S. president Donald Trump had pardoned Black after he had written Trump a flattering biography. Today, Black's columns regularly appear in the *National Post*. The approximately \$15 million deal involved Postmedia buying numerous assets of J.D. Irving Ltd., including the three Brunswick News dailies—the *Telegraph-Journal*, the *Times & Transcript*, and the *Daily Gleaner*—as well as smaller newspapers, *Miramichi Leader*, the *Bugle-Observer* in Woodstock, *Northern Light* in Bathurst, *Kings County Record* in Sussex, the *Tribune* in Campbellton, and the *Victoria Star* in Grand Falls. From J.D. Irving Ltd., Postmedia also acquired French-language newspapers, *L'Étoile* and *InfoWeekend*, and the printing shop that prints the province's only French-language daily newspaper, *L'Acadie Nouvelle*. Besides the newspapers, Postmedia also bought J.D. Irving's parcel delivery service and proprietary distribution software.<sup>12</sup>

Today's media conglomerates are owned by U.S. hedge funds that engage in continuous cost-cutting, such as closing newsrooms and laying off massive numbers of workers.<sup>13</sup> Postmedia is majority-owned by the American hedge fund Chatham Asset Management, which owns an 80 per cent stake in the American media conglomerate A360 Media that has controversial ties to Donald Trump. Postmedia boasts ownership of 120 brands in Canada, including the *National Post*, the *Financial Post*, *Vancouver Sun*, *Calgary Herald*, *Edmonton Journal*, *Ottawa Citizen*, *Windsor Star*, and the *London Free Press*,<sup>14</sup> and now the Brunswick News flagship, the *Telegraph-Journal*, and the company's other daily and weekly newspapers.

## What's Good for Postmedia Is Good for Irving

Erin Steuter, a sociologist at Mount Allison University, has studied Irving's media monopoly, including the dangers of the Irvings' covering themselves as well as Irvings' dominant pro-business narrative.<sup>15</sup> "The papers are presenting the view that what's good for the Irving company is good for the province," Steuter told the *NB Media Co-op* in 2010 when the province of New Brunswick proposed to sell NB Power to Hydro Québec.<sup>16</sup> The proposed deal would have seen lower power rates for industrial power users for at least five years, which resulted in support for the deal from the Irvings.<sup>17</sup>

New Brunswick, one of the poorest provinces in Canada,<sup>18</sup> is home to two Irving billionaires, Arthur Irving<sup>19</sup> and James K. Irving, both sons of K.C. Irving.<sup>20</sup> James is the current owner of J.D. Irving Ltd. K.C. Irving entered the newspaper business after buying a Saint John weekly newspaper, *Maritime Broadcaster*, in 1936. By 1968, his company had bought all five English-language daily newspapers in the province.

With the Postmedia acquisition of Brunswick News Inc., the Irvings, Canada's eighth richest family in 2015,<sup>21</sup> are not completely out of the media business in Atlantic Canada. Ocean Capital Investments, a holding company that has represented the interests of John E. Irving's group of companies, owns Acadia Broadcasting.<sup>22</sup> Acadia Broadcasting owns *Huddle*, a digital business-focused media outlet, as well as fifteen radio stations in Atlantic Canada and Ontario. Besides broadcasting, Ocean Capital Investments, with John K.F. Irving at the helm, has interests in real estate, construction, and petroleum service.<sup>23</sup>

Who is not served by the Postmedia purchase? The obvious answer: consumers of media who now have fewer options at the media buffet and the journalists who face layoffs at the newsrooms likely to close. Postmedia is known for buying newspapers then shutting them down<sup>24</sup> and for turning local newspapers into advertising carriers.<sup>25</sup> Anne Lagacé Dowson, former CBC radio journalist, has noticed the effects of Postmedia in Montréal where she lives. She tells us: "Postmedia is killing its papers and contributing to the demise of democracy. The *Montreal Gazette* is a shadow of what it once was. They didn't even hire interns this summer. When reporters retire they aren't being replaced. It's terrible for English Montréal." Meanwhile, Dowson notes that *La Presse* and *Le Devoir*, two newspapers not owned by Postmedia, seem to be enjoying renewal and are hiring new staff. To be sure, Irving will not be harmed by the Postmedia takeover. Irving's influence over the media will not disappear. Jamie Irving, James K. Irving's grandson, became a member of the board of directors of Postmedia in April 2022, on the heels of the Brunswick News purchase. The Postmedia board is a slate of individuals with deep ties to conservative politicians,<sup>26</sup> oil and gas companies,<sup>27</sup> and real estate investment trusts,<sup>28</sup> which are a major driver of the housing crisis in Canada. In July 2022, Jamie Irving was announced as the successor

to Postmedia CEO Paul Godfrey.<sup>29</sup> As Steuter notes, “The Irvings will continue to have influence in media coverage of themselves in their capacity as advertisers for hundreds of companies.”<sup>30</sup>

## Adding Fossil Fuels to the Fire

Postmedia’s links to corporate climate change profiteers is visible in the pages of the newspaper. The website of their advertorial arm—Content Works—boasts that corporate interests can “leverage the Postmedia Network” to promote their brand and message, stating “Your success is our success.”<sup>31</sup> The page proudly displays their work in platforming greenwashing by Canada’s LNG industry<sup>32</sup> and promoting private schools.<sup>33</sup> In 2014, the *Vancouver Observer* reported that Postmedia planned to enter into a sponsored content partnership with the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), the powerful fossil fuel lobby group.<sup>34</sup> The leaked presentation suggested that Postmedia would help CAPP promote their “thought leadership” through sponsored content.

Postmedia and other corporate media owners argue that labelling such content as “sponsored” absolves them of any wrong doing, but critics disagree. In fact, Postmedia was the subject of a complaint for failing to do even that. In 2013, DeSmog Canada filed a complaint over a fluff opinion piece about an oil industry executive that made dubious economic claims after another economist who tried to submit a rebuttal piece was informed that her piece could not be run because she was responding to an advertorial.<sup>35</sup>

The effect of such content, coupled with their editorial bias in favour of corporate profiteering, is what researchers have called “manufacturing consent,” a reference to the idea that public opinion can be controlled by the strategic use of mass media. Researchers in New Brunswick published an analysis of Brunswick News editorials showing that the papers carried the narrative that resource extraction is an economic necessity for the survival of rural communities as part of an attempt to manufacture consent for corporate profiteers.<sup>36</sup> This phenomenon is likely to get worse with the Postmedia takeover of Brunswick News. When Alberta Premier Jason Kenney launched his controversial “war room” for the energy industry—a taxpayer-funded public relations department to promote fossil fuels—Postmedia engaged the services of a lobbying firm founded by a former Kenney staffer to secure a piece of the \$30 million pie for their advertorial services.<sup>37</sup>

## Controlling Information, Winning Elections

Besides media ownership, there are other ways that the Irvings control information in New Brunswick. Irving companies are private companies so there is little information available to the public about their operations. During the 2021 hearings where Irving Oil unsuccessfully sought to increase its fuel prices,<sup>38</sup> Irving refused to disclose important information about their business practices. Not the media but anti-poverty groups, the Common Front for Social Justice and Grassroots NB, and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), had to pressure Irving for this information. In response, Irving chose to withdraw their application.

In his book, *Citizens Irving: K.C. Irving and His Legacy: The Story of Canada’s Wealthiest Family*,<sup>39</sup> John Demont noted that one of K.C. Irving’s sons boasted that his father, a large donor to the provincial Liberals and Progressive Conservatives, never lost an election in New Brunswick.<sup>40</sup> While J.D. Irving’s Brunswick News may not have officially endorsed one of the only two parties to ever

govern in New Brunswick in their editorials, Postmedia has directed the editorial boards of its newspapers to endorse the Conservative Party of Canada.<sup>41</sup>

A month after Postmedia bullied the editors of their newspapers into endorsing the Harper Conservatives during the 2015 election,<sup>42</sup> the *Ottawa Citizen* editorial board resigned in protest.<sup>43</sup> That same year, the editor of the *Edmonton Journal* disclosed that Postmedia had directed its four dailies to endorse the Conservatives during Alberta's election campaign.<sup>44</sup> Besides supporting the Conservatives in editorials before that election, Postmedia and Sun Media dailies across Canada wrapped bright-yellow, full-page advertisements around their newspapers, with headlines that stated, "Voting NDP or Liberal will cost you." Before the election, Postmedia selectively dropped columns by Andrew Coyne for endorsing a party that was not the Conservatives. Margaret Atwood's column criticizing Stephen Harper was pulled from the *National Post* website before the election. The *Post* later ran a redacted version that was not so confrontational against Harper.<sup>45</sup> Despite Postmedia's best efforts to guide the hand of voters at the election booths in 2015, Canadians booted Harper out of the prime minister's office and Albertans elected the NDP and made Rachel Notley premier.

In 2009, the Irving media was embroiled in "wafergate," when the *Telegraph-Journal* published a story claiming that then Prime Minister Stephen Harper, a non-Catholic, took the communion wafer at former Governor General Roméo LeBlanc's state funeral in 2009, and placed it in his pocket rather than consuming it. The paper was forced to apologize for printing the story. In a show that they were not against the establishment, J.D. Irving sacked one of their own, Jamie Irving, the son of its owner, as the publisher of the newspaper, and Shawna Richer as its editor.

According to Ambarish Chandra and Allan Collard-Wexler in their 2009 study, newspaper mergers are motivated not just by profit, but also by political motives and empire building.<sup>46</sup> For tax haven critic Alain Deneault,<sup>47</sup> Irving's shedding of its newspapers marks an interesting turn where Irving is indicating that it does not need its newspapers as an ideological tool in its empire building.<sup>48</sup> If any media corporation is up to the task of Irving empire building, it is Postmedia.

## Uncrossing the Wires

Without any interference from the Competition Bureau, Canada has let one media corporation, Postmedia, gobble up, merge, and close newsrooms across the country. In the past two decades, waves of workers in newsrooms have been fired so that the same stories can be published in more than one newspaper. The media consumer is not only given less news, they often have to pay more for their media as media monopolies often raise their prices.<sup>49</sup> Before one of many large-scale acquisitions by Postmedia, a *Toronto Star* editorial in 2015 quipped, "In most cities, the choice for newspaper readers will be between Postmedia—and Postmedia."<sup>50</sup>

In 2016, Marc Edge noted: "Believe it or not, Postmedia was probably not even the worst media monopolist in Canada. That dubious distinction had instead long been reserved for the Irving family of New Brunswick, which owned all three of that province's dailies, eighteen of its twenty-five community newspapers, and four radio stations. Its monopoly had been the target of media inquiries dating to the 1970 Senate report on Mass Media, which described New Brunswick as a 'journalistic disaster area.'"<sup>51</sup> In 1972, the predecessor of Canada's Competition Bureau, the Restrictive Trade Practices Commission, charged and convicted Irving with operating a monopoly. The commission ordered Irving to divest one

of their dailies and fined each of the dailies \$150,000. However, Irving successfully appealed the conviction at the Supreme Court of Canada.<sup>52</sup>

Julian Walker, author of *Wires Crossed: Memoirs of a Citizen and Reporter in the Irving Press*,<sup>53</sup> is a long-time critic of the Irving media monopoly. In his newly released book, he describes three national commissions on Canadian media that “viewed New Brunswick as the worst example of concentrated ownership and cross-ownership in the country.”<sup>54</sup> The 1981 Royal Commission on Newspapers recommended breaking up the Irving media monopoly. The 2006 Senate report on news media described the situation as “an industrial-media complex that dominates the province.” However, Irving has been allowed to continue undercutting the competition, like when it killed a small newspaper in Woodstock with a combination of legal intimidation and discounted advertising and subscription rates.<sup>55</sup>

Walker says that the federal government showed leadership in supporting a freer press in the province when it forced the sale of CHSJ television and radio to CBC, clearing the way for the establishment of the province’s English CBC television station and three English CBC radio stations. Walker also notes that federal funds supported the establishment of New Brunswick’s French-language daily newspaper, *L’Acadie Nouvelle*. Walker wants to see the federal government put in place a special trust fund to support an independent, digital daily.

## What’s Good for Postmedia Is Not Good for Us

The Postmedia purchase has media watchers thinking about how to increase media literacy when White supremacist and hate groups deploy mis- and disinformation and other subtle and not-so-subtle strategies on social media to win supporters. In 2009, the *NB Media Co-op* was founded a year after the New Brunswick Social Forum brought together social justice activists, Indigenous land defenders, workers, and students from across the province, who all recognized that the media was their common problem. The aftermath of the 2007–2008 financial crisis did not leave New Brunswick unscarred from the global neoliberal response to the crisis. New Brunswick workers, like workers elsewhere, were told to tighten their belts and live with gutted social programs at a time when they needed that support more than ever.

On the same day in 2009 that the *Telegraph-Journal* issued a front page apology to the Canadian government over “wafergate,” a dozen professors from the University of New Brunswick, St. Thomas University, and Mount Allison University issued a media release denouncing the firing of student intern Matt McCann from the *Telegraph-Journal*, after he wrote a story about faculty protesting the awarding of an honorary degree to then–New Brunswick Premier Shawn Graham at the University of New Brunswick. The neoliberal prescriptions of Graham did not sit well with the professors or the workers who took to the streets many times during his tenure as premier to protest his plans to sell NB Power and force austerity measures on workers.<sup>56</sup> Graham served only one term as premier and the Liberals became the first party in New Brunswick’s history to not win a second consecutive mandate.

Also in 2009, Saint John Mayor Ivan Court challenged Irving to a public debate. For a time, Court stopped speaking to the *Telegraph-Journal* over the newspaper’s coverage of city hall. Court said that Irving and several senior newspaper staffers told him that the newspaper’s coverage of city hall would change if the city cut taxes and replaced its manager. Court was one of the speakers at the New Brunswick Social Forum that inspired the creation of the *NB Media Co-op*.<sup>57</sup>

Thirteen years later, the *NB Media Co-op* now finds itself in a media landscape alongside Postmedia. Postmedia has a history of syndicating racist commentators and platforming far-right pundits<sup>58</sup> across their chain, so we can expect New Brunswick to become the latest battleground for these cynical attempts to divide our communities, something that the Irving media has also done. In the most popular commentary published by the *NB Media Co-op* this past year, we pointed out the racist nature of a cartoon published in the *Telegraph-Journal* that depicted ungrateful immigrants running over rural New Brunswickers.<sup>59</sup>

Studies show the detrimental impact of corporate media in Canada determined to oppress segments of the population, such as Mark Cronlund Anderson and Carmen Robertson's 2011 book, *Seeing Red: A History of Natives in Canadian Newspapers*. Genevieve Johnston's more recent examination of 122 articles from 2014 to 2018 covering opioid-related overdose deaths—including Postmedia outlets the *National Post*, *Ottawa Citizen*, and *Toronto Sun*, but also the CBC—found that White opioid users are portrayed as innocent victims while Indigenous users are often ignored or stigmatized as addicts.<sup>60</sup>

Recent Postmedia-owned *Telegraph-Journal* editorials tell us that New Brunswickers deserve higher wages, but only if they work harder. This is no surprise given that they once threatened to lock out their own workers in their Ottawa newsrooms if they did not accept a contract that reduced benefits, including sick pay.<sup>61</sup> The editorials are repeating the same falsehoods and right-wing rhetoric found in the newspapers when they were owned by Irving: diatribes against public sector and frontline workers, arguments against state support for housing based on trickle-down economics,<sup>62</sup> and the need to mine and frack in our communities to save rural New Brunswick.<sup>63</sup>

Ian Gill quit journalism in 1994 to become an environmental activist. Once a reporter with the *Vancouver Sun* and the CBC, and author of *No News is Bad News*, Gill argues that Postmedia's close ties with energy interests, namely the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, is detrimental to society.<sup>64</sup> Besides being cheerleaders for the energy and natural resource industries, the newspapers champion the interests of banks, developers, and Big Pharma. The editorials are regularly hostile toward workers and unions. Can we expect Postmedia to cover Irving Oil, the largest oil refinery in Canada, in a way that tells us something about their responsibility for the climate crisis or Saint John's child poverty rates?

Eduardo Galeano, the Uruguayan storyteller of the oppressed, wrote the poem *The Nobodies* as a testament to the struggle of the countless casualties of capitalism and imperialism. In it, he writes: "The nobodies: nobody's children, owners of nothing. The nobodies: the no ones, the nobodied, running like rabbits, dying through life, screwed every which way. / Who are not, but could be."<sup>65</sup> What Galeano, the journalist and poet, tells us is that we can't rely on the Irvings or on Postmedia to tell our stories. Roger LeBlanc didn't. It's up to all of us to make sure that our stories "appear in the history of the world" and not in "the police blotter of the local paper," as Galeano wrote.

LeBlanc's autopsy report reads like a chronicle of a working-class death. Both of LeBlanc's parents died in their forties of heart disease. During his life, LeBlanc had been diagnosed with pulmonary silicosis, hypertension, dyslipidemia, cardiac insufficiency, and sleep apnea. He stopped working when he had problems breathing. He died on September 16, 2021, of cardiorespiratory arrest. His family wanted the autopsy to focus on heavy-metal toxicity of the brain. The report did not find lead encephalopathy, but it noted that lead toxicity in adults produces peripheral motor neuropathy, such as

weakness, numbness, and pain, usually in the hands and feet, and not encephalopathy. However, like a Postmedia story, it's what is not reported in the thirteen-page autopsy report that tells the actual story of LeBlanc's life.

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