

**Staying Connected: Gauging the relevance of English-language community  
newspapers in the Montreal region**

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A Thesis

in

The Department of Journalism

Presented in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Journalism Studies) at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

May 2014

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**CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY**  
**School of Graduate Studies**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Staying Connected: Gauging the relevance of English-language  
community newspapers in the Montreal region

Wayne Larsen

Through a content analysis of seven Montreal community weeklies over a two-month period, as well as a case study of competition between two newspapers within a single market, this thesis examines how ownership structures and policies governing the provision of local content can affect the economic health of newspapers through the amount of advertising they attract. Informed by the theories that news is a commodity and that community news must be “relentlessly local,” this study focuses on how ownership and editorial practices — and their relationship to local readerships — can be credited for the continued vibrancy and financial health of some community newspapers while contributing to the floundering of others.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Foremost thanks goes to my supervisor, Dr. James McLean, for his valuable advice and enthusiasm for this project from the beginning, and to my committee members, Dr. Michael Gasher and Dr. William Buxton, for their contributions.

At Concordia's Journalism Department, I wish to thank Peter Downie for his komraderie and good cheer throughout. Thanks also to Sandra Cochrane, Brian Gabriel, Linda Kay, Lisa Lynch, David Secko, Joyce Stempkowsky, and Enn Raudsepp — and to Blossom Thom for her assistance throughout the process.

For supplying me with research material necessary for this project, and for help here and there, I wish to thank my friends and colleagues from Montreal's community newspaper "community," both past and present: Anthony Abbondanza, Harvey Aisenthal, Anthony Bonaparte, Raffy Boudjikianian, Gordon Brewerton, Andy Dodge, Debbie Dore, Marlene Eisner, Leo Gervais, David Goldberg, Beth Hudson, Mireille Kulisz, David Price, Daniel J. Rowe, and Richard Tardif.

And of course special thanks to my wife, Darlene Cousins, for her steadfast support and academic advice, and to my children, Nikolas and Bryn-Vienna, for their help along the way.

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## Chapter One: Connecting with the Community

*There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common.* — John Dewey

“If it didn’t happen in Westmount, it didn’t happen.” With this deceptively simple motto, community newspaper publisher and editor John W. Sancton (1920-2004) summed up the principal philosophy behind his newsgathering policies and, in fact, one of the prevailing theories behind community newspapers in general. Of all the story ideas, reader submissions, press releases and photographs that crossed his desk during his long tenure as publisher and editor-in-chief of the *Westmount Examiner* from 1957 to 1989, only those concerning or directly affecting members of the Westmount community did he deem acceptable for publication.<sup>1</sup>

Larger stories — the events and issues of interest to a general readership, not just those living in the neighbourhood covered by the paper — were occasionally covered in *The Examiner*, but only if they contained a strong enough local angle. For example, the August 1959 royal visit to Montreal by Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip was given prominent play in *The Examiner*, not only because of the implied cultural connection between the monarchy and Sancton’s largely Anglo-

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with John Sancton, Westmount, Quebec, 15 March, 1998.

Saxon readers — Westmount’s perceived cultural identity being that of a predominantly British enclave at the time — but because the royal couple had paid a brief visit to Westmount City Hall.<sup>2</sup> This provided a clear focus for the coverage in *The Examiner*, which offered readers photos of the royal motorcade as it made its way along Westmount streets, passing local homes festooned with Union Jacks for the occasion. Confronted with this textual treatment of this news coverage, the casual reader might have been led to believe that the royal visit was exclusive to Westmount; details of the Queen’s itinerary throughout Montreal — including her presiding over the ceremonial opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway — were provided within the accompanying article, but placed far enough down in the column that their relative insignificance was implied. Twenty-five years later, in September 1984, *The Examiner* covered Pope John Paul II’s visit to Montreal in much the same way, providing readers with three articles and four photos of the pontiff’s two brief stops in Westmount — first at the Westmount train station, then at the Congregation de Notre Dame Mother House.<sup>3</sup>

From *The Examiner*’s perspective, Westmount and the interests of its residents always came first. If, for example, a major news story broke in Canada, Quebec, or even a section of Montreal outside of Westmount, and there was no apparent connection to the local community and its residents, Sancton’s editorial policy

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<sup>2</sup> Aline Gubbay, *A View of Their Own: The Story of Westmount*, Montreal: Price-Patterson Ltd., 1998, 9.

<sup>3</sup> J.W. Sancton, “Pope met at station by cheerful, neighborly crowd,” *The Westmount Examiner*, 13 September 1984, 1; Laureen Sweeney, “Congregation of Notre Dame witnesses joyful occasion,” *The Westmount Examiner*, 13 September 1984, 26; Rob Southcott, “Fleeting view of John Paul for crowds at Mother House,” *The Westmount Examiner*, 13 September 1984, 26.



might have meant ignoring the story altogether. “That is the reason why God created *The Gazette*,” he was fond of saying, referring to Montreal’s only English-language daily.<sup>4</sup> Sancton was aware of the fact that the vast majority of his Westmount readers also read *The Gazette* on a daily basis, so any attempt on his part to cover a non-Westmount story that was certain to be covered by *The Gazette* would merely amount to duplication — a common occurrence in areas where two or more publications cover the same territory.<sup>5</sup> This could be seen as both a disservice to readers and a waste of valuable newspaper space. Instead, Sancton endeavoured to devote all of his editorial space to local items and discussions of locally relevant issues that his readers were not likely to find anywhere else. This meant covering what many would consider the most important local stories, such as municipal elections, major fires, groundbreaking decrees from city hall, etc., as well as filling the remaining spaces with small, hyper-local briefs which Sancton fondly referred to as the “broken arms”: the idea being that if a young local boy fell off his bike and was taken to hospital with a broken arm, it might merit a brief paragraph in *The Examiner*. Sancton contended that no matter how trivial these small stories might appear to the casual reader, they not only complemented the big stories but, when taken together, helped form an intricate portrait of the community.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Interview: John Sancton, Westmount, Quebec, 15 March 1998.

<sup>5</sup> James T. Hamilton, *All the News That’s Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004, 24.

<sup>6</sup> John Sancton, 1998.

This study concerns itself with the importance of local reporting in community newspapers and the inherent connectedness between the papers and their readers. It draws on theories of political economy to investigate whether a correlation exists between profitability and sustainability (primarily through a healthy stream of advertising) and a higher amount of local editorial content. It analyses the content of seven English-language community newspapers in Montreal, delving into the offerings of each issue over a designated two-month period. Issues of corporate versus private ownership are addressed, culminating in a case study of two local newspapers — one being John Sancton’s *Examiner* — directly competing to dominate a relatively small local market.

### **The “relentlessly local” paper**

While the community newspaper is certainly not a recent phenomenon — small-town and rural publications have existed alongside their larger, urban daily counterparts for centuries — the term “community journalism” is relatively new. It was first used by the late K.R. Byerly as the title for his 1961 book on the subject, acknowledged by subsequent scholars to be the first work to emphasize the importance for a community newspaper to maintain its focus on its readers and their concerns.<sup>7</sup> While Byerly stressed that crucial concept of tangible

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<sup>7</sup> Bill Reader, “Community Journalism: A Concept of Connectedness,” *Foundations of Community Journalism*, eds Bill Reader and John A. Hatcher, Los Angeles: Sage, 2012, 4.

connectedness, he also pointed out community journalism's fundamental pitfall: "Community newspapers have something that city dailies lack — nearness to the people," he wrote. "This is a great strength, and a great problem."<sup>8</sup> The problem in this case is the possible blurring of the lines of objectivity when a journalist works too closely with sources, newsmakers, and advertisers. Although questions of journalistic objectivity are not entirely relevant to this study, it should be pointed out that the traditionally close relationship between community editorial staff and local advertisers has further intensified over the past two decades as community newspapers continue to shift their circulation method from paid subscription to free distribution. In fact, only one of the seven newspapers in this study still relies on a paid circulation. This of course leaves advertising as the primary, if not sole, source of revenue for many papers, and financial necessity has tempered editorial policy to the point where many (but certainly not all) community journalists are no longer expected by their employers to report the news in a complete or objective way.<sup>9</sup>

Still, the importance of local reporting — and maintaining close ties to the community — remains a crucial element of community journalism. In their 1991 book *What's News? The Market, Politics, and the Local Press*, Bob Franklin and David Murphy fully support the Sancton policy on covering such events as the royal and papal visits: "The news content of such papers relates entirely to the

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<sup>8</sup> K.R. Byerly, *Community Journalism*, Philadelphia: Chilton, 1961, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Nathalie McHugh, Conseil central du Montréal métropolitain-CSN, memo to unionized TC Media journalists, 6 May 2013.

locality where they sell. Inasmuch as national stories are covered, that is only the case if there is a local ‘angle’. No national stories appear purely in their own right.”<sup>10</sup>

While the term “community journalism” may be credited to Byerly, it was his student, community newspaper editor-publisher Jock Lauterer, who coined the term “relentlessly local” to describe what he argues is the ideal mandate for a community newspaper. It is also the title of his 2006 book, which drives home the assertion that in order to fulfill its obligation to readers a community paper must remain fixed on the local: “Regardless of difference in subject, specialization, setting or circulation, all community publications share a common denominator,” he writes. “Their perspective, focus, balance and news judgment are driven by local interests first.”<sup>11</sup>

This assertion is furthered by Thomas C. Terry, who, in his 2011 essay *Community Journalism Provides Model for the Future*, quotes the U.S. National Newspaper Association’s definition of a community newspaper’s mandate as being strictly local: “The distinguishing characteristic of a community newspaper is its commitment to serving the information needs of a particular community. That community is defined by the community’s members and a shared sense of

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<sup>10</sup> Bob Franklin and David Murphy, *What’s News? The Market, Politics, and the Local Press*, New York: Routledge, 1991, 56.

<sup>11</sup> Jock Lauterer, *Community Journalism: Relentlessly Local*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006, 40.

belonging.”<sup>12</sup> This “shared sense of belonging” immediately suggests the seminal work of Benedict Anderson, whose 1983 book *Imagined Communities* took the concept of community beyond its conventional geographical boundaries and expanded it to embody any group of individuals united by a common interest, ethnicity, or nationality.

While this study concerns itself with specific community newspapers, each covering a designated geographical area (in this case throughout the western portion of Montreal) Anderson’s theory can be applied to show how topics and issues of interest to non-geographical “communities” inevitably come into play to varying degrees with all of these publications. The concept of non-geographical communities, such as special-interest groups, political or religious organizations, transcend the physical boundaries of boroughs and municipalities and may also be considered a “local” audience when community newspaper editors make their decisions over what items will be published. For example, John Sancton’s *Examiner* regularly ran a column recounting recent social events such as gallery openings, formal balls and fundraising dinners, despite the fact that a Westmount resident was not always present in a photo or mentioned in the accompanying text. This popular society column was considered local, and therefore worthy of publication, because a considerable portion of Sancton’s readers were wealthy patrons of the arts and the benefactors of local charities — in short, members of

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas C. Terry, “Community Journalism Provides a Model for the Future,” *Newspaper Research Journal*, 32(1): 73.

one of Anderson's "imagined" communities, united by a common interest, occupation or social classification other than the shared residency of a geographical community. Anderson's theory will inform this study as a means to give clarity to the content analysis, especially when some items are deemed to be "local" despite the absence of a discernible geographical relevance.

Though Lauterer's study is distinctly American, with all examples and cases cited from U.S. publications, his overview of community newspapers includes descriptions of various types of weeklies, all of which exist in Canada and each of which describe one or more of the newspapers in this study:

**The independent, or family-owned weekly:** The owner has an investment in the community as well as the newspaper. The level of involvement between ownership, staff and community is profound... But fewer and fewer of these papers exist now, as the chains pressure them into selling. Some of the remaining independent family-owned papers are legendary in their areas, and their owners are fiercely resolved to hold off the chains. But the pressure of big bucks is too much for many owners.

**The chain-owned weekly:** In this instance the publisher is not the owner... at their worst they can be plagued by uninvolved management, low-grade talent, a bottom-line focus, and draconian edicts handed down by a distant, remote owner who cares little

except the profit and loss statements. There are many exceptions to this; in the best cases the chain has allowed the former owner-family to stay in place as editors and managers.

**Little Big Papers:** These are growing community newspapers, still classified by the American society of Newspaper Editors as “small newspapers” but feeling their muscles. These papers are caught between two cultures, that of the community paper and that of the larger regional daily. Newspapers this size may often begin to lose sight of their original reason for being — of what made them great in the first place. If they start setting their sights on other goals instead — usually the constantly increasing profit margin — they risk losing their connection with their community or constituent communities.<sup>13</sup>

As Lauterer is careful to point out, each of these types of newspapers have their merits and drawbacks. Of the three, however, the chain-owned weekly has drawn the most criticism for its “relentless” pursuit of profit rather than remaining “relentlessly local.” In her 2012 essay *Community Journalism Must Tackle Tough Local Issues*, Linda Steiner zeroes in on one of the key drawbacks to the current trend toward concentration of media ownership — a decreasing sense of “connectedness” to the communities they ostensibly cover. “Moreover,” writes Steiner, “glowing praise of

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<sup>13</sup> Lauterer, 40-41.

independent community weeklies often ignores that community newspapers increasingly are units of chains, edited by careerists without local roots, and written by people who don't know one another and rarely meet up at regional offices. They regularly produce special editions celebrating the 'anniversaries' of the locality or newspaper, but often are unable to put contemporary problems into historical context."<sup>14</sup>

Much of the existing scholarship on media ownership agrees with Steiner's assertion that chain-owned community newspapers are less likely to sacrifice profit in favour of generating and publishing local material. The general head-office reasoning behind this is concisely summed up by Ben H. Bagdikian, whose analysis of the trend toward corporate ownership forms the basis of his 1997 book *The Media Monopoly*: "Why do the corporations fight for so much dominance, spending most of their executive time and billions of dollars in ferocious bidding battles, mergers, acquisitions, leveraged buyouts, and takeovers? The answer is an ancient one: money and influence."<sup>15</sup>

While the perceived evils of chain ownership present themselves as easy targets for communications scholars, not all existing research arrives at the same conclusion. In his 1996 book *The Menace of the Corporate*

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<sup>14</sup> Linda Steiner, "Community Journalism Must Tackle Tough Issues," *Foundations of Community Journalism*, eds Bill Reader and John A. Hatcher, Los Angeles: Sage, 2012, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1997, 5.



*Newspaper: Fact or Fiction?*, David Demers states that while “Corporate newspapers are accused of placing more emphasis on profits and less on the quality of the news product, alienating employees, reducing solidarity in the community, and producing a less vigorous editorial product,” he contends that “Empirical research supports the notion that corporate newspapers are more profitable; however, there is relatively little evidence to suggest that they place less emphasis on product quality, alienate employees, or are less vigorous editorially.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Economic realities**

While many scholars agree that the community newspaper is unique in that it does not necessarily report the news or exert editorial opinion with the same perception of detached objectivity as its big-city or national counterparts, this can be purely a result of economic necessity.<sup>17</sup> As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of local papers across Canada are now circulated through the free-distribution structure, hand delivered door-to-door by either a private firm or Canada Post and dropped off in bundles at designated public locations within the community. The subscription structure, by which readers pay a flat rate for weekly delivery of the paper, or the retail system, by which they purchase each issue at a

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<sup>16</sup> David Demers, *The Menace of the Corporate Newspaper: Fact or Fiction?*, Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Steiner, 21.

store or newsstand, have both been replaced in many cases by free distribution. This removes an entire stream of revenue from the paper's economic structure, leaving only advertising as a primary source of income. The free distribution structure, by which the newspaper is automatically delivered to each home every week, is of great benefit to readers because it means they no longer have to go out to buy their local paper; instead, it is brought directly to them, making it much easier for them to participate in community discourse. More importantly, this system offers strong benefits to advertisers, as they are guaranteed that the newspaper will find its way into each and every home in the community. As a result they are being sold what is potentially a significantly greater audience for their goods or services. Under the subscription structure, not all households in the community could be relied upon to buy the paper, and advertisers were therefore not reaching the highest number of potential customers.

There is a drawback to the free distribution system that compounds one of the traditional problems inherent to the community newspaper: the potential inability to present all editorial content in a fair and (for the most part) balanced way, for objectivity in news reporting can be significantly compromised whenever a news outlet is inextricably reliant upon advertising dollars, and the free distribution system enforces this reliance by eliminating the relatively small — but not insignificant — revenue stream produced by paid subscriptions and retail sales. This creates a dynamic that empowers advertisers to the point where editorial

objectivity can easily become compromised when a news story involves an advertiser — a common occurrence in covering a small community — or when an influential advertiser who feels he or she has a financial stake in the paper wishes to promote or suppress an issue of significant interest to the community and threatens to cancel all future ads if that issue is not addressed to their satisfaction. This can lead to crises of ethics among publishers and editors, who find themselves faced with difficult decisions that could potentially impact the financial health of their newspapers. Of course, this is compounded by the ongoing sense of uncertainty across the newspaper industry, a result of which has been the closure of many news outlets due to a significant reduction in advertising. Now, more than ever, faithful advertisers are valued by community publishers.

### **The study**

The analysis of seven Montreal community newspapers will be informed by the theory of news as commodity as posited by both James T. Hamilton in his 2004 book *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News*, and Vincent Mosco in his 1996 book *The Political Economy of Communication*. In both cases the delivery of local news to a community is seen to provide a product to consumers. In order to be of optimum value to those consumers, local weeklies must be what Lauterer describes as “relentlessly local” in content, the result of being “connected” to both newsmakers and readers through active engagement in the community.

The analysis will examine not only the “connectedness” of each paper through its publication of local articles but also seeks to determine whether this practice has paid off at the financial level by attracting advertisers. It also seeks to estimate the approximate revenue generated by that advertising. Taken together, these two related elements, connectedness and attractiveness to advertisers, will be used to establish whether there exists a clear correlation between local content and a healthy revenue stream.

The seven newspapers chosen for this study cover the predominantly English-speaking communities in the Montreal area, situated on, or adjacent to, the western half of the island. They are *The Eastern Door*, *The West Island Chronicle*, *The Suburban* (City and West Island editions), *The Free Press*, *The Westmount Examiner*, and *The Westmount Independent*. Each of these publications falls into one of the categories described by Lauterer: The family-owned or independent weekly (*Eastern Door*, *Free Press*, *Westmount Independent*), the chain-owned (*West Island Chronicle* and *Westmount Examiner*), and the Little Big Paper (*The Suburban* City and West-Island editions). There is also a considerable degree of competition among them, for only *The Eastern Door* can be seen as a monopoly. Combined, the two *Suburbans* cover a vast area that encompasses the territories covered by *The Chronicle*, *The Free Press*, *The Examiner*, and *The Independent*. In the case of Westmount, there is also head-to-head competition each week between *The Examiner* and *The Independent* — a case study that will be explored in Chapter Four.

These seven weeklies were chosen because they represent not only a wide range of socio-economic markets, from lower-income Aboriginal households (*The Eastern Door*) through middle-income communities (*The Chronicle, The Free Press*) through the wealthy (*The Examiner, The Independent*), but also a wide range of editorial content and varying degrees of location-specific material.

The time frame of this study, October and November 2013, was chosen for two reasons: the autumn is normally a busy period for community newspapers, with a higher volume of advertising in anticipation of the holiday season; and because this particular period was especially fortuitous for a content analysis since it encompassed both Montreal's municipal election campaign (October) and the election itself (the first week of November). Providing detailed municipal election coverage to local readers is widely considered a fundamental duty for community newspapers, as neighbourhood issues often form the basis for candidates' platforms.<sup>18</sup> Given this importance, conducting the study during this period was seen to offer a unique opportunity since all the community newspapers in the Montreal area ostensibly covered the local candidates during the campaign and subsequently the election itself.

The findings of the study will be discussed in Chapter Three, whereby the "connectedness" demonstrated by each of the seven newspapers will be analysed through the number of local items they published during the study period,

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<sup>18</sup> Lee Shaker, "Community Newspapers Play Significant Role in Election," *Newspaper Research Journal*, 32(1), 6-18.

compared to the volume of advertising they generated, as well as indications of reader engagement through letters to the editor and other such submissions.

However, a basic familiarity with each publication and the communities they serve is essential to understanding the context within which this study was carried out.

Therefore, Chapter Two will be devoted to a brief overview of the English-language community newspaper landscape in western Montreal, consisting of an introductory profile of each of the publications in the study, with emphasis on their histories and positions within their respective markets.

## Chapter Two: The English Community Press in Montreal

### The Chronicle

Of the newspapers in this study, *The Chronicle* — or at least its lineage — has demonstrated the greatest longevity, dating back to 1925. Its origins were both humble and tentative. According to the paper's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary special edition, published in 2000, *The Chronicle* can trace its roots back to the garage of a Pointe Claire home, where a group of ambitious local teenagers with access to a small printing press endeavoured to publish a few pages of neighbourhood news and gossip on an irregular basis. The result of this venture survived long enough to evolve into a regular publication under the banner *The Lakeshore Record*.<sup>19</sup>

The continued survival of the paper is credited largely to the Freeman family of Pointe Claire, who saw an opportunity to develop *The Lakeshore Record* into a viable commodity. John Freeman, proprietor of a travel agency in Pointe Claire Village, bought *The Record* and established its offices in the building next door to his travel agency in the heart of the local business community. With his wife, Helen Freeman, serving as editor, publisher Freeman built the paper — by now rechristened *The Lakeshore News* — into a community weekly that expanded its coverage to include a greater portion of the West Island. After John Freeman's

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<sup>19</sup> Unsigned, *The Chronicle* (75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Edition), 3 May 2000, 5

death in the late 1960s, the paper was sold to Southam, a large national media chain that also owned Montreal's *The Gazette*. By this time *The News* had merged with *The North Shore Chronicle* and was published by Southam as *The News & Chronicle*.<sup>20</sup>

This lasted until 1979 when Southam sold *The News & Chronicle* to Publications Dumont, the publishing arm of the Quebec-based media chain Cogeco, which already owned several French-language community weeklies in the Montreal area. Although Dumont had not been in the market for an English-language paper at the time, the deal was initiated by Southam employee James Wood, who was able to convince Dumont CEO Henri Duhamel, Jr. to tap into the lucrative Anglophone market in Montreal's large West Island area. To top off the deal, Wood himself offered to come along with *The News & Chronicle* to serve as its publisher and help with the transition. The final name change also occurred during this period, as Dumont management, worried about Quebec language legislation (the province had recently forced the Eaton's department store to drop the apostrophe and S from its name) thought it wise to drop the News and remain with the French word *Chronicle*.<sup>21</sup> In 1996, Cogeco sold off its newspapers to printing/distribution giant Transcontinental — the publishing arm of which is now named TC Media — for \$24 million.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Albert Kranberger, "You know you're a West-Islander when..." editorial, *The Chronicle*, 11 July 2007, 6.



Up until 2000, *The Chronicle* was circulated by paid subscription, its print run of 17,000 copies delivered to homes by a force of 420 carriers who were paid 15 cents per copy. At a cover price of 75 cents, its annual circulation revenue was just under \$500,000. Today, *The Chronicle* remains part of the TC Media chain, with a weekly circulation of 45,600 copies at an average of 20 to 24 pages, of which approximately 75 per cent is advertising. It continues to cover the West Island region of Montreal as the English-language counterpart to its sister publication, *Cité Nouvelles*, although the two papers remain editorially separate, with translated articles only occasionally duplicated in both papers. It does, however, share its two-member editorial staff — a Director of Content & Media Relations and a reporter — with *The Westmount Examiner*, the only other remaining English-language TC Media weekly in the Montreal region. The emphasis on advertising is reflected by the nine-member sales staff (excluding the publisher), which consists of one sales manager, one sales support supervisor, three sales coordinators, three sales consultants, and one classified ad sales representative.

*The Chronicle* is distributed throughout the southern West Island region of Montreal, a largely suburban residential community with a total population of approximately 130,000.<sup>22</sup> This large area consists of the autonomous municipalities of Pointe Claire, Dollard des Ormeaux, Kirkland, Beaconsfield, Baie d'Urfe, and Ste. Anne de Bellevue. While traditionally a largely English-

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<sup>22</sup> Canada Census 2011; Statistics Canada: [www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Facts-csd-eng.cfm?LANG=Eng&GK=CSD&GC=2466097](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Facts-csd-eng.cfm?LANG=Eng&GK=CSD&GC=2466097)

speaking community, the West Island has seen a sharp increase in its francophone population over the past two decades, providing a solid market for *Cité Nouvelles*. Editorially, the two papers share a geographical area in terms of news coverage, but TC Media has eliminated the chances of duplication by delivering only one of the papers to neighbourhoods where, according to market research, one language is predominant. As a result, *The Chronicle* is delivered to all homes south of Highway 40, including all of Kirkland, while *Cité Nouvelles* goes to homes north of the highway, excluding Kirkland.

*The Chronicle*'s paper edition is augmented by a web site, which exists essentially as the TC Media site, with the capacity for local reporting and photos to be posted beyond the confines of the paper edition. However, the local material posted on the site is mixed in with postings from several other newspapers in the chain, resulting more in an eclectic collection of local, regional, and generic material. Also, a PDF file, or "smart edition" of each week's paper version is available to view online.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Westmount Examiner**

As mentioned above, *The Westmount Examiner* is currently linked both editorially, administratively, and financially to *The Chronicle*, as the two are

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.westislandchronicle.com>

headquartered along with six French-language weeklies at a centralized regional office in Dorval, although *The Examiner* has its own satellite office in Westmount.<sup>24</sup> Throughout its eventful 79-year history *The Examiner* has maintained a steady weekly presence in Westmount, a predominantly English-speaking municipality bordering downtown Montreal, widely acknowledged to be one of the wealthiest communities in Canada.<sup>25</sup>

Originally a broadsheet publication consisting of eight pages per week, *The Westmount Examiner* first appeared in residents' mailboxes in February 1935. The actual origins of the paper go back a bit farther. It began life in 1929 as *The Weekly Examiner*, covering Montreal's north end and Park Extension area. It was part of the small Monitor Publishing chain, which included the *NDG Monitor*, *The St. Laurent News* and *The Verdun Guardian*. In 1968, *The Examiner* became an independent, family-owned publication when John Sancton — who had been president of Monitor Publishing since 1957 — agreed to resign from the company and take on ownership of the paper under his newly formed company J.W. Sancton and Sons.<sup>26</sup> “He would revert to his journalism roots and try to make a go of what he saw as a paper — and a community — with huge potential,” recalled

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<sup>24</sup> *The Examiner's* Westmount office has been a point of local controversy that will be addressed in more detail in Chapter Four.

<sup>25</sup> Aline Gubbay, *A View of Their Own: The Story of Westmount*, Montreal: Price-Patterson Ltd., 1998, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Don Sancton, “Independent carries on 40-year tradition of community journalism,” *Westmount Independent*, 1 October 2008, 6.

his son Don, who would serve as the paper's editor-in-chief for five years beginning in 1989, when his father sold *The Examiner* to Cogeco and retired.<sup>27</sup>

Today, *The Examiner* publishes an average of eight pages per week, its advertising ratio fluctuating between 40 and 50 percent. This is a significant reduction in both page count and advertising, as it was publishing an average of 20 to 24 pages per week in 2006, with an average of 70 percent advertising. Although it maintains its small office in Westmount, the base of its operations has shifted entirely to the regional office in Dorval, where it shares resources with *The Chronicle* and the French-language weeklies in TC Media's West Montreal division.

Due to its limited space and human resources, *The Examiner's* editorial character has also been significantly altered over the past five years; whereas it was traditionally held up as Westmount's newspaper of record, providing a voice for all residents, an April 2013 edict from TC Media forbids editorials or op-ed articles and it rarely receives a letter to the editor.<sup>28</sup> Instead, it avoids all controversy and devotes much of its limited space to extended photo essays and soft news items from schools and charitable organizations — a far cry from the days of local firebrand John Sancton.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> McHugh, 2013.

Though relatively small, with a population of just over 20,000 and a geographical area of approximately four square kilometres, Westmount maintains an average household income of \$195,213, which makes it an attractive target for potential advertisers.<sup>29</sup> It is also home to a thriving business community consisting of two commercial districts, not to mention a high-end real estate market with many agents and realtors whose advertising dollars have traditionally provided a substantial portion of the paper's income.

Like *The Chronicle*, *The Examiner's* paper edition is augmented by a web site that is essentially a page on the larger TC Media site. Again, Westmount material is mixed in with postings from across the region, and the "smart edition" of each week's paper edition is available in PDF format.

### **The Suburban (City and West-Island editions)**

Of the newspapers chosen for this study, *The Suburban* is by far the largest in circulation and communities covered, both geographically and culturally. With a total weekly print run of 145,000 copies, it boasts of being the largest English-language weekly newspaper in Quebec and covers the same geographical area as all the other papers in this study, with the exception of *The Eastern Door*.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> This figure is consistent with information provided by the City of Westmount and Statistics Canada (2011 census).

<sup>30</sup> [www.thesuburban.com/about\\_us.php](http://www.thesuburban.com/about_us.php)

In order to fulfill its mandate as a community newspaper while maintaining the maximum possible area of coverage, it publishes three separate editions, each focusing on a different area of Montreal: the City edition, which covers central west-end Montreal (Côte St-Luc, Westmount, Hampstead, NDG); the West Island edition, which covers the same westernmost municipalities as those covered by *The Chronicle*; and the Laval-East End edition, which offers English-language coverage of the predominantly francophone region that stretches as far east as St-Léonard and Rivière des Prairies. In addition, there is also a full web site and an online feature, *The Suburban Magazine*, “an inter-active experience providing top-notch entertainment coverage for all that takes place in Montreal.”<sup>31</sup>

For the purposes of this study, *The Suburban*'s City and West-Island editions will be examined as separate publications due to the fact that, with the exception of a few shared editorial items and advertisements, the two editions are entirely different, each focused on their respective area of coverage. The same can be said of the Laval-East End edition, but that edition was excluded from this study because its area of coverage is far removed from the western-Montreal territory shared by the other seven publications.

*The Suburban* has grown well beyond the conventional structure of the community newspaper, and despite the fact that it is family-owned, its expanded mandate suggests that it would therefore be classified by Lauterer as a Little Big

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Paper. It is unique among Montreal's English-language weeklies in that it maintains a loud political voice that transcends the reporting of local events. Unlike its smaller counterparts, *The Suburban* does not waver in its stance in order to maintain favour with a wide variety of advertisers. Remaining true to its original mandate, the paper augments its coverage of community news with items of items of interest to members of Montreal's Jewish community, many of whom live in Côte St-Luc — the municipality most closely covered by *The Suburban* over the years.

*The Suburban*'s 51-year history reflects a spirit of grassroots activism that began in March 1963, when Côte St-Luc resident Sophie Wollock produced the first issue from her basement. Wollock, a journalist for the now-defunct *Westward News*, resigned from that paper in outrage over what she saw as management placing restrictions on her reporting.<sup>32</sup> *The Suburban* was born a few weeks later, providing Wollock with a platform for her views and the residents of Côte St-Luc with a publication that would be “uncompromising in reporting the news and getting the truth out to the public.”<sup>33</sup>

Wollock's editorial style was brash and biting; she took on local issues with what appeared to be a colourful fearlessness that can be seen in a 1966 editorial commenting on the closure of her former employer, *The Westward News*, written in obituary form: “...the paper's demise had been preceded by a lengthy illness.

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<sup>32</sup> Joel Goldenberg, “Suburban's founder wielded a sharp pen,” *The Suburban*, 20 June 2012, 8.

<sup>33</sup> [www.thesuburban.com/about\\_us.php](http://www.thesuburban.com/about_us.php)

Friend of few, enemy of many, the *News* is survived by a long list of creditors, a few devoted readers, and a collective sigh of relief ... With its barrage of insults, tilted lines of type, plagiarized ads, cut prices, the browbeating of local merchants and piles of dumped and undistributed copies, the *News* has finally destroyed itself.”<sup>34</sup>

*The Suburban*'s long-held policy of reporting not only local news but also serving as an advocate of English-speaking Montrealers, can be traced back to Wollock's public political stand. In 1970, *The Suburban* printed a front-page statement condemning the separatist Parti Québécois, which was fielding its first candidates in a provincial election: “We defy you, René Lévesque, and your band of arrogant, thoughtless and grasping separatists,” Wollock wrote. “We defy you to take away the rightful heritage that belongs to all Quebec people. We defy you to threaten us with nationalism and a police state. We defy you — period.”<sup>35</sup>

Although Wollock died in October 1978 — she collapsed at the Snowdon YMHA while covering a locally organized rally in support of Soviet Jews attempting to flee the USSR<sup>36</sup> — her husband and son continued publishing *The Suburban* for a further nine years, and in 1989 they sold it to the Sochaczewski family, who remain the owners today.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Goldenberg, 20 June 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Joel Goldenberg, “Five years of never backing down,” *The Suburban*, 31 October 2012, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Goldenberg, 20 June 2012.

<sup>37</sup> [www.thesuburban.com/about\\_us.php](http://www.thesuburban.com/about_us.php)



With new ownership came the inevitable changes to the paper, most significantly the expansion into the West Island. But Wollock's pro-Israel and pro-Anglo political ideologies remained firmly in place with publisher Michael Sochaczewski at the helm. Under current editor Beryl Wajzman, who was hired in 2007, *The Suburban* has further increased its long-held practice of journalistic advocacy, its news and opinion pages augmenting community-based issues with coverage and comments on broader topics such as Quebec language laws and issues of concern to Montreal's numerous ethnic communities.<sup>38</sup> As a result of this, and in order to help publicize *The Suburban's* stand on controversial issues, Wajzman has expanded his role to include frequent appearances on local television and talk radio programmes, where he discusses controversial issues of concern to Montreal's Anglophone community.

### **The Eastern Door**

Although it is distributed within a distinct geographical community — the Mohawk reserve at Kahnawake, just off the southeastern tip of Montreal — *The Eastern Door* is unique among the newspapers in this study in that it reports not only on the news and issues within the physical boundaries of Kahnawake but also the Mohawk nation and, quite often, aboriginal affairs in general. It is also unique in that it is distributed through the paid subscription system.

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<sup>38</sup> P.A. Sevigny, "Thousands march in secular rally against Marois Charter," *The Suburban*, 2 October 2013, 1.

Kahnawake is a small community compared to the areas covered by the other newspapers in this study, with a geographical area of approximately 50 square kilometres and a population of 8,000.<sup>39</sup> Despite its close proximity to a major urban centre, its character tends to be more rural than its Montreal neighbour — a largely residential community consisting of single-family dwellings set back on quiet roads without sidewalks. The closely knit nature of the Mohawk residents is reflected in the self-reliance of its social infrastructure: the community has its own police service, a hospital, four elementary schools, and two high schools. Officially, the Iroquois language is first among residents, however English is the predominant common language, as well as the *lingua franca* of *The Eastern Door*. According to the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake, French has never surpassed English as Kahnawake's second language because English remains the common second language among the First Nations, and for several generations many Kahnawake residents have maintained close cultural ties with the United States, having been employed as iron workers in the construction industry.<sup>40</sup>

Despite its size, Kahnawake is extremely well served by local media. Aside from the weekly *Eastern Door*, the community members are further connected through journalist Greg Horn's online news site *Iori:wase*, two local cable television stations, and two local radio stations — a high per capita concentration of media for a population of only 8,000, which prompted *Eastern Door* founder Kenneth Deer to

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<sup>39</sup> Mohawk Council of Kahnawake: [www.kahnawake.com](http://www.kahnawake.com)

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

observe, “Kahnawake is one of the most wired communities anywhere in the world.”<sup>41</sup>

*The Eastern Door* was established in 1992 as an indirect response to the heavy mainstream media coverage of one of the most volatile incidents in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Quebec — the 1990 Oka Crisis — whereby Mohawk residents of the nearby Kanesatake reserve, incensed over the appropriation of their ancestral land for a proposed golf course and residential development, set up roadblocks and challenged authorities in what would prove to be a two-month standoff that ultimately claimed the life of a provincial police officer. Although the incident did not take place in Kahnawake, the entire Mohawk nation was affected, and it prompted Kahnawake resident and local activist Deer to put out a local newspaper. Naming his new enterprise after the traditional name given to local Mohawks as “The Northern Keepers of the Eastern Door,” as they were the easternmost of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy, Deer proceeded to work “from scratch” and with no prior journalistic experience.<sup>42</sup>

I started *The Eastern Door* in the aftermath of the Oka Crisis ...  
Our community was awash with gossip, hearsay, unsigned letters  
and misinformation. Almost all the news came from the  
mainstream media over the Montreal newspapers, radio and TV

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<sup>41</sup> Greg Horn, “The Eastern Door celebrates 20 years,” *IORI:WASE* [www.kahnawakenews.com](http://www.kahnawakenews.com), 30 January 2012.

<sup>42</sup> [www.easterndoor.com/about-us](http://www.easterndoor.com/about-us)

stations, which was very slanted and did not express our point of view. Kahnawake needed a platform of information that it could depend on for accurate news and information while at the same time allowing for the different points of view in the community to be expressed. I didn't want the newspaper to be a political platform for my point of view or a political rag. I wanted a true newspaper that the whole community could identify with.<sup>43</sup>

Through a steady effort to maintain balance between his personal political views and the interests of his readers, Deer made every effort to ensure that *The Eastern Door's* news coverage was balanced and fair. This, he believes, was crucial in establishing a weekly that would gain acceptance by readers and become entrenched in the community.<sup>44</sup> He continued to build up the paper over the next 16 years, leaving in the summer of 2008 in order to devote his time more fully to "representing the interests of the Mohawk Nation at the international level."<sup>45</sup> Eastern Door Communications was then taken over by editor Steve Bonspiel, a native of Kanasatake, who served as co-publisher with Kahnawake native Tracey Deer. Since 2012, Bonspiel has been sole publisher and editor, overseeing an office of four employees, including one full-time journalist who also serves as staff photographer.

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<sup>43</sup> Horn, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> [www.easterndoor.com/about-us](http://www.easterndoor.com/about-us)

*The Eastern Door's* current circulation is 2,500 copies — by far the lowest of the seven newspapers in this study — which reflects the relatively small community it covers. It also has a much lower advertising ratio, allowing for a considerably higher amount of editorial content. However, the reduced ad revenue is compensated by two federal grants — from the Canada Periodical Fund and the Department of Canadian Heritage — and the two-dollar cover price.<sup>46</sup>

*The Eastern Door* is also augmented by a website, which posts a few (largely older) news items and letters to the editor, but emphasizes the online version of the printed edition, to which readers can subscribe for 50 percent less than the cover price.<sup>47</sup> As a result, there is little news or feature content on the site itself, but ample information on how to advertise or subscribe to either the print or online versions of the paper — the two main elements which support the financial well being of the enterprise.

### **The Westmount Independent**

The first issue of the *Westmount Independent* appeared in spring 2007, published under the auspices of Sherbrooke-Valois, a small company that had been printing special-interest magazines for the Montreal market.

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<sup>46</sup> *The Eastern Door* masthead, 4 October 2013, 2.

<sup>47</sup> [www.easterndoor.com](http://www.easterndoor.com)

With the motto *We are Westmount* emblazoned on the front page of each issue, *The Independent* sought to get closer to the Westmount community by following the “relentlessly local” model. From the outset, *The Independent* appeared to present itself to readers as a rebirth of the old *Westmount Examiner* — the pre-media chain weekly put out by John Sancton and his family. This is underscored by the presence in the masthead of chief reporter Laureen Sweeney, who had occupied that same post at *The Examiner* for several years in the 1980s and ’90s, and graphic designer Ted Sancton, who had previously worked in that capacity for his father’s paper. From the outset, the aim was to emulate the bygone days of *The Examiner* when it was still owned by the Sancton family — the “family-owned” enterprise that ostensibly put interests of the community and its residents ahead of its own quest for weekly profits. Not only did *The Independent* put into practice the theory of “relentlessly local,” but drove home the Sancton connection by filling the gaps in the layout with small, single-paragraph “broken arms” with little news value beyond that of quirky neighbourhood anecdotes.

Armed with a business plan that called for a cautious, tentative entry into a market dominated by one community weekly, the long-established *Westmount Examiner*, publisher David Price was able to attract local advertisers by reintroducing a distribution method that harkened back to the days when the vast majority of community newspapers were made available through paid subscription. Now, instead of being distributed door-to-door by a contracted

delivery company, *The Independent* would find its way into each Westmount home via Canada Post. While the exact cost of this venture is not known — a private business negotiation between Sherbrooke-Valois and the marketing division of Canada Post — figures quoted by Canada Post sales representatives indicate that distribution to all Westmount homes were comparable to the rates paid by TC Media newspapers to the chain's in-house distribution arm, PubliSac, which was \$588 per week. Given the added expense of distributing the paper in bundles to each of Westmount's several large apartment buildings, in local stores, municipal buildings and other public venues, it is fair to state that *The Independent* faces overall weekly distribution expenses substantially above those of its chain-owned competitor.

However, the additional expenses of a significantly higher print run than *The Examiner*, and distribution by Canada Post, have yielded tangible benefits for *The Independent*, for its visibility in the community far outpaces that of its competitor, a fact that has not been lost on advertisers. With higher circulation figures (print run) and virtually guaranteed delivery to every mailbox and apartment building lobby, it presents itself as the more attractive choice for businesses seeking to tap into what has long been perceived as the lucrative Westmount market.

*The Independent's* seemingly radical choice of circulation by mail also had an impact on the physical appearance of the paper. Whereas most community weeklies are now tabloid format, with pages measuring 13½ x 11 inches (34.3 x

28 cm), *The Independent* had to reduce its page size to the almost square 11½ x 11 inches (29.2 x 28 cm). This way, each unit would only have to be folded once in order to comply with Canada Post's size specifications; the larger tabloid format would have to be folded twice to fit the same category — a seemingly simple requirement, but nevertheless a significant added expense. *The Independent's* smaller format does not necessarily mean lower printing costs than those of its competitor, as it prints 50 percent more copies. Moreover, the smaller format created the problem of less available space for both editorial content and advertising on each page.

### **The Free Press**

Much as in the same manner as the history of *The Westmount Independent* is inextricably linked to *The Westmount Examiner*, any discussion of the origins of *The Free Press* would not be complete without a brief mention of *The Monitor*: *The Free Press's* immediate predecessor in the Notre-Dame-de-Grace community market. As one of what were then three local English-language weeklies in the TC Media chain, *The Monitor* ceased publication in early 2009 amidst criticism that it was no longer living up to its long-held mandate of providing unbiased and relevant community news to its readers.<sup>48</sup> Instead, its detractors complained, each

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<sup>48</sup> Steve Faguy, "Monitor vs Citoyen: lots of whining, little journalism," *Fagstein*, 9 June 2009 (<http://blog.fagstein.com/2009/06/09/monitor-vs-citoyen-lots-of-whining-little-journalism/#comments>)



issue had become an ad-heavy vehicle for unedited press releases and non-journalistic content: “Now all it does is list community events and republish open letters, while contributing whatever news articles that can be churned out with as little effort as possible.”<sup>49</sup>

Again, it was cited as a case of a once-strong, well-established independent weekly deteriorating after being sold to a large chain. *The Monitor* was established in 1926 by Hugh E. McCormick, a resident of Notre-Dame-de-Grace (NDG) who was best known at the time as a former goaltender for the Montreal Maroons hockey team.<sup>50</sup> As the flagship publication of the Monitor Publishing Company, it maintained a strong presence in the community throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was bought by Transcontinental in 1996, as part of the acquisition of Cogeco papers that also added *The Examiner* and *The Chronicle* to the rapidly growing chain. For the next 11 years *The Monitor* would be closely linked to both of those papers in all aspects of its operations, sharing production facilities, advertising sales staff and some editorial personnel. In fact for a six-month period in 1997-98, Leo Gervais served as editor of both *The Monitor* and *The Examiner*. In 2001, as part of Transcontinental’s move to reorganize a few of its Montreal markets along the lines of the recently implemented borough system, *The Monitor* — by now a tabloid — reverted to its original broadsheet format as part of a redesign effort that renamed it *The West End Chronicle*, an edition of its West

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<sup>49</sup> Steve Faguy, “NDG Monitor news article actually a press release,” *Fagstein*, 20 April 2009 (<http://blog.fagstein.com/2009/04/20/ndg-monitor-republishes-press-releases>)

<sup>50</sup> Don Sancton, 2008.

Island counterpart that would specifically serve the borough of NDG – Côte-des-Neiges. In a reversal of the standard newsroom job titles, *Chronicle* editor Albert Kranberger appeared at the top of the masthead as managing editor over the incumbent *Monitor* editor David Goldberg. Although there was a minimal amount of sharing of editorial material between the two publications — in fact *The Monitor*'s stable of freelance contributors remained in place, covering the same beats for *The West End Chronicle* — sales dropped off to the point where *The Monitor*'s average of 16 to 20 tabloid pages per week had diminished to just eight broadsheet pages for *The West End Chronicle*, representing the significant reduction of approximately 35 percent of page space. Although *The Monitor* name and tabloid format were eventually restored, the paper continued to struggle for advertising revenue. After the departure of its editor, lifelong NDG resident David Goldberg, in 2008, the paper greatly increased its reliance upon press releases for its editorial content, often using the “copy-and-paste” method of publishing them without any editorial scrutiny.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the paper was now being edited by TC Media employees who were not intimately familiar with the NDG community and for many of whom English was either a second or third language. This led to a noticeable increase in misspellings, grammatical and factual errors throughout each edition, a fact not lost on readers and advertisers.

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<sup>51</sup> Faguy, 20 April 2009.

Finally, in February 2009, TC Media announced that it was closing the print version of *The Monitor*, but the paper's website would not only remain functional but stand as an improvement over the print edition. "The sky's the limit now," announced the editorial in *The Monitor's* final print issue. Although the print version of *The Monitor* (as well as its previous incarnation, *The West End Chronicle*) had been "losing money, year after year," the editorial admitted, it promised that readers would now "receive quicker, more up-to-date and more in-depth local reporting" through the website.<sup>52</sup>

This announcement was met with scepticism and scorn. "I'd wish it luck online," countered an incredulous media blogger Steve Faguy, "but the website is so crappy — Transcon cookie-cutter messiness that's more interested in pushing other Transcon products than featuring local content — that without a significant redesign I'm pretty sure it's on its way to failure as well."<sup>53</sup> Just as Faguy predicted, the online *Monitor* remained a virtual non-entity, neglected for months at a time, and was finally taken down without fanfare in 2013, having last been updated in 2010.

The demise of *The Monitor* provided *Westmount Independent* publisher David Price an ideal opportunity to branch into the NDG market unchallenged. He launched *The Free Press* in September 2008 through his publishing company,

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<sup>52</sup> "The sky's the limit now!" Editorial, *The Monitor*, 5 February 2009, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Steve Faguy, "NDG Monitor to go online-only," *Fagstein*, 1 February 2009 (<http://blog.fagstein.com/2009/02/01/ndg-monitor-to-go-online-only>)

Sherbrooke-Valois Ltd., using the same Westmount office and established resources of *The Independent*. Once again, a Westmount and an NDG paper were being published out of the same Westmount office, but this time by a rival company. Moreover, Price recruited former *Monitor* and *West End Chronicle* editor David Goldberg to head up the editorial side of the new enterprise, and he in turn brought in several former *Monitor* contributors to write news and features on a freelance basis, as well as veteran cartoonist Stan Roach, who had been a mainstay at *The Monitor* (and carried on working for rival TC Media by continuing to draw for *The Chronicle*.) The result was that, for all appearances to the average reader, *The Free Press* was a redesigned resurrection of the old *Monitor*, publishing a comparable selection of local news and columns by many of the same familiar names.

Just as he had with *The Independent*, publisher Price started slowly. Instead of offering the editor a regular weekly salary, he drew up a contract that called for Goldberg to be paid at a rate of \$30 per published page — a cautious measure during a period when the fledgling paper was still testing its own viability in the NDG community which, unlike the relatively lucrative Westmount market, had recently proven unreliable in sustaining the ill-fated *Monitor*. Repeating the initial strategy that had worked for *The Independent*, Price began publishing *The Free Press* only twice per month. But while the Westmount market had allowed for *The Independent* to increase its page count and eventually publish on a weekly basis,

*The Free Press* has yet to appear in local mailboxes more often than twice monthly. Nevertheless, it has managed to increase its page count to an average of 20 per issue.

In short, a significant advantage in Sherbrooke-Valois's business strategy in launching *The Independent* and *The Free Press* appears to be its ability to offer readers and advertisers a product that is not restricted by what Jock Lauterer describes as "a bottom-line focus, and draconian edicts handed down by a distant, remote owner who cares little except the profit and loss statements."<sup>54</sup>

Still, further expansion into Montreal's west-end market has not been easy. During the period of this study, *The Free Press* tentatively published two special editions for the Montreal West and Côte St-Luc markets with the hope of attracting enough readers and advertisers to justify permanent expansion into those areas. Despite positive response from readers, several of whom wrote letters of support that were published in the second issue, as of early 2014 the Montreal West and Côte St-Luc edition had yet to resume publication.

As shown in this chapter, the western half of Montreal is well-covered by English-language community newspapers. This large, socially and economically diverse region benefits from healthy competition among its local publications, each of which strive to deliver the commodity of local news and opinion to

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<sup>54</sup> Lauterer, 40.

readers. In turn, that same group of readers comprise a commodity themselves — one that is sold to advertisers by the newspaper via space in each edition, which, as this chapter has indicated, represents by far the most significant source of revenue for all seven newspapers in this study.

### **Chapter Three: The Study**

In order to gauge the degree of “connectedness” to the communities they serve, seven of Montreal’s English-language community newspapers were subjected to a content analysis whereby the editorial material; principally, news, features, opinion, sports and arts, was examined for its ties and/or relevance to the local community. As the newspapers in this study are each circulated within a finite, clearly defined geographical area, borough or municipality, each editorial item was adjudged to be either local or non-local by merit of its direct connection to that geographical area and/or its residents. This was accomplished through a textual analysis of both words and images whereby a “local” item concerned either a person or group residing in the community, an incident or event that occurred within the boundaries of the community, an opinion expressed by a resident or an elected official representing that community, or an issue that would have a direct or indirect bearing on a substantial portion of the readership.

Items that did not immediately connect themselves to the geographical community through one or more of the “Five W’s” (who, what, where, when, and why) denoted in the text were re-assessed in order to find a relevant connection to the non-geographical “community” as described by Benedict Anderson. For example, a report on an Anglo-rights rally in downtown Montreal would be deemed “local” if covered by a West-Island newspaper because of its relevance to the English-speaking “community” that forms the majority readership of that

English-language weekly. Likewise, a report on a First Nations conference in Winnipeg appearing in *The Eastern Door* might have no discernible geographical connection to readers in Kahnawake, but it would logically be of interest to the paper's largely Mohawk readership, which by definition consists of members of Canada's First Nations "community."

By the same criteria, items were deemed non-local or generic if they proved to have no connection to the community (or communities) covered by the paper. For example, a review of a restaurant in Old Montreal would be considered non-local if it appeared in a West-Island paper, as would a generic crossword puzzle or a health column devoted to the dangers of smoking. While there is no question that these types of items are of interest to many local readers, they are of interest to many readers in all communities throughout the region and therefore not specifically rooted in the community served by the newspaper that published them. Generic items, such as instructional articles on how a seller might best prepare their home for an open-house event, routinely appear next to ads for real estate companies or in special sections designed around a theme and sponsored by advertisers in that area of business. These articles are not connected to any specific community and would therefore be deemed "non-local" editorial content. On the other hand, an instructional article quoting local real estate agents and home owners on how to prepare for an open-house event in the community would be



deemed “local,” even if the advice they offer applies to open-house events everywhere.

Particular attention was paid to coverage of the Montreal municipal election campaign, which culminated in a vote on 3 November — approximately the middle of the period chosen for the study, and a subject relevant to all but one of the newspapers to be examined.<sup>55</sup> This was helpful in gauging community connectedness, in that local media had the option of covering the “big” race between Montreal mayoral candidates or the smaller, community-specific campaigns for the mayors and city councillors of the boroughs and municipalities in the western portion of the island.

Once the data concerning the amount of editorial items and the ratio of local material was collected from each newspaper, the volume of advertising was gauged as an indication of financial health. While it is impossible to arrive at an exact figure for the revenue generated by each issue without complete access to the company’s books — an unrealistic expectation in a study of this scope — a more general but reliable indication of financial vigour can be observed through the number of pages the publisher chooses to print, and the volume of advertising on those pages. As a rule, total advertising revenue determines the number of pages that will be printed each week — with the profit line clearly in mind. Within

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<sup>55</sup> *The Eastern Door* covers the Mohawk territory of Kahnawake, which is self-governed by a local council that exists apart from the regional municipal structure of Greater Montreal and therefore does not hold elections on the same date as the other communities.

the culture of community newspaper publishers, editors and sales staff, a good week is indicated by a higher number of pages at a high enough news-advertising ratio:

Whether we have 40 percent ads or 60 percent ads in a 12-page paper, newsprint costs are the same. The rent goes on; electricity costs are unchanged. We don't buy any new material; we don't invest in any new stock. So when we run a 60 percent news-advertising ration in a 12-page paper instead of a 40 percent, we've made ourselves some fine profit.”<sup>56</sup>

This ideology is especially prevalent within the conference rooms of TC Media, where regional directors routinely praise those publishers who manage to print the most pages at the company-enforced rate of at least a 70- to 80-percent advertising ratio, and offer trophies for the highest sales figures at the Folios, an annual in-house awards banquet designed to encourage and motivate sales staff. In most cases a higher volume of ads therefore equates to higher profits, but many newspapers avoid the temptation to become mere advertising publications — the equivalent of glorified flyers — and deliver a reasonable percentage (usually at least 20 percent) of editorial content alongside the advertising.

The difficulty in arriving at an exact figure for the advertising revenue in any given issue of a publication is compounded by many variables. Despite prices

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<sup>56</sup> Bruce M. Kennedy, *Community Journalism: A way of life*, Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974, 197.

quoted on the rate cards handed out by sales staff to potential clients, the price of advertising fluctuates wildly from paper to paper, governed not only by size and the circulation numbers of each publication but also factors such as the number of colours (if any) in the ad, the number of weeks it is booked to appear, and whether it is a “pick-up” ad from a sister publication in a chain, whereby a client will pay extra for their ad to appear in several papers concurrently, but at a rate that is significantly less than what would have been charged if they had booked them individually. Add to this the tendency for sales staff to offer special deals to entice clients, and the insertion of smaller, free “filler” ads that publishers may drop into the layout at their discretion, a common practice meant to nurture goodwill among members of the local business community. It is also normal for sales staff to charge a client extra for preferred placement within the paper, such as a real estate agency requesting that its ad appear opposite the monthly list of local property transfers.<sup>57</sup>

In some cases an ad may be bought for significantly less than the price quoted on the rate card. If, for example, the back page of the latest edition remains unsold as the weekly press deadline looms, a salesperson will get on the phone and offer a last-minute “fire sale” deal to favoured clients and sell the space at a drastically reduced price. This was common practice at *The Examiner* during my tenure as editor; production was often held up on layout day as sales staff solicited clients

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<sup>57</sup> This remains regular practice at many newspapers, including *The Westmount Examiner* and *The Westmount Independent*, where monthly real estate transactions are published as a matter of public record.

for a cut-rate ad on the back page, a choice placement made all the more attractive by the low price.

As a result of these many unknown variables, the most reliable method of estimating profit in a study of this nature remains the overall page count and the percentage of advertising on those pages. In short, a loose issue of only a few pages with a sparse amount of advertising is much less likely to be profitable than a tighter issue of many more pages and a high percentage of advertising.

The results of this nine-week study were as follows:

### **The Chronicle**

Issues: 9

Total Pages: 200

Pages (editorial): 61

Pages (advertising): 139

Percentage of advertising: 70%

Total editorial items: 162

Local items: 152 (93%)

Non-local items: 10

Montreal election items: 27

Letters to the editor: 1

**Observations:** Given the fact that *The Chronicle* printed an average of 32 to 36 pages per week in the corresponding period in 2003, the drop to 20 to 24 pages 10 years later indicates a discernible loss of both advertising revenue and editorial space. There are likely several reasons for this loss, including the reduction of editorial staff (from one editor, three reporters, and several freelance writers and columnists in 2003 to one part-time reporter and one columnist in 2013), as well as cost-cutting initiatives in the administrative and production sectors. The loss of advertising is of course the main reason for this reduction,

**Connectedness and Reader Engagement:** While *The Chronicle* continues to publish West-Island-specific photos, news, features and opinion articles — accounting for 93 percent of all editorial content — diminishing editorial space has necessitated the reduction of not only the number of articles, but also the scope of each. The average news item now consists of just a few short paragraphs and a photo — a company policy that promotes a streamlined, visually dynamic graphic style. While faithfully remaining local in content, the brief editorial items are no longer designed to report the news in an in-depth manner — a handicap that evidently affects the paper's relationship with its readers.

*The Chronicle* published only one letter to the editor during the entire nine-week period of this study. This reinforces the appearance of a very low level of reader engagement, especially during an election campaign, when residents would logically be especially keen to express their views on the issues being raised by

candidates, and the local newspaper presents an ideal platform to do so. While most news organizations have strict guidelines governing what can and cannot be published during election campaigns, letters to the editor have traditionally served as one of several viable ways to gauge public opinion on the candidates, the parties, and their respective platforms. The fact that only one reader in such a large market thought to write a letter to *The Chronicle* during the nine-week study period points to a significant loss of reader engagement.

**Elections:** As mentioned in Chapter Two, TC Media, which owns *The Chronicle* and *The Westmount Examiner*, delivered a company-wide edict in April 2013 forbidding, among several other things, the coverage of politics in its newspapers. While this was ostensibly a move to reduce the probability of alienating or offending readers who might not agree with the politician(s) being covered, it was met with hostility by TC Media journalists and their union.<sup>58</sup>

Notwithstanding this formal policy, *The Chronicle* went ahead with extensive municipal election coverage, devoting several pages per week to candidates' campaigns throughout the West Island. In fact, the 23 October issue — the penultimate print edition before Election Day — proclaimed itself as a “Municipal Election 2013 Special Edition,” and devoted a total of nearly three full pages to election stories and brief profiles of the mayoral candidates running in West-Island municipalities. Prior to this, each week's *Chronicle* contained at least four

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<sup>58</sup> McHugh, 2013.

election-related articles, complete with interviews and photos of the candidates. These stories all adhered to the “relentlessly local” ideal; instead of devoting space to the big race in Montreal between the main mayoral candidates, which was being covered daily by broadcast media and the large dailies, *The Chronicle* focused its coverage on the mayoral candidates in the smaller municipalities and boroughs within its territory. Although tight space restrictions and TC Media policy governing graphic presentation meant that each article consisted of little more than a brief text (100 to 250 words) accompanied by a large photo, readers were presented with a comprehensive account of the candidates and their platforms.

**Economy:** As noted above, *The Chronicle* has reduced its page count over the past decade, with a corresponding reduction in editorial material, but it maintains an average advertising ratio of 70 percent — which is still relatively low for TC Media weeklies in Quebec, as many of them routinely publish an 80-20 ratio of advertising to editorial material. Because it operates as part of a major media chain, *The Chronicle* is not entirely dependent upon advertising revenue for its survival. Still, the companies that continue to advertise in its pages are virtually all local — based either on the West Island or in the adjacent off-island communities. This suggests that despite the reduced page count and corresponding reduction in editorial items, as well as a discernible drop-off in reader connectedness, *The Chronicle* still retains a considerable portion of the local West Island market.

## **The Westmount Examiner**

Issues: 9

Total Pages: 116

Pages (editorial): 51

Pages (advertising): 65

Percentage of advertising: 54%

Total editorial items: 104

Local items: 70 (67%)

Non-local items: 34

Westmount election items: 10

Letters to the editor: 0

**Observations:** *The Westmount Examiner* has lost a great deal of ground in its market. Ten years ago, in 2003, the paper published an average of 20 to 24 pages per week; during the period of this study, it published an average of 12 pages per week: a reduction of half. Instead of utilizing its little remaining editorial space to its fullest potential, *The Examiner* veers away from providing multiple items of local news and tends to fill large amounts of space — as much as three pages in each issue — with extended photo montages of soft news events such as a high school football game or the arrival of autumn.<sup>59</sup> While these types of items are standard fare in community newspapers, the disproportionately high amount of

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<sup>59</sup> Unsigned, “Selwyn House drops homecoming game,” *The Westmount Examiner*, 10 October 2013, 1-3; Unsigned, “Autumn has broken,” *The Westmount Examiner*, 17 October 2013, 1-3.



space devoted to them in a 12-page issue suggests the absence of reporting initiative or a restrictive lack of resources to cover the community in an effective manner. This suggests a strong correlation with the policies of chain ownership.

**Connectedness and Reader Engagement:** The fact that it is published remotely, from a central office in Dorval, is readily evident in the editorial content, almost one-third of which (33 percent) is not local and therefore does not appear to have any relevance to Westmount readers. Further evidence of its apparent disconnectedness from the local community is the fact that a weekly “filler” box inserted onto at least one page of each issue of *The Examiner* calls upon readers to submit their photos, opinion pieces and letters to the editor, but no material of this kind appeared during the nine-week study. While the letters section was once a vibrant, sometimes controversial part of the editorial page, often turning onto the op-ed page and beyond, there no longer appears to be any such discourse. During the period of this study, *The Examiner* published no letters, nor any other contributions from readers, with the possible exception of a press release from a local school that was reprinted with no discernible journalistic alterations to the text.<sup>60</sup> The fact that there exists no apparent dialogue with readers suggests that *The Examiner* has lost touch with its target audience, a result of its no longer attempting to provide detailed coverage of local news or publishing columns that voice opinions on local concerns. Moreover, the fact that *The Independent*

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<sup>60</sup> Unsigned, “Gryphon gala raises \$1.4 million,” *The Westmount Examiner*, 10 October 2013, 12-13.

regularly publishes an entire page worth of letters from within the same community further reinforces the assertion that readers have abandoned *The Examiner* as a viable means of voicing their opinions.

**Elections:** Municipal politics have traditionally presented a relatively easy beat for the *Examiner* reporter, as there is only one city hall to cover. As a result, the election campaign that played out during the period of this study offered *The Examiner* an opportunity to report the race in considerable detail. Much like *The Chronicle*, which was also subjected to the ban on political reporting by TC Media management, *The Examiner* carried on against company policy and covered the month-long campaign in a series of 10 articles, the majority of which were profiles of local city council candidates. With the exception of one issue published during the campaign period (24 October), in which no mention of the election was made, *The Examiner* kept up an otherwise steady, albeit general, series of reports on council candidates. The missed week was likely not the result of an editorial oversight: the same two employees provide the editorial content of *The Chronicle*, which published its special election edition that week.

**Economy:** The results of this study suggest that *The Examiner* would be on extremely weak financial ground if not for the fact that it has the protection of the TC Media chain to keep it alive. Its subordinate position in the local market is reflected in the amount of advertising it attracts, and in this case *The Examiner* has the lowest volume of advertising in the study — 54 percent on an average of 12

pages — and only two to three ads per issue were from Westmount businesses. This stands in stark contrast to the years immediately preceding the emergence of *The Independent*, when *The Examiner* was able to publish as much as 75 percent advertising on an average of 20-24 pages, and the vast majority of those ads came from local businesses. Further evidence of this loss of confidence in *The Examiner's* reach can be seen in the fact that throughout the municipal election campaign, all candidate advertisements were given to *The Independent*, as well as the City's voter information notices. No election ads appeared in *The Examiner* during the period of this study, despite the fact that the paper faithfully devoted a considerable amount of editorial space to candidate profiles.

### **The Suburban (City edition)**

Issues: 9

Total Pages: 436

Pages (editorial): 130

Pages (advertising): 306

Percentage of advertising: 70%

Total editorial items: 352

Local items: 330 (93%)

Non-local items: 22

Montreal election items: 46

Letters to the editor: 60

### **The Suburban (West Island edition)**

Issues: 9

Total Pages: 408

Pages (editorial): 123

Pages (advertising): 285

Percentage of advertising: 69%

Total editorial items: 321

Local items: 288 (89%)

Non-local items: 33

Montreal election items: 53

Letters to the editor: 60

**Observations:** With an average of between 40 and 48 pages per week — for a combined total of nearly 100 pages — the City and West Island editions of *The Suburban* included in this study represent by far the largest publications in size, circulation, and generated revenue. But while the scope of this operation would suggest a more relaxed attitude toward the “relentlessly local” nature of community journalism, the volume of local items in both publications underscores a strong commitment to delivering a substantial amount of news and opinion that local readers would not expect to read in their local city daily, *The Gazette*.

Although neither of the two editions of *The Suburban* in this study published the highest percentage of local items in their respective markets (the City edition scored 93 percent, behind *The Independent*'s 98 percent and *The Free Press*'s 96 percent, while the West Island edition's 89 percent ranked behind *The Chronicle*'s 93 percent) the lower numbers are due to the sharing of some material between the two newspapers. This is especially evident in the editorial and op-ed pages, which are reproduced verbatim in both editions, editorial cartoon included. As well, the West Island edition's arts section consists of a blend of both West-Island items and the Montreal-based entertainment reviews and features published in the City edition—a benefit to West Island readers, but non-local enough to bring down the percentage of local content.

Although the West-Island edition picks up an average of four news items from the City edition, it is only in cases where the subject has a tangible connection to the West-Island readership. For example, Pierre Albert Sevigny's front-page news report "Thousands march in secular rally against Marois charter" appeared in both editions with no alterations to the text, and although the event occurred within the boundaries of the City edition's coverage area, it was reproduced in the West-Island edition on the merit of its potential interest to all members of Greater

Montreal's English-speaking community, as well as members of the various ethnic communities who reside on the West Island.<sup>61</sup>

**Connectedness and Reader Engagement:** Although the two editions are substantially different in that they cover their respective communities as if they were separate entities, all opinion pieces are included in both, which increases by twice the potential readership for anyone who submits a letter to the editor or an op-ed piece that is selected for publication. As a result, there is a high level of reader engagement — so much so that *The Suburban* (both editions) published no less than 60 letters to the editor during this nine-week study. A substantial number of the concerns voiced by readers were of interest to residents of both communities and members of Quebec's English-speaking population, as they commented on issues raised by the paper's fiery editorial stand on provincial language legislation and the then Parti Québécois government's controversial Charter of Values proposal. Editor Beryl Wajzman's characteristically provocative columns are seen to create a healthy atmosphere for discourse on topics of interest to local residents and members of various other "communities" that comprise *The Suburban's* readership.

**Elections:** The many municipal election campaigns across the island of Montreal provided the two *Suburbans* with a vast area to cover. While each edition maintained a firm focus on the campaigns in their respective regions, they

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<sup>61</sup> P.A. Sevigny, "Thousands march in secular rally against Marois charter," *The Suburban* (City and West Island editions), 2 October 2013, 1.

did share a series in which the four main party leaders — the City of Montreal’s mayoral candidates — were interviewed in uniformly structured articles that were ostensibly of interest to readers in both regions due to the fact that the area is comprised of both Montreal boroughs and autonomous municipalities. While these articles were of a general nature and did not delve into local community issues to a significant extent, they did pay off financially by attracting a series of advertisements from each of the municipal parties that were booked to run throughout the month-long campaign.

The main drawback to *The Suburban*’s election coverage was that it had to focus almost exclusively on the various mayoral candidates in each borough and municipality, while the City edition’s main competitors — *The Independent*, *The Free Press* and *The Examiner* — each had a much smaller electoral landscape to cover and therefore had an opportunity to take their local reporting to a deeper level by running articles on city council candidates and their stands on neighbourhood-specific issues. While that exemplifies the value of community journalism, it would certainly have been an impossible task for *The Suburban* to accomplish, as it would have necessitated devoting a disproportionate amount of editorial space to the election, likely to the exclusion of other important news. Instead, the two editions of *The Suburban* opted to keep readers in each region informed on the latest developments in their district throughout the campaign by publishing articles that focused on the main candidates in a more general sense.

**Economy:** The high circulation numbers (145,000 copies over three editions) allow for *The Suburban* to charge the highest prices for advertising space, and both editions run the largest volume of advertising in this study — much more than their TC Media competitors when weekly page counts are considered. Given the fact that advertising ratio and number of pages published each week are considered to be the most basic indicator of financial health among publishers, the figures indicated in this study suggests that the two *Suburbans* are currently enjoying the highest level of financial health among the newspapers in their respective markets.

The distinction between the two editions is not only evident by their respective editorial content, but also by the volume of local advertising to be found in each; with only a few exceptions each week, advertising space in the City edition had been by bought by businesses based in the area of Côte St-Luc, Westmount, Hampstead, and NDG, while the West-Island edition's advertising came from businesses in Pointe Claire, Dorval and other municipalities in that area: two distinctly different sets of advertisers for the two different regions. This again supports Lauterer's theory that local editorial content attracts local advertising revenue.

## **The Eastern Door**

Issues: 9



Total Pages: 288  
Pages (editorial): 164  
Pages (advertising): 124  
Percentage of advertising: 45%  
Total editorial items: 420  
Local items: 328 (78%)  
Non-local items: 92  
Montreal election items: 0  
Letters to the editor: 11

**Observations:** *The Eastern Door* is a large newspaper covering a relatively small community. This is apparent from the high number of pages published each week. By comparison, the vast West-Island area and its population of 130,000 is covered by *The Chronicle* and *The Suburban's* West-Island edition, which print an average of 22 and 44 pages per week, respectively, while *The Eastern Door* publishes an average of 32 pages per week for the Kahnawake population of only 8,000 (with some peripheral distribution to Kanosatake and Chateauguay). This allows for a much higher than average volume of editorial space. This presents the opportunity for close coverage of the community, but also creates a need for generic or non-local material whenever the available editorial space exceeds the amount of local content on hand. This is a unique situation among the newspapers in this study. In most other cases the reverse is true: editorial space is at a premium and the necessary use of generic “filler” is relatively rare.

**Connectedness and Reader Engagement:** The small, tightly knit community of Kahnawake is by its very nature an ideal environment for a local newspaper to become entrenched in the daily lives of its readers. As the primary print medium, *The Eastern Door* serves as a significant platform for local opinion — borne out by the fact that at least one letter to the editor appeared in each issue throughout the study period, the subjects of which were consistently focused on or around the small local Mohawk community or on matters of concern to First Nations people in general. While ostensibly letters to the editor, and presented as such, several of these submissions were of considerable length and written in the op-ed style, which suggests an open, non-restrictive policy concerning opinion pieces, a quality that further encourages a healthy discourse among readers and reinforces the paper's strong engagement with the community.

**Elections:** No municipal elections were held in Kahnawake during the period of this study. As mentioned earlier, the Mohawk territory falls outside of the boundaries governed by the provincial municipality infrastructure; its leaders are selected through a process according to Mohawk tradition.

Still, close proximity to neighbouring municipalities where municipal election news items were prominent in local headlines — not to mention the big mayoralty race in Montreal, just across the river — did not tempt *The Eastern Door* to write about or otherwise mention any of the multiple campaigns in progress all around its own community. During the period of this study, no election stories were

published. Likewise, and for obvious reasons, there were no election-related ads taken out. *The Eastern Door* remained focused on its own community throughout the campaign, as if consciously adhering to John Sancton's policy of ignoring outside issues if they had no effect on local readers.

**Economy:** *The Eastern Door* is unique among the newspapers in this study as it is circulated through a paid distribution at \$2 per copy and therefore is not entirely dependent upon advertising revenue to survive. Although the cover price and print run of only 2,500 copies per week generate a maximum revenue of \$5,000 — assuming that all copies are sold, which is highly unlikely — two federal government grants subsidize the operation. This allows *The Eastern Door* to publish an average of 32 pages per week with a volume of advertising that is barely more than half that of the larger papers in this study. Moreover, the much lower circulation figures suggest that ads are sold at a significantly lower rate than those of the paper's larger neighbours.

While it would be possible to publish a quality newspaper for Kahnawake without the two government grants to support its operation, the resulting commodity would no doubt be only 12 or 16 pages per week, with a much higher editorial-advertising ratio. The injection of outside revenue allows *The Eastern Door* to offer its consumers a product that is not only substantial in local coverage but also uncluttered by a high volume of advertising — all of which is local,

consisting of ads taken out by small businesses and services either in Kahnawake or in the neighbouring region southwest of Montreal.

Thanks in part to government funding, *The Eastern Door* does not have to venture outside of the tightly knit community it covers in order to find news stories or solicit large businesses for advertising. However, the low volume of advertising in a 32-page newspaper means a higher volume of editorial space, which is expensive to fill. Even with one full-time reporter-photographer on staff to write the bulk of news and feature stories, *The Eastern Door* has more available editorial space than necessary to cover such a small community and therefore augments its local coverage with wire stories concerning the First Nations community in general, as well as generic space-fillers such as syndicated crossword puzzles, which it can publish for a nominal fee.

### **The Westmount Independent**

Issues: 9

Total Pages: 248

Pages (editorial): 104

Pages (advertising): 144

Percentage of advertising: 61%

Total editorial items: 338

Local items: 332 (98%)

Non-local items: 6

Westmount election items: 29

Letters to the editor: 35

**Observations:** *The Westmount Independent's* focus on one small community is virtually total. At a rate of 98 percent local items, it showed the highest percentage of local content of the seven papers in this study. This can be traced back to the John Sancton model of *The Westmount Examiner*, whereby all non-local material was rejected in favour of content directly related to the community. This has been accomplished by utilizing the smaller page size to its fullest potential, mainly by reducing the size of photos and filling all available space with Westmount material, from major news stories to the small, even trivial “broken arm” briefs that reflect the less obvious aspects of the community.

**Connectedness and Reader Engagement:** The commitment to almost exclusively local content has paid off for *The Independent* in terms of reader engagement: no less than 35 letters to the editor appeared over the nine issues in this study — an amount second only to *The Suburban*, but much higher per capita given the fact that *The Suburban's* letters came from readers throughout the vast West End and West Island region, while *The Independent's* letters came exclusively from within Westmount. All were either calling attention to a matter of concern within the geographical community or commenting on a previously published letter or article, which underscores the assertion that *The Independent* is

being widely read within the community and is considered the most effective means by which a resident can publicly voice his or her opinion.

**Elections:** *The Independent* is fortunate in the fact that it covers just one municipality — a closed political entity with one mayor and eight city councillors — which tends to make municipal election coverage a much more simple endeavour than *The Suburban*, *The Free Press* and *The Chronicle*, which cover multiple municipalities and boroughs. *The Independent* and *The Examiner* cover only Westmount, which presents an opportunity to offer readers a more detailed account of the process that extends beyond the mayoral race to include competition for city council seats, all framed by the candidates' stand on issues that are often unique to the community. In this area *The Independent* excelled, publishing 29 election items over the nine-week study period.

From important voter information articles alerting readers to the steps required for proper registration to a uniform series of interviews designed to introduce readers to local candidates running for city council (the mayor was acclaimed following the candidate registration deadline), *The Independent* kept readers informed of the campaign in a chronological manner, reporting each new candidate as they announced themselves. By maintaining daily contact with the City Clerk's office, the editorial staff was able to keep up with the latest developments and pass them on to readers. This gave *The Independent* a distinct advantage over *The Examiner*, which was unable to provide detailed coverage. An

excellent example of this can be seen in the case of Andrei Jones, a first-time candidate who announced that he was challenging an incumbent councillor, then changed his mind, but the following week was back in the race!<sup>62</sup> These three developments were duly reported in *The Independent*, while *The Examiner* missed the story altogether; its readers in that district were left completely uninformed of the back-and-forth nature of the race between their local candidates. In all, *The Independent* maintained a much closer relationship with the candidates throughout the campaign and this paid off financially for the paper, as all election-related advertising appeared in *The Independent*, none in *The Examiner*.

**Economy:** The findings of this study reinforce the assertion that *The Independent* now dominates the Westmount market. With nearly 100 percent local advertising, it has taken the lion's share of business away from its erstwhile competitor, *The Examiner*, which, as stated earlier, published only between two and three local ads per week during this study. Although it maintains an average of 28 pages per week, *The Independent* keeps a low advertising ratio of 61 percent, which suggests it has the financial health to devote a much higher amount of space to local editorial items, a strategy that has paid off in reader loyalty and by extension the support of the local business community.

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<sup>62</sup> Laureen Sweeney, "Jones changes mind, stays in against Samiotis," *The Westmount Independent*, 22 October 2013, 3.

## **The Free Press**

Issues: 4

Total Pages: 96

Pages (editorial): 42

Pages (advertising): 54

Percentage of advertising: 56%

Total editorial items: 124

Local items: 120 (96%)

Non-local items: 4

Montreal election items: 31

Letters to the editor: 13

**Observations:** Although it is not published weekly, as are the other papers in this study, *The Free Press* covers the NDG-Hampstead-Côte St-Luc communities in a thorough manner. Using the same approach as its sister paper *The Independent*, it makes full use of its smaller page format by avoiding common practices such as adding generic “filler” stories to its coverage and increasing the size of photographs in order to fill space. Instead, most photographs are restricted to reasonably modest dimensions and articles are kept short and concise, allowing for the placement of the maximum number of items per page without the loss of aesthetic value.



**Connectedness and Reader Engagement:** In terms of content, *The Free Press* exemplifies Lauterer’s assertion of being “relentlessly local” by maintaining the focus on news and features from within its geographical boundaries. Of the 124 editorial items that appeared in its October and November 2013 issues, only four were geared toward a general readership and not specifically tied to the NDG-Hampstead-Côte St-Luc communities in any way. Among these non-local items were an editorial reminding readers of the importance of Breast Cancer Awareness Month and a general health column on celiac disease — both expounding on important issues, of course, but perfectly suitable to run in a national publication without any revisions.

Coverage of a much larger issue — the Quebec government’s proposed Charter of Values — was included in the 12 November issue. While this could have been considered local through the criteria of Anderson’s theory of extended communities, as the paper’s circulation area includes considerable portions of Montreal’s ethnic population, *The Free Press* removed any doubt of this being a local story by framing it around a recent article condemning the Charter, written by the local Member of Parliament, Irwin Cotler.<sup>63</sup>

The Free Press’s connection to readers is reflected in the number of letters to the editor printed in each issue; in this case a total of 13 letters were published over four issues in October and November. All of these letters were from local

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<sup>63</sup> Isaac Olson, “Cotler condemns the PQ’s charter of values,” *The Free Press*, 12 November 2013, 21.

residents and were prompted by a news or opinion item in a previous issue. As it is the policy of *The Free Press* to publish all the letters it receives — as long as space allows, and with the obvious exception of those deemed inappropriate or redundant — the fact that each issue carried several letters suggests that the paper is not only being read but that the stories it covers are considered important enough to merit comment from members of the community, and they in turn are supporting the paper’s “connectedness” by allowing to serve in part as a public forum within the community.

**Elections:** *The Free Press* took full advantage of its relatively small area of coverage by taking a more detailed and focused approach to the municipal election campaign and subsequent election coverage, publishing 31 election-related items in just three issues. Although its publishing schedule made redundant any attempt to provide conventional election-night coverage (the next issue appeared nine days after the election), the eight election-related items in the 12 November issue focused on the winners and the more hotly contested ridings within the paper’s area of coverage.

While its main competitor in the NDG-Hampstead-Côte St-Luc area, *The Suburban*, restricted much of its local election coverage to the mayoral candidates, *The Free Press* took a much more grassroots approach, providing readers with profiles of local city council candidates and the issues faced by the community, rather than following the more high-profile campaigns of the main mayoral

candidate, which was the primary focus of the mainstream media. Through headlines such as “Johnson concerned about Turcot interchange overhaul”<sup>64</sup> and “Samuel Spiegelman wants to keep Hampsteaders safe,”<sup>65</sup> *The Free Press* introduced readers to the candidates by firmly connecting them to their respective platforms.

The strategy of providing up-close, detailed coverage of the municipal election campaign paid off for *The Free Press* in advertising revenue, as it published two quarter-page ads for Projet Montréal (approximately \$400 each), two half-page ads each for Groupe Mélanie Jolie and Équipe Denis Coderre (approximately \$700 each), and one half-page ad for Coalition Montréal — each of which emphasised the local angle of the campaign through images of the city council candidates with the party leader.

**Economy:** The advantage of belonging to a smaller, family-owned publisher is made evident by *The Free Press*'s ability to devote a relatively large amount of space to editorial content without the company-enforced restrictions placed on chain-owned newspapers. It does, however, have its drawbacks in that the four issues published during this study period consisted of a total of 96 pages at an average of 56 percent advertising per issue, well below the average percentage, and thus well below the amount of generated revenue of its much larger main

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<sup>64</sup> Isaac Olson, “Johnson concerned about Turcot interchange overhaul,” *The Free Press*, 22 October 2013, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Isaac Olson, “Samuel Speigelman wants to keep Hampsteaders safe,” *The Free Press*, 22 October 2013, 22.

competitor, *The Suburban*'s City edition, which published more than four times the number of pages during the same period, with an average total advertisement ratio of 70 percent.

As the perceived heir apparent to the now-defunct *Monitor*, *The Free Press*'s low advertising percentage suggests that it is experiencing similar difficulties in attracting ads from local businesses in Montreal's West-End community. While *The Monitor* was part of the TC Media chain and could rely upon shared revenue from its many sister papers — both English- and French-language weeklies — to help keep it afloat, Sherbrooke-Valois Ltd.-owned *Free Press* has only the financial support of *The Westmount Independent*.

## **Summary**

This study has found that Jock Lauterer's call for the need to be "relentlessly local" is of primary importance to community newspapers, and is in fact being reflected by all seven of the publications whose content was analysed. The degree of "connectedness" with readers, a direct result of local engagement, is also quite healthy in most cases. As this study shows, most of the papers are devoted to covering their local community first and as extensively as their respective economic situation allows. Most have succeeded in creating and maintaining an ongoing discourse with readers within their pages — a fact not lost on local

businesses, who continue to invest their advertising dollars in these publications, knowing that readers' eyes are returning to those pages each week.

This is especially evident in the cases of *The Suburban's* City and West-Island editions and *The Westmount Independent*, which not only provide readers with a very high percentage of local stories each week (93 percent, 89 percent, and 98 percent, respectively) but also attract and publish a high number of letters to the editor each week (60 in *The Suburban*, 35 in *The Independent* during the nine-week study period). This indicates a strong connection with readers and the community itself. These three papers are among the four that attracted the highest volume of advertising, which allows them to continue to grow and flourish.<sup>66</sup>

Also highly engaged in their respective communities are *The Free Press* and *The Eastern Door*, both of which provide readers with a strong local focus. But while *The Free Press* devotes its editorial space almost entirely to community stories (96 percent) and publishes a fair number of letters from readers (13 over four issues), it continues to struggle for a firm foothold in its market. Its relatively low advertising ratio (56 percent) suggests that Lauterer's "relentlessly local" blueprint for financial health through advertising is not entirely guaranteed unless the local market itself is healthy enough to support a weekly newspaper; *The Free Press* adheres to the same criteria as the healthiest papers in this study, but has yet

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<sup>66</sup> *The Independent* ranked fourth, with an average of 61 percent advertising each week, behind *The Chronicle* and *The Suburban* City edition with 70 percent each, and *The Suburban* West-Island edition at 69 percent.

to garner sufficient interest from local advertisers to become a weekly publication. On the other hand, *The Eastern Door* publishes what could be considered an excessive number of pages each week in its coverage of a small community. While “relentlessly local” in its coverage of Kahnawake and, by extension, the Mohawk and First Nations communities in general, its low advertising ratio (45 percent) and high average of 32 weekly pages often requires the addition of “non-local” material not directly related to Kahnawake residents in order to fill the extra space. Like *The Free Press*, *The Eastern Door* finds itself in a local market that cannot support a large weekly newspaper — but it continues to thrive thanks to additional revenue provided by two substantial federal government grants.

Significantly, the two newspapers with both the longest histories and strongest financial backing thanks to their ownership by a large media chain — *The Chronicle* and *The Westmount Examiner* — have exhibited the weakest links to their respective communities — with what appear to be alarming financial consequences for one of them. While both papers ostensibly focus their editorial attention on local stories, hence an effort to remain “connected,” this study finds that their engagement with local readers is virtually non-existent. *The Chronicle* fared better in this study, publishing a total of 200 pages over nine weeks at 70 percent advertising, while *The Examiner* produced only 116 pages during the same period at 54 percent advertising — the lowest page count and advertising volume of all the publications in this study. Moreover, *The Examiner* not only published

no letters to the editor during the nine-week study period, but total local advertising consisted of an average of only two to three Westmount ads per week. The rest were non-local, and several were in French-only — obviously supplied by the largely francophone TC Media. The absence of local ads and letters from readers suggests an almost complete disengagement from the community: few people are reading it, and as a result, few businesses are interested in buying advertising space in it.

Of all the newspapers in this study, *The Westmount Examiner* was not only the least “local” and least “connected” to both readers and advertisers, but its consistently low advertising volume suggests that the paper is running at a considerable loss each week — not only floundering, but in imminent danger of closing altogether.

## **Chapter Four: The Westmount Battle: Broken Arms and Broken Ties**

As editor-in-chief of *The Examiner* from 2000 to 2012, I was responsible for the entire editorial side of the paper. This entailed assigning news and feature stories to a stable of freelance reporters and columnists, as well as editing all copy and, on occasion, coming up with a local idea for the editorial cartoonist, who did not live in the community but was required to provide a Westmount-themed cartoon each week. I was also responsible for laying out the paper on production day, which allowed me the freedom to extend deadlines at my own discretion in order to accommodate late-breaking news stories. Above all, I was required to establish and maintain a close relationship with both newsmakers and readers. I attended nearly all of the monthly city council meetings and related events at Westmount city hall, where much of the latest news was generated. Having been introduced to community journalism several years earlier during an internship at *The Examiner* under John Sancton, I came to the *Examiner* job with a keen understanding of the paper's central role in the community and had Mr. Sancton's philosophy firmly in mind when I established connections with not only the obvious sources such as the mayor and city councillors, but also a wide variety of local players such as members of the many Westmount clubs and organizations, the local police and public security officers, and support staff at the various municipal buildings and departments. The most important contacts were the local activists — a loose, informal network of residents who took an avid interest in



their community and could be counted upon to attend most public meetings. They belonged to the local organizations such as the Westmount Municipal Association and the Westmount Historical Association, coached youth sports teams, and volunteered at the municipal library; this group of involved citizens covered the entire community and had a keen knack for knowing what was going on. They were valued sources who could be counted upon to alert *The Examiner* of any potential news stories. Without their eyes and ears in the community, the paper could not have functioned as well as it did. As a result, for several years *The Examiner* under my editorship enjoyed a healthy relationship with the Westmount community. But that was not to last.

What follows is a micro-case study of the situation in Westmount, whereby a chain-owned weekly with a long history and strong roots in the community allowed itself to be displaced from its dominant position in the market by a privately owned start-up paper. The results of this case study support the central argument of this thesis that the provision of local content and active engagement in the community are key to attracting a strong stream of advertising revenue and thus the advantage in a competition within a limited market. As well, the ostensible benefits of chain ownership are advantageous only if and when the corporate structure allows for the continued investment of operational resources in the community. As editor-in-chief of *The Examiner* during this period, I was not only privy to several policy discussions regarding the competition, but also an

active participant in some of the events described in this chapter. As a result, this chapter is informed by both first-hand accounts of key events and published sources.

### ***A bitter Experience***

*The Westmount Examiner* had enjoyed what was virtually a competition-free existence in the lucrative Westmount market since its inception in 1935. Even through the 1950s to 1980s, when John Sancton’s “broken arms” complemented the coverage of news, from city hall to the neighbourhood swimming pool and hockey arena, the “relentlessly local” family-owned weekly claimed a monopoly in the small but thriving market. As the newspaper of record, it remained unchallenged until early in 1994, when, in an unusual twist of circumstances, *The Examiner* faced its first formidable competitor — the Sancton family itself.

The foundation for this unlikely scenario had been laid five years earlier in 1989, when the 69-year-old patriarch John Sancton sold *The Examiner* to Publications Dumont and announced his retirement. Under the terms of the sale agreement, Sancton’s son Don was to stay on as editor-in-chief for an initial period of five years, a condition that would help in the paper’s transition from family ownership to part of a large media chain that had no substantial connection to the local community. With the sales and editorial staff remaining on board

throughout the transition, *The Examiner* carried on much as it had before the sale, in fact there were no outwardly discernible differences between the Sancton paper and the new Dumont product, with the possible exception of a small Dumont logo in the masthead. In 1994, when Don Sancton's contract as editor expired, he announced that he was leaving *The Examiner* and would be starting a rival paper, *The Westmount Experience*. Moreover, the entire *Examiner* staff — with the exception of two advertising salesmen, David Seltzer and Harvey Aisenthal — would be joining Sancton at the new paper, ostensibly to carry on *The Examiner* tradition back within the structure and environment of a family-owned newspaper. The business strategy appeared sound, for the fledgling *Experience* could boast of a seasoned editorial staff that already knew the community well and would simply continue working just as they had at *The Examiner*, while the sales staff that followed Sancton would simply bring their existing clients over to *The Experience*. Moreover, *The Examiner* would be forced to hire new journalists, sales staff, and administrators, none of whom were likely to know the local community as intimately as their rivals.

The competition proved volatile. Unhappy with the new situation at *The Examiner*, Seltzer and Aisenthal soon yielded to Don Sancton's repeated invitations to join their former colleagues at *The Experience*, which by now was putting out a second publication, *The Downtown Experience*. But no sooner had Seltzer and Aisenthal crossed over to the new papers than *The Examiner* launched

a court injunction that sought to prevent them from soliciting their Westmount clients for *The Experience* papers for a period of six months. This rendered them virtually useless to *The Experience*, and both eventually left the paper — Seltzer going to *The Chronicle* and Aisenthal returning to *The Examiner*. It would prove to be a fortuitous decision for both of them, as they would remain at those respective papers for the next 20 years while *The Westmount Experience*, weighed down financially by the unsuccessful *Downtown Experience*, was forced to close after just nine months.

The lesson appeared to be quite clear: *The Examiner*'s name and brand, maintaining its momentum from the John Sancton era, continued to attract advertisers in greater numbers and remained the most reliable player in the local market, even when challenged by *The Experience*, which consisted of knowledgeable former *Examiner* employees — moreover headed by a member of the Sancton family — and published what was arguably a superior community-based newspaper compared to the chain-owned *Examiner* with its novice staff.

### **Freedom within the chain**

For the next 12 years, *The Examiner* continued to enjoy its re-established monopoly of the Westmount market, publishing an average of 20 to 24 pages per week at a steady profit. When it was sold into the Transcontinental chain (now TC Media) in 1996, the new owners were honest and clear in their intentions: they

were interested in generating revenue, not journalism. I was informed of this policy when I was initially hired as a reporter at *The Examiner* in 1998: then-publisher Peter Yakimchuk would often jokingly reiterate his bosses' sentiments by quoting them as saying, "We don't care about any of that journalism stuff." This was borne out by the fact that sales representatives were routinely called out of the office to attend seminars and other company-sponsored events geared to motivating employees, while journalists were rarely invited. As a result, the editors of *The Examiner* and the other English-language weeklies included in the acquisition — *The Chronicle* and *The Monitor* — were permitted to function at arm's length from head office, covering their respective communities with minimal editorial interference by the owners. On occasion we would be asked to insert a small photo and outline announcing the appointment of a new high-ranking executive in the Transcontinental hierarchy, but its placement in the paper was at the editor's discretion; even if it appeared at the bottom of a page well inside the paper, the owners and management were content. The benefits of working within a chain structure were also readily apparent to the sales staff, whose commissions rose once they were able to sell advertising space into three newspapers at once to clients who were willing to pay more for the added exposure.

From 1996 to early 2007, *The Examiner* remained one of the more profitable weeklies in Transcontinental's ever-growing chain, and was twice recognized as

the third-best newspaper in its general size category (0 to 24 pages) at Transcontinental's annual Folio awards gala in 2004 and 2005, respectively. It enjoyed a high degree of autonomy whereby sales staff were free to offer special deals to entice first-time advertisers; they also had tacit permission to haggle with those clients who balked at the established rate-card prices.

It had one major problem: distribution. Several times per week, *The Examiner* office would receive a phone call from a reader complaining that they had not received that week's paper. The root of the problem, they found, was Westmount itself. As its name suggests, the upper half of the community was built against the western slope of Mount Royal, which means many streets are set on steep hills that present daunting challenges for a carrier pushing a supermarket carriage loaded with newspapers and plastic bags containing Transcontinental's weekly PubliSac flyer package. One outraged caller claimed to have seen a carrier arrive at the foot of a steep street, look up the hill, then shake his head and simply push his carriage to the next corner. As a result, that entire street would not receive an *Examiner* that week — a loss of approximately 60 to 100 readers.

Another distribution obstacle unique to wealthy neighbourhoods such as Westmount are the "no flyers" stickers affixed to many local mailboxes, the idea being that the residents were ostensibly wealthy enough that they did not care about saving a few cents on items at the local supermarket, and so flyers were simply a messy nuisance they could do without. This presented a special problem

for those who wanted *The Examiner* but not the flyers — but the two were distributed together, and all Transcontinental carriers across Montreal were warned to avoid any home bearing the distinctive “no flyers” sticker. Although PubliSac management was informed of the problem in Westmount and subsequently issued a directive to carriers to leave just an *Examiner* at homes bearing the stickers, this did little to solve the problem. First, the high turnover of carriers meant that within a few weeks most new carriers were unaware of the Westmount exception to the “no flyers” rule with regard to the newspaper and continued to avoid those mailboxes altogether. Second, a City of Westmount bylaw governing beautification stipulated that all mail, newspapers, flyers, etc. should be inserted fully into each mailbox so as not to be visible from the street. This bylaw was strictly enforced by the City’s Public Security officers, who were ready to fine the individual carriers personally — not PubliSac — for any infractions, which naturally led to carriers steadfastly avoiding any mailbox that appeared too small to fully accommodate a tabloid-format newspaper without their having to waste time by folding it twice.

The distribution problem would never be resolved; switching to a private contractor was vehemently opposed by Transcontinental management because distribution was an in-house operation, carried out by the PubliSac division of the company. Paying an outside firm for a service already provided within the company appeared absurd on paper, but for those of us working at *The Westmount*

*Examiner* — especially sales staff, who were often placed in the awkward position of trying to explain to clients why so many residents were not receiving the paper, and of course not seeing the ads those clients had paid for — it seemed to be the only logical solution. Harvey Aisenthal, who had been with *The Examiner* since 1983, pointed out during a June 2006 meeting with regional management that the Sancton-era *Examiner* had reached readers via Canada Post, which had proven much more reliable than the current in-house system.

Subsequently, Aisenthal and publisher Debbie Dore would keep copies of the latest issue in the back seat of their cars and routinely spent part of each Thursday and Friday driving around Westmount to personally deliver copies of the paper to advertisers and many of those readers who had complained of chronic non-delivery. This was a blatant infraction of the chain's strict division-of-labour policies, but was deemed necessary to maintain close ties with the community and partially compensate for the lapses in what was acknowledged to be a deeply flawed service — proven to be an efficient and reliable delivery system in other communities, but unable to adapt to Westmount's physical and social particularities.

Despite a clear handicap in the distribution sector, a company-enforced policy that raised the advertising-editorial ratio to 75-25 meant that *The Examiner* continued to enjoy a healthy bottom line and a prominent place in the Westmount community, as well as having all the advantages of being part of a large chain that



few family-owned newspapers could, or were willing, to offer: employees not only had a certain degree of job security and could rely upon receiving a regular paycheque, not to mention benefits such as group health and dental plans. Editorial employees were unionized, which meant they were not obliged to take photographs or write advertising copy (an issue of some importance at papers such as *The Examiner*, which ran numerous “advertorials,” or advertising features paid for by the client and published as part of special promotional sections).

Transcontinental also promoted a high level of camaraderie among its employees, organizing morale-boosting events such as the Folios Awards, a company-wide competition whereby the top-earning newspapers were honoured and the most successful sales representatives were feted at an annual awards gala. Though distinctly marginalized in comparison to the bottom-line-oriented flavour of the event, a brief section honouring the best editorial contributions was included.

### **The chain tightens**

The days of editorial and administrative freedom came to an abrupt end one day in late January 2007, when TC Media regional director Louis Mercier turned up at *The Examiner* office along with publisher Sylviane Lussier and news director Matthieu Robert-Perron, the three main executives responsible for the chain’s French-language weeklies in Montreal’s Sud-Ouest sector. Having been informed of their arrival, I met them in the office lobby and noticed that they each carried a

stack of folded cardboard boxes, which they discreetly left by the door. Mercier called *The Examiner* and *West End Chronicle* employees together and announced that the company's media structure was changing and the boundaries of the Montreal regions had been reorganized along geographical lines, not linguistic. This meant that *The Examiner* and *The West End Chronicle* were no longer a part of the West Island region, where they had been aligned with *The Chronicle*. Now we would be part of Montreal's Sud-Ouest region, which was headquartered at a central office in Ville LaSalle. Then, producing the boxes, Mercier announced that *The Examiner* and *The West End Chronicle* would be packing up and moving to the LaSalle office immediately, where they would join the five French-language weeklies under one roof. The Westmount office would be closed.

Moreover, Mercier said, the role of publisher would now be centralized, with Lussier serving as publisher for all papers in the Sud-Ouest region. This meant she would be replacing *Examiner* publisher Debbie Dore, who would be given a relatively minor administrative role at the LaSalle office. On the editorial side, Robert-Perron would be assuming a hands-on role as news director, overseeing and approving all news, feature, and opinion content before it could be published. When Mercier invited him to speak, Robert-Perron began by apologizing for the fact that he could not speak English, but he was quick to point out that he had worked extensively with publications such as *Vox Populaire*, the TC Media weekly in neighbouring St. Henri, and he was eager to bring that experience to a

similar community like Westmount. This prompted an angry interjection from one of the sales representatives, who informed Robert-Perron that Westmount, one of the wealthiest communities in Canada, had very little in common with working-class St. Henri, generally acknowledged to be among the most impoverished communities in Montreal. Still, Robert-Perron insisted that aside from the language difference, the two markets were virtually the same — in fact they even bordered each other, he said.

At the end of the meeting, Mercier asked the staff whether they believed the move might have an adverse effect on *The Examiner's* operations. In terms of editorial needs, technology allowed for remote coverage; in fact, most *Examiner* contributors rarely appeared in the office and were easily able to file their texts and photos via email. Whether the material was edited and layout composed in Westmount or LaSalle made no difference to the final product — which was in fact printed in east-end Ville d'Anjou — as long as the contributors themselves were physically in Westmount, attending meetings and other community events just as they had been all along. This, Mercier agreed, would not be a problem, but he expressed concern that residents, community leaders, and, most importantly, advertisers, might react negatively, perceiving the move as *The Examiner* abandoning its community rather than an efficient cost-cutting initiative.

As editor of *The Examiner*, I phoned then-mayor Karin Marks and several other Westmount community leaders to inform them of the move, believing it best

they heard the news from me rather than read a management-generated notice in the next issue of *The Examiner*. Most were reassured when I told them it was simply a physical move and that nothing about *The Examiner* and its coverage of Westmount would change. However, when I broke the news to former mayor May Cutler, who had retained a high profile as a community activist in the years since leaving public office, she reacted with outright hostility. “We have to do something about this,” she told me, adding that an acquaintance of hers, a young local businessman named David Price, had lately been making enquiries in the community to determine whether Westmount could support a second community newspaper.<sup>67</sup>

Over the next few days, an exasperated Cutler phoned me several times, urging me to join Price in his proposed new venture, but I repeatedly declined. If the *Westmount Experience*, with its experienced staff and close Sancton family connections, could not survive against the chain-owned *Examiner*, I had no reason to believe another new publication would fare any better. My decision to stay with *The Examiner* was also tempered by the fact that my salary and employee benefits would be significantly reduced at the new paper, if indeed the latter was offered at all. As I would find out later, Price would not offer his editor a regular salary, but rather a flat rate of \$30 per published page — a gross revenue of only \$360 per 12-page issue, which at first appeared every second week. This, along with the

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<sup>67</sup> Price declined to be interviewed for this thesis, citing issues of confidentiality. All information pertaining to *The Independent* has therefore been derived entirely from the published record.

inherent benefits and job security at Transcontinental, clinched my decision to avoid Price's new enterprise, despite the urgings of the former mayor and several other community leaders.

Events moved swiftly once *The Examiner's* move was announced. As editor, I was invited to speak at the next public meeting of the Westmount Municipal Association, ostensibly to quell some of the rumours and hearsay that had been spreading through the community over the past few days. As I wrote in the next issue of *The Examiner*, the move should not have had any effect on the editorial content of the paper:

The office may have been moved out of Westmount, but *The Examiner* will stay the same. That was the message I had for members of the Westmount Municipal Association on Tuesday. I had been invited to clear up the flurries of hearsay and rumour that have been floating around Westmount since last Wednesday, when *The Examiner* and *West End Chronicle* staff was informed that we would be moving out of our Victoria Avenue office and relocated to a much larger space in LaSalle. As word spread through Westmount, it was generally feared that *The Examiner* was abandoning the community. This is completely wrong. We have simply moved our office to a new location just 15 minutes away. As editor, I have no intention of changing any aspect of the

editorial content and remain firmly committed to keeping up the long-cherished tradition of excellence and 100 percent Westmount content that *The Examiner* has always maintained.<sup>68</sup>

Some of the drama that unfolded at that Westmount Municipal Association meeting was not reported. Several *Examiner* employees attended, including the new publisher, Lussier, who also hoped to win over any remaining doubters. After the meeting, as residents and Municipal Association members were mingling over coffee, Lussier spotted Cutler and headed straight for her. Smiling and extending her hand, Lussier greeted Cutler by saying she was pleased to finally meet her. Cutler reacted by smacking Lussier's hand away and shouting, "Don't lie to me! You're not pleased to meet me at all! You want me to go away — but I won't!" A stunned Lussier retreated and went back to report the incident to Mercier in LaSalle. At a later meeting with *Examiner* staff, Lussier admitted that she had never encountered such passion over a community newspaper; until then, all of her dealings with readers and clients had been entirely cordial. She had never encountered a community so attached to its local paper, she said, citing the fact that aside from the *Messenger LaSalle*, all of the other papers now at the LaSalle office had moved out of their respective communities without a word of protest from readers. Former mayor Cutler's brutal honesty had struck a chord, albeit an unpleasant one, prompting Lussier and Mercier to look into the possibility of

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<sup>68</sup> Wayne Larsen, "New Digs, Same Values," editorial, *The Westmount Examiner*, 8 Feb, 2007: 6.

returning *The Examiner* to its Westmount office, for which TC Media still held a valid lease. The decision was clinched in early March, after Mayor Marks wrote to Transcontinental CEO Remi Marcoux to complain of the situation. Soon after, Louis Mercier met with Westmount city officials and was informed that his initial fear had been realized — Price intended to go ahead with his plans to start a new local paper since *The Examiner* had, for all intents and purposes, left town.

When Mercier announced the return of *The Examiner* to Westmount in the last week of March 2007, he pointed out that his reasons were two-fold: to appease the readers who had protested the move, and, more importantly, to prevent the perceived need for a rival newspaper to open up and challenge *The Examiner*'s monopoly in the Westmount market. Neither tactic would prove effective, and on 16 May 2007 — just six weeks after *The Examiner*'s return to its local office — *The Westmount Independent* appeared in every residential mailbox in the city, every apartment building lobby, and in many stores and municipal buildings throughout the community. From the outset, the small newcomer took a hard stand against its competitor, the inaugural issue clearly announcing its arrival as a fresh new voice for the community. In addition to a one-quarter page box containing well-wishes from former mayors, city councillors, and nearly 70 Westmount residents, the editorial, under the headline “Independence Day,” attacked *The Examiner* by pointing out some of the drawbacks of chain ownership:

We are not part of an impersonal, unresponsive megacorp. *The Independent* is published by a single, hands-on entrepreneur ... Companies run by professional managers will always have trouble being as interesting as ones run by owners. This dictum applies as much to restaurants and computer companies as to newspapers. Employees will always tend to play it safe, to fall into a routine, to be dull.”<sup>69</sup>

The attack on TC Media was continued on the same page by former mayor Cutler, who could not resist the opportunity to recount her fight for *The Examiner*'s return from LaSalle. In an op-ed piece titled “The bigger they get, the less service they give,” she wrote:

Transcontinental Inc. is one of the biggest printing-publishing companies in North America. But three months ago, it abruptly moved the editorial office of one of its smallest newspapers, *The Westmount Examiner*, out of Westmount to a central office in LaSalle. I screamed. As the former mayor, I feel protective of my city. *The Examiner* has been edited here for more than 70 years and been a place where we could drop in just as we do the library. I wish I could say it was all the protests, including that by our current mayor, that caused an abrupt return of the office here, but more

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<sup>69</sup> David Price, “Independence Day,” *The Westmount Independent*, 16 May 2007, 4.



likely it was their discovery that another Westmount paper (this one) was starting up.<sup>70</sup>

This auspicious debut had yet another unpleasant surprise for the sales staff of *The Examiner*, as well as its parent company: page seven of the inaugural *Independent* was devoted to “The Westmount Page,” a bright, graphically dynamic full-page ad that announced upcoming municipal events and services, as well as brief messages from City Hall. This had been developed eight years earlier from a concept by then-*Examiner* publisher Leo Gervais, who not only sold the City of Westmount on the idea but had also arranged for Transcontinental graphic designers to create the original template for the ad. “The Westmount Page” had been a twice-monthly advertising feature in *The Examiner* ever since, and while the City of Westmount had not cancelled the ad in *The Examiner*, it was clear to sales staff that there was going to be much competition for the City’s advertising dollars which, altogether, generated a major stream of revenue second only to the real estate ads.

From the outset, *The Independent* had several distinct advantages over *The Examiner*. Fully aware of his competitor’s distribution problems, Price looked to the old Sancton model and made arrangements to have his product delivered to every home in Westmount by Canada Post, a much more reliable service than *The Examiner*’s in-house PubliSac distributors. Because of this he was obliged to

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<sup>70</sup> May Cutler, “The bigger they get, the less service they give,” *The Westmount Independent*, 16 May 2007, 4.

reduce the paper's size from the standard tabloid format to a nearly square 11" x 11.5".

Once guaranteed superior distribution, *The Independent* proceeded with the freedom afforded the family-owned newspaper, unfettered by the rigid company constraints imposed upon *The Examiner* which, although ostensibly back in its Westmount office, was losing its editorial autonomy by increments. One especially irksome decision saw Robert-Perron reduce *The Examiner's* editorial budget so that writers would receive \$20 per article and photographers a mere \$16 per published photo while, across the street, *The Independent* hired on several experienced freelance writers and paid them \$50 per article. This prompted the immediate defection of three established *Examiner* freelancers to *The Independent*. Over the next three years, TC Media management would order the elimination of long-standing *Examiner* columns, including contributions by The Westmount Historical Association, The Westmount Municipal Association, federal Member of Parliament Marc Garneau and provincial Member of the National Assembly Jacques Chagnon, all considered valuable editorial material despite being free content. Once dropped from *The Examiner*, these contributors moved to *The Independent* with little coercion.

One of the first targets on TC Media's elimination list was popular musical comedian (and local resident) George Bowser, whose bi-weekly humour column cost the company approximately \$240 per month. Despite garnering much

attention among readers, as seen in the number of letters to the editor received in response to Bowser's comic musings on Westmount life, it was deemed too expensive to maintain. As a result, Bowser moved to *The Independent*, where he was immediately welcomed.<sup>71</sup>

The elimination of freelance contributors was not restricted to writers. Ferg Gadzala, the editorial cartoonist who had been taking humorous jabs at Westmount issues since the early 1990s, had his \$35 per week panel cut from the budget in 2011. He was immediately replaced by Pascal Elie, whose syndicated cartoon was already running in many of TC Media's French-language weeklies. All Elie had to do was translate the text of his cartoon to English before sending it to *The Examiner*. Elie's subjects were always geared towards the widest possible readership, his targets consisting mainly of global events, federal and provincial politics, and Montreal city hall. This elimination of Westmount-specific material in favour of the generic saved TC Media less than \$150 per month although it was argued at one point by Robert-Perron's successor, Marc Lalonde, that Elie's cartoon was technically local whenever he caricatured then-Premier Jean Charest, who happened to be a Westmount resident.

By late 2011, the only freelance contributor remaining at *The Examiner* was Andy Dodge, a local real estate expert who had been writing about the buying and

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<sup>71</sup> West-Island resident Rick Blue, Bowser's partner in the popular musical comedy duo Bowser & Blue, also contributed a humour column to his local paper, *The Chronicle*. TC Media would subsequently cut Blue's column as well.

selling of Westmount homes in *The Examiner* for nearly 40 years. TC Media recognized Dodge's value to the paper, as local real estate agents would routinely pay a premium for placement of their ad adjacent to Dodge's column or his monthly listing of local real estate transactions, an extremely popular and controversial feature that published not only the addresses of recent sales but the names of buyers and sellers, as well as the prices and most recent valuation.

Although the division of labour is a considered a primary cost-cutting advantage of chain ownership, the unique situation of *The Examiner* — as the sole English-language publication based in a centralized office comprised of French-language newspapers and a predominantly francophone staff — bore unforeseen disadvantages that would have a detrimental effect on the both the editorial and advertising departments.

For sales staff at *The Independent*, advertising space was sold on a relatively informal basis, with prices fluctuating from client to client according to necessity; the most important factor was making the sale and getting the client into the paper; at *The Examiner*, working under the tightened TC Media structure meant strictly adhering to rate-card prices or face disciplinary actions. At one *Examiner* staff meeting in 2010, sales representative Harvey Aisenthal complained that it was not only becoming increasingly difficult for him to sell ads to Westmount businesses because *The Independent* was offering much lower rates, but it was also landing him in trouble with TC Media management. At one point, he said, he was faced

with losing a valuable client to *The Independent*, so he offered that client a deal, just as he was accustomed to doing for many years. This tactic succeeded, and as a result Aisenthal made a sale of several thousand dollars, but was subsequently served with a letter of reprimand for straying from company policy. On another occasion, he said, he was blocked from processing a substantial sale because the client's account showed an outstanding balance of a few dollars and the computer system would not allow any further transactions. In order to put the sale through, Aisenthal was first forced to pay the balance from his own pocket.

Though ostensibly efficient, the media chain's rigid division-of-labour structure also created unnecessary delays in the production process. In the spring of 2007, I was told that as editor of *The Examiner* I would no longer have access to the layout computers in the LaSalle office's production room. Instead, only the graphic designers would be permitted to work on the weekly layout doing everything from composing each page with the texts and photos provided by the editor to making the final corrections after the proofing stage, correcting typographical errors and adding any subtle finishing touches to the layout. This policy, initiated by the TC Media journalists' union — the powerful *Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN)* — was to be strictly enforced; reporters and editors were permitted to be present when the graphic designers laid out their papers, but they were forbidden to touch the computers.

This decree was further complicated by the long-standing tacit understanding that matters of advertising trumped all other concerns, which meant that graphic designers were obliged to set aside work on the editorial layout in favour of the higher-priority task of creating a last-minute ad or revising an existing one. This could lead to delays of several hours; editors had no choice but to wait for a graphic designer's availability, sometimes just to make a few quick corrections that normally would have taken mere seconds to complete. This frustration was sometimes compounded by situations whereby an editor with several years' experience working with QuarkExpress, the layout program, had to stand by and watch as a novice graphic designer hunted for the correct key or onscreen tool to complete a simple task. This situation worsened in 2010, when the LaSalle production unit was moved to east-end St-Léonard, and all interactions between editors and graphic designers had to be carried out via email and telephone.

Another aspect of the chain-ownership structure that restricted the delivery of a high-quality product was the rigid production schedule. Due to the fact that several newspapers were laid out on the same day by the same production team, the graphic designers were only available to work on a certain paper during a certain period, at the end of which they were required to send the completed product to the printer. Failure to respect the strictly enforced press deadline meant a fine, this despite the fact that newspaper, production team, distributor and printer were all owned by the same company. Although efficient from a production

perspective, this structure often eliminated an opportunity for editors to provide readers with last-minute breaking news.

Meanwhile, *The Independent* had no such issues; editor, publisher and graphic designer worked together on the layout in the same office throughout production day, effectively tailoring their product to its weekly requirements. If they were publishing a large issue, they had the freedom to begin the layout process earlier; if there was an important event to be covered in Westmount on production day, they could wait until the last possible moment before sending the finished product to the printer, a common practice in newspaper production, but now strictly forbidden in the ranks of their TC Media counterparts.

Unfettered by company rules, *The Independent* grew steadily, winning over advertisers from *The Examiner* by offering lower prices and near-perfect distribution via Canada Post, two important advantages that TC Media papers were unable to match. By early 2012, *The Independent* was publishing an average of 24 to 32 pages per week, compared to *The Examiner*'s 12. Large advertising contracts, such as major real estate companies and the City of Westmount — which alone accounted for as much as \$100,000 per year — were now exclusively in *The Independent* camp. In a letter to *The Examiner*, the mayor's office explained the cancellation of its advertising as strictly a business decision based on *The Independent*'s lower prices, superior distribution, and overall visibility in the community. In order to remedy this, hoping to win back the lucrative city contract,

Aisenthal took it upon himself to hand-deliver copies of every new issue to each member of his dwindling roster of clients, and on Saturday mornings he would drive around Westmount to ensure that copies of *The Examiner* were available at supermarkets and other public places such as Westmount Square, alongside stacks of *The Independent*, which was now printing 16,337 copies per week as opposed to *The Examiner*'s 9,661 — a difference of 6,676 copies in a market serving a total population of 20,000.

*The Examiner* was caught in a vicious circle that was purely a result of its own position within a rigid chain structure. It could not attract advertising because it could neither undercut its competitor's prices nor improve its faulty distribution. This meant a reduced page count, which in turn meant less editorial content for readers — a situation made worse by the elimination of a freelance budget and the mandatory insertion of generic articles provided by TC Media. Less local content meant fewer readers, and subsequently less advertising. That loss of revenue ruled out the possibility of increasing the operating budget to effectively compete with *The Independent*.

Instead, the cost-cutting measures continued until, in March 2012, the last remaining editorial position (mine) — with the then-misleading title of editor-in-chief — was abolished in favour of a part-time reporter position. Although I was offered the editor position at *The Chronicle*, I chose to resign, knowing I would be working under the very same restrictions on the West Island. This was quickly



followed by a related departure and further financial blow that TC Media had not anticipated. Valued real estate columnist Andy Dodge, who had always vowed that he would leave *The Examiner* if I ever left, made good his promise and announced that he was moving to *The Independent*, along with a considerable amount of advertising revenue from the local real estate agents who followed him.

A year later, *The Examiner* was dealt a further blow that effectively took it out of competition when it came to covering local news: in April 2013, TC Media announced a new policy whereby its stable of 22 journalists across Montreal would be reduced by half. These cuts would be necessary, the company explained, as the new editorial direction would “reduce the need for journalistic research.”<sup>72</sup> As a result of this decree, the position of *The Examiner*’s sole remaining editorial employee, a part-time reporter, was abolished and one full-time reporter was hired to provide content for both *The Chronicle* and *The Examiner*. He would be based at the Dorval office and not be required to function as a traditional journalist because TC Media’s new policy forbade him from performing many basic duties — a move that prompted an angry response from the editorial employees’ union:

On April 15, Transcontinental Media (TC Media) announced that its 22 Montreal newspapers were changing their vocation, citing a glut of news coverage on the island of Montreal. Thus, half of the weekly journalists were laid off. Now, investigative journalism —

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<sup>72</sup> Benoit Caron, Regional Director General, TC Media, memo to all Montreal employees, 23 April 2013.

sometimes lengthy undertakings involving searched files — and even attendance at press conferences and neighborhood organizations, are threatened with extinction! As of 20 May, TC Media requires its journalists to no longer cover: borough council meetings, projects related to capital expenditure programs, zoning meetings, political news, any communications from politicians, sports scores, news conferences, or surveys.<sup>73</sup>

While upholding its primary purpose of defending the rights of its members when it came to issues of working conditions and job security, the union clearly saw the impending loss of “local quality” in the TC Media newspapers’ community coverage and used it to further solidify its argument against the announced job cuts:

Our employer recently admitted publicly that newsrooms represented only 6 per cent of expenditures in the process of publishing its local weeklies! We therefore conclude that the layoff of eleven journalists and editors will have little impact on improving the financial results

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<sup>73</sup> McHugh, 2013: “C'est ainsi que, le 15 avril dernier, Transcontinental Media (TC Media) annonçait que ses 22 journaux montréalais changeaient de vocation, prétextant la surabondance d'information sur l'île de Montréal. Ainsi, la moitié des journalistes de ces hebdomadaires étaient-ils mis à pied. Désormais, ce sont le travail d'enquête journalistique, parfois de longue haleine, les dossiers fouillés et, même la présence aux conférences de presse des organismes de quartier qui sont menacés de disparaître! TC Media demande à ses journalistes, à partir du 20 mai prochain, de ne plus couvrir : les réunions du conseil d'arrondissement, les projets reliés au programme triennal d'immobilisations, les réunions de changements de zonage, l'actualité politique, les communiqués des politiciens, les résultats sportifs, les conférences de presse couvrant l'actualité et de ne plus faire de dossiers ou d'enquêtes.”

of TC Media, but will indeed have serious repercussions on the human level and on more generally, information of local quality that Montrealers are entitled to obtain.<sup>74</sup>

By the time of this study (October and November 2013) *The Examiner* had between two and three Westmount ads per issue, and the average amount of advertising per issue was as low as 40- to 45 percent, generating revenue well below the amount required to turn a profit. This was compounded by the fact that since most of the ads were not local, they were likely sold into other papers and included in *The Examiner* as a special promotional deal, at a lower price than indicated by the rate card, further lowering the amount of revenue per issue.

## **Recent Developments**

The findings of the study outlined in Chapter Three, which concluded that *The Independent* had a significant advantage over *The Examiner* in both local connectedness and advertising revenue, are not only consistent with the current dynamic in Westmount, but in fact indicate a gap between the two competitors that has since widened even further. By early 2014, just two months after the end of

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. "Notre employeur a récemment admis publiquement que les salles de rédaction ne représentaient que 6 % des dépenses dans le processus de publication de ses hebdomadaires locaux! Nous constatons dès lors que la mise à pied de onze journalistes et rédacteurs en chef n'aura que peu d'impacts sur l'amélioration du bilan financier de TC Media, mais aura bel et bien de sérieuses répercussions sur le plan humain et, de manière plus générale, sur l'information de proximité, de qualité, que les Montréalaises et les Montréalais sont en droit d'obtenir."

this study period, *The Examiner* had lost virtually *all* of its Westmount advertising to *The Independent*. It was publishing only eight pages per week at approximately 45 per cent advertising, all of which was coming from outside the community, with very few exceptions. This is partially due to the fact that there is no longer any *Examiner* staff remaining in Westmount; the last full-time employee, sales representative Harvey Aisenthal, departed in November 2013 and was not replaced. The last years had proven increasingly difficult for Aisenthal, for many years a top salesman who now found himself unable to sell advertising space in what was considered a substandard product compared to its competitor — a common problem faced by others in his position:

An ad salesman, no matter how aggressive or talented, is handicapped by a poor newspaper. Publishing a good newspaper is imperative in meeting and besting competition. You must sell a good product yourself. A well-edited, solid newspaper, alert and active, is the best offense against any kind of competition. Be on top of your competition from the first. Let him apologize for any defect or weakness.<sup>75</sup>

All of *The Examiner's* advertising and editorial functions are now carried out at the central office in Dorval. As the sole remaining occupant of the once-thriving Westmount office, Aisenthal's departure meant that TC Media was paying rent of

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<sup>75</sup> Kennedy, 128.

approximately \$3,000 per month for an empty office — fuelling speculation that this further loss of revenue could force the paper to close. In mid-March 2014, *The Examiner* published a front-page photo and article announcing it had donated a portion of its archive of bound issues, dating back to 1982, to the City of Westmount — on one hand a public gesture of goodwill toward a former major advertiser, on the other a veiled foreshadowing of an imminent announcement of the office’s (and possibly the paper’s) closure, as the accumulation of archive books had occupied a substantial amount of space in the small, otherwise empty office.<sup>76</sup>

Although *The Examiner* continues to publish articles from the Westmount community, its ratio of local content is by far the lowest among the seven community newspapers observed in this study. This is a direct result of chain ownership, whereby editorial space is filled in the cheapest way possible, in this case by a lone reporter who must generate local material from the West Island for *The Chronicle* as well Westmount items for *The Examiner*. Under these strained circumstances, the insertion of generic or non-local material shared by both papers becomes a necessity when pages have to be filled quickly and cheaply, a reality that has not been lost on Westmount readers and advertisers, who have long since proven their preference for the competitor.

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<sup>76</sup> Anthony Abbondanza, “Examiner donates archives to Westmount,” *The Westmount Examiner*, 20 March, 2014: 1-3.

The Westmount case is not unique, in fact a similar situation arose in 2005 in California, when the weekly *Point Reyes Light* was sold to “an outsider” after being a local family-owned business for more than 30 years. “The newspaper’s ensuing external perspective alienated readers and resulted in the development of a competing community weekly that was more in tune with the community.”<sup>77</sup> The new paper, *The West Marin Citizen*, quickly gained a strong foothold in the local market by remaining steadfastly focused on the community.<sup>78</sup> The blame for *The Point Reyes Light*’s loss of its monopoly, according to Jonathan Rowe’s 2008 article in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, rests squarely on the shoulders of Robert Plotkin, *The Light*’s new owner and editor, who brought in reporters from outside of the community and established an editorial policy that focused less on the “broken arms” of the San Francisco suburb and more on non-local features rendered in the style of literary journalism — which Rowe argues did not reflect “the soul of community journalism.”<sup>79</sup>

Supported by the *Point Reyes Light* example, the Westmount case study fully illustrates the theory that being “in tune” with the community, thereby establishing and nurturing a strong connection to readers, can be a sound business strategy for a community newspaper. As we have seen in this chapter, the chain-owned

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<sup>77</sup> Diana Knott Martinelli, “Considering Community journalism from the Perspective of Public Relations and Advertising,” *Foundations of Community Journalism*, eds Bill Reader and John A. Hatcher, Los Angeles: Sage, 2012, 165.

<sup>78</sup> Jonathan Rowe, “The Language of Strangers: How a hotshot editor with big ideas failed to comprehend the soul of community journalism,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, 46(5), 36-40.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 36.

community weeklies may have an inherent financial advantage over their family-owned competitors, but unless the chain is willing to maintain its investment in the community through the steady provision of a high amount of local content and an ongoing engagement with readers — the community itself — the opportunity is opened for a competitor to step in and win over readers and advertisers by supplying the demand for local content and community engagement or “connectedness,” the fundamental elements that combine to form the “soul of community journalism” as described by Rowe.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion: No News is Not Necessarily Good News**

Despite ongoing changes in the print media industry, with rampant cases of staff reductions and, in some extreme instances, the closure of entire newspapers, the findings of this thesis hold that the local newspaper remains a solid commodity in the overall media market. For the most part, Montreal’s English-language community weeklies maintain the ability to fulfill their simple business mandate through invested interest in their respective communities — attracting local advertising through the continued practice of delivering the commodity of “relentlessly local” content to readers — the news, opinion, and attention to issues affecting a community that readers would not expect to find in the larger city dailies, regional publications, or broadcast media.

By drawing attention to the correlation between the provision of a larger amount of local content to readers and a higher volume of advertising, the results of this study underscore the importance of Jock Lauterer’s assertion of the need to be “relentlessly local” through a tight focus on the geographical community and, where necessary, a related “community” of readers bound by a common interest or social experience. As well, Linda Steiner’s observations on how chain ownership can have a detrimental effect upon the delivery of that local content to a community is reinforced through examples in the local market.



This study clearly shows that *The Suburban* (both City and West-Island editions) and *The Westmount Independent* have each established a strong connection to their respective communities, not only by publishing a large number of editorial items each week, but also by ensuring that they consist of a high percentage of local content. Evidence of this connection can be seen in the large number of letters to the editor they publish each week: letters voicing readers' concerns about local matters, in most cases commenting in response to articles and opinion pieces published in preceding issues. This dialogue with readers has proven to be a valuable asset in the papers' financial strategy, for it generates interest in the newspaper within the community and, as a result, attracts advertisers. The vast majority of the advertising to be found in these three publications comes from businesses located within the three geographical communities they cover. This suggests that local business owners and entrepreneurs are aware of a close connection to readers (their potential clients) and in turn are keen to advertise, confident that their commercial messages will be seen. This healthy relationship with both readers and advertisers has paid off for both editions of *The Suburban* and *The Independent*, the advertising-reliant papers that published the most pages during the nine-week study period. As this thesis has noted, a healthy correspondence between advertisers, readers and publishers is one of the surest signs of financial health and the yardstick by which publishers and editors in the community newspaper industry are most apt to measure a paper's success.

A strong connection to local readers was also demonstrated by *The Free Press* and *The Eastern Door*, both of which maintain a focus on their respective communities but do not attract a high volume of advertising. This can be attributed to the fact that they are entrenched in markets that are considerably less financially vibrant than the five other publications in this study. For this reason they stand out as exceptions to Lauterer's theory, but thanks to their respective financial structures — *The Free Press* is part of a two-paper mini-chain and *The Eastern Door* is subsidized by government grants — they are not entirely reliant upon local advertising to survive.

On the other hand, the two newspapers owned by a large chain presented a clear contrast, both to each other and to their counterparts in this study. *The Chronicle* maintained a high level of local content, but it fell short in its ability to provide a comparable amount of editorial material in general, publishing half the number of pages and articles of its West-Island competitor, *The Suburban*, yet with an equal advertising percentage. This indicates a substantial decline in the market it once dominated, despite the fact that it continues to attract a high enough level of advertising revenue to remain profitable.

The same cannot be said for *The Westmount Examiner*, which continues to flounder in the face of strong competition from *The Independent*. As seen in Chapter Four, *The Examiner* has been virtually eliminated from the Westmount market, having lost nearly all local advertising to its competitor and publishing the

bare minimum of eight pages per week at an advertising ratio so low that there can be no question it is currently operating at a continued financial loss and is in danger of closing altogether, a very real possibility considering the strong profit motive that drives large chains such as TC Media. It is therefore not coincidental that this study found *The Examiner* to be well behind the other publications in both the provision of local content (with the highest percentage of non-local editorial items) and reader engagement (publishing no letters to the editor or other reader-generated material, despite running weekly “filler” items soliciting these items from readers). As a result, Westmount readers are offered a weekly newspaper that not only pads its editorial content with news and photos from other communities but also runs advertisements for businesses that are, with very few exceptions, situated well outside of the local market. The consequences of this policy are clearly illustrated by the mass migration of both readers and advertisers to *The Independent*.

The findings of this study support Lauterer’s theory that providing the commodity of local news is a sound business strategy; the invested interest in a community is likely to pay off in advertising dollars and nurture continued financial health and, ultimately, survival. However, that simple assertion should be amended to include the provision that the market must be able to support at least one weekly newspaper. There is no question that this investment of community interest comes at a cost, and this study has shown that within the landscape of

Montreal's English-language community weeklies, that cost is something the chain-owned newspapers are not willing to bear at this point. Despite what appear to be the best efforts and intentions of the two-person editorial staff providing the content of both *The Chronicle* and *The Examiner*, the loss of advertising and resulting reduction of weekly pages has left the two TC Media newspapers in this study at a disadvantage in the face of their competitors. Without sufficient staff, and with fewer pages to fill each week, they are no longer able to send reporters out to cover the community and then publish detailed reports in a comfortable, loose layout. Company-initiated cuts in both personnel and resources have rendered both papers all but obsolete in their respective markets. Due to these cutbacks and profit-oriented policies, they are currently ill-equipped to compete with the privately owned publications that have entered their markets and continue to gain ground by publishing a higher number of solidly reported, detailed local stories and issue-oriented opinion pieces that attract a strong and engaged readership and, as a result, a healthy revenue stream through advertising.

Moreover, this study has shown that Montreal's chain-owned English-language weeklies have deliberately shifted away from providing close coverage of their respective communities, not only through the above-mentioned cuts to budgets and staff but also by a company decree forbidding journalists from attending city council meetings and other fundamentally important news-generating events that lay at the very core of community reporting. Although this

policy was apparently suspended to allow coverage of the 2013 municipal election, possibly to encourage the sale of campaign advertising, it remains a formidable obstacle for papers vying for readers in a competitive market.

In short, this study has found that the current plight of Montreal's two chain-owned English weeklies support Steiner's observation that they are "edited by careerists without local roots and written by people who don't know one another and rarely meet up at regional offices."<sup>80</sup> In addition, the findings support Lauterer's assertion that chains "can be plagued by uninvolved management, low-grade talent, a bottom-line focus, and draconian edicts handed down by a distant, remote owner who cares little except the profit and loss statements."<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, while exemplifying Demers's qualification that "corporate newspapers are accused of placing more emphasis on profits and less on the quality of the news product, alienating employees, reducing solidarity in the community, and producing a less vigorous editorial product," the findings of this thesis do not support his follow-up statement that "there is relatively little evidence to suggest that they place less emphasis on product quality, alienate employees, or are less vigorous editorially."<sup>82</sup>

By implementing cost-cutting policies that make the production of local news more difficult, and by neglecting to address problems that prevent them from

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<sup>80</sup> Steiner, 21.

<sup>81</sup> Lauterer, 40-41.

<sup>82</sup> Demers, 24.

remaining competitive in markets where one or more community newspapers have opened and are winning over advertisers, large chains like TC Media can be seen as doing a disservice to their own bottom line. While appearing to increase their yearly profits by cutting back on operating costs in the long term they may lose enough in advertising revenue to have eventually squandered the millions of dollars in goodwill capital that was included in purchase price of each newspaper at the time of their acquisition from Dumont-Cogeco. This constitutes an overall loss that, one might argue, could have been avoided by vigorously maintaining its invested interest in the community rather than appearing to neglect or abandon it in favour of generating short-term profits.

The seven-year (and counting) rivalry between *The Examiner* and *The Independent*, and the latter's near-complete domination of the Westmount market, clearly underscore the assertion that under the right circumstances an upstart family-owned newspaper can get the better of an established, chain-owned competitor by taking advantage of the company-enforced restrictions placed upon that competitor. The perception of a David-and-Goliath dynamic may appear accurate on the surface, but unless the giant media chain takes the necessary financial actions to defend its invested interests in a community — by spending to correct its shortcomings in areas of endeavour where the newcomer has proven to have a distinct advantage — it can easily lose its financial stake in that community altogether. The micro-case study outlined in Chapter Four clearly showed that by

systematically ignoring the financial threat posed by *The Independent* from the outset, and in fact continuing to incrementally cut staff, resources, and editorial space — ostensibly to increase its profit margin — TC Media has accomplished just the opposite and effectively given away what was once a lucrative newspaper market while its competitor has succeeded by merely emulating *The Examiner* as it once was under the stewardship of John Sancton, whose folksy motto of the old-school newsroom, “If it didn’t happen in Westmount, it didn’t happen,” has proven to be equally relevant to the practice of 21<sup>st</sup>-century community journalism.

Unencumbered by the restrictions of chain ownership that limit the ability to provide “relentlessly local” editorial content (staff reductions, a predilection for generic texts, and company edicts prohibiting the reporting of hard news), as well as rigid policies governing distribution and operational procedures in the sales department, *The Independent* has been free to decide and carry out various editorial and business strategies to attract advertising revenue and help it gain the advantage over its long-established competitor.

As *The Independent* has proven, publishing local names, faces, and neighbourhood news and concerns can be a winning strategy when challenging an established institution such as *The Examiner*. The results of the content analysis study on which this thesis is based, as discussed in Chapter Three, and the micro-case study of the *Examiner* and *Independent* rivalry as outlined in Chapter Four,

combine to support my argument — informed primarily by Steiner and Lauterer, and enforced by personal experience and observation — that the provision of local content and prolonged community engagement are essential to the success of the community newspaper, as they attract the all-important advertising dollar.

Through these findings I have concluded that by following the five rules outlined below, a community newspaper stands a better chance of succeeding, especially if competing with a chain-owned publication:

- Establish a close connection to the community by covering issues important to local readers, especially those stories that would not be reported in the mainstream media.
- Encourage local discourse by publishing as many letters to the editor as possible, thus nurturing a dynamic public forum that generates interest in the paper whereby readers are always looking forward to the next issue.
- Use the limited amount of editorial space to its fullest potential, filling layout gaps between important stories with brief, hyper-local “broken arms” rather than inserting generic fillers or simply enlarging photos to take up space.
- Establish and maintaining a high visibility in the community, ensuring that the paper is not only distributed by the most reliable method possible



but also investing in a higher print run in order to leave copies in as many public places as possible.

- Nurture loyalty and goodwill with advertisers by offering flexibility in prices and payment where deemed necessary, even extending credit (up to a reasonable point) in certain circumstances.

While Montreal’s English-language community newspapers are, for the most part, enjoying a reasonably high degree of financial health through advertising volume and revenue, the example of *The Westmount Examiner* serves as a warning. The old saying “No news is good news” takes on an entirely different meaning when applied to newspapers in general and the community press in particular. As this study has shown, the lack of local news in a local paper is in fact bad news for its bottom line, for no news can quickly lead to a loss of readership, and as a result, a significant loss of advertising — the very lifeblood of most small publications struggling to survive in a rapidly evolving and increasingly competitive industry.

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