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GLOBAL METRO:
THE RISE OF THE FREE COMMUTER NEWSPAPER

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Resumen

In the last half-decade, the newspaper industries of Canada and the United States have been transformed by the introduction, in most major cities, of free newspapers distributed to commuters at the principal nodes of public transportation systems. English-lanuage newspapers such as 24 and Metro and French language papers such as Montreal's 24 heures have transformed the economics and geographical bases of the newspaper industry. The largest chain of free newspapers is the Metro chain, based in Sweden, which adapts a standardized format for each metropolitan market, mixing news produced on an international basis with local or "localized" material in each city. Free commuter newspapers are embraced by some industry analysts as a solution to the declining circulation of traditionally daily newspapers, particular insofar as they attract their readership from among populations of immigrants and service workers whose consumption of newspapers might otherwise be extremely low. These same newspapers are condemned by journalists for as degrading the practice of news production and weakening an already fragile relationship between the newspapers and locality. My paper will compare the development of free commuter newspapers in Montreal and New York, tracing the different relationship of free papers in each city to an ideal of "localness".

Key words: Communication studies, globalization, printed press.

In Canada's capital city, Ottawa, two new daily newspapers were introduced in November of 2006. One was a morning paper called **24 Hours**; the other was an evening newspaper given the name of **Rush Hour**. It is imporant to note that, with its launch, **Rush Hour** became the first evening newspaper produced in Ottawa since the end of the 1970s. By the 1980s, it was believed that supper hour television newscasts, and the broader reorganization of work and lifestyle, had put an end to the reading of newspapers after work. A year or two earlier, in

Ottawa, another daily newspaper, *Metro*, had been introduced to compete with the *Ottawa Citizen* and the *Ottawa Sun*, the city's longstanding English language dailies. Amidst a general alarm in the newspaper industry over the loss of readers to the internet, this launch of three new newspapers in Ottawa should stand as a quite remarkable event. At the very least, it provides us with a puzzle which this article will attempt to partially unravel.

Elsewhere in the world, the steady appearance of new urban newspapers since 2000 has become a banal feature of city life. In Germany, more new newspapers were launched in 2005 than at any time in the previous 60 years. In fact, the current rate of introduction of new papers in Europe was rivalled in modern times only by the explosion of new titles which followed the rebuilding of civil societies at the end of World War II. Montreal, where I live, now has at least six daily newspapers published in English and French, more than at any point in the last thirty years. Toronto, with only one official language, has just as many newspapers operating in that language.

The newest of these newspapers follow a particular model. They are given free to people as they move within cities, rather than delivered to their homes or sold from news kiosks. They are supported by advertising rather than subscriptions. And so, while they compete with each other for the attention of readers, they do not compete for their readers' money. They are smaller in size than conventional newspapers, and smaller, even, than the tabloids which have stood for a century as the model of journalistic compactness. They typically offer little in the way of editorial opinion and are rarely willing to invest in the sorts of investigative reporting or expert commentary which have long been the hallmarks of the mainstream metropolitan daily. Perhaps most interesting, their existence and success have been shaped by the rise of the internet even as their old-fashioned form and mode of circulation seem to hearken back to a pre-electronic age.

In 1995, the Metro International corporation, based in Stockholm, Sweden, launched the first incarnation of a newspaper it called *Metro*. The newspaper was a success. In 1997, the same company started a second version of *Metro*, in Prague. As of last year, the Metro International company, which is now based in Luxembourg, published 70 editions, in 93 major cities of the world, in 21 countries and in 19 languages. Rather than consider all of these as distinct newspapers based on a shared model, the Metro International company prefers to see them as local editions of a single newspaper. As a result, the *Guinness Book of Records*, in 2006, named Metro the world's largest global newspaper, as if its Toronto and London editions were no more distinct than the versions of the New York Times produced for that city's different boroughs.

It is difficult to disentangle the rise of the free newspaper from a variety of other phenomena within the world of newspaper publishing and the media more generally. The first of these involves the ongoing commodification of attention B the transformation of attention into what the media analyst Dallas Smyth (1981) once called the audience commodity. The media analyst Robert Picard has expressed this in coldly economic terms: the time spent by people on public transport systems, on subways or buses is, from an economic viewpoint, a wasted resource (2001). The free daily newspaper is designed give value to that time. Newspapers like Metro are designed to be read in 20 minutes, the estimated average time of a city dweller's ride on public transportation systems. Like the television screens in doctor's offices which commodify the bored attention of waiting patients, the free commuter newspaper harvests the otherwise uncaptured attention of people travelling to or from their place of work.

The free commuter newspaper participates in another contemporary trend as well: the move on the part of almost all newspapers to become smaller, more portable and with reduced content. *The Times* of London, the British *Independent*, and; more recently, the European edition of the *Wall Street Journal* have all been made smaller with redesign. This large cale transformation echoes an earlier move, a century or so ago, to produce newspapers which lent themselves to reading in crowded public conveyances. In justifying these moves, the British Indepndent, like the publishers of Metro and other free dailies, rely on a view of the youth market which has become conventional wisdom within the newspaper industry–a view which says that younger people have shorter attention spans and narrower spheres of interest, and therefore must be catered to with short, telegraphic reporting.

In all the cities which have been invaded by free commuter newspapers B cities like London, Toronto, Montreal and New York–the informational ecology of urban life has been transformed in roughly similar ways. Over the past decade, most major cities have had to deal with clusters of news hawkers standing at the entrances to public transit systems, competing for the attention of commuters in ways that are usually peaceful, but not always so. In New York, there have been highly publicized fights between newshawkers at important nodes in the city's subway system. Across the Western world, cities have grappled with the growing number of newspaper boxes which fill sidewalks and cluster around the entrances to subways or commuter ferry boats. The free newspapers discarded by by the thousands are now blamed for fires on subway lines, or, at the very least, for creating a garbage disposal problem unanticipated 10 years ago. Deals between the distributors of free newspapers and urban transit systems have posed the question of the commodification of public space. The newspapers of ethnic groups or cultural communities, which had won the right to public

availability within urban space, now find themselves shunted aside by the new wave of free, general-interest daily newspapers. Professional journalists, and those who comment on the role of the press in urban, civic life, are bemoaning the decline of journalism as a trade possessed of its ethical commitments and belief in a professional nobility.

FIGURE 1.

The free daily newspaper is interesting because the political and cultural collisions which surround it have little to do with the civic role of journalism or with the traditional problems which are the focus of press studies. In other words, the issues which these newspapers have forced onto the arena of public debate are not the longstanding questions of journalistic objectivity or civic responsibility in the act of meaning-making. They are much more about the ownership and occupation of public space, about the degrees to which that space may be commercialized, and about the right of diverse voices to register that presence within public space.

Figure One is a picture of a street corner in Toronto, taken at some point in the last couple of years. Few images so effectively condense the cultural variety and ecological distress which the present-day situation of urban newspapers has produced. We see here, set alongside each other, the various forms of the newspaper which have emerged over the last 150 years or so: the Toronto Star, epitome

of the 20th century mass-circulation metropolitan daily, loosely rooted in a mission of social improvement; the National Post, poised delicately between its claims to be a national media and its dependence on the local, Toronto market; Now, one of the very first of the so-called Aalternative weeklies which transformed urban culture life in the 1980s by concentrating on the downtown activities of art worlds and music scenes; AEye, the cultural weekly started by a mainstream publisher so as to enter the market occupied by Now. Alongside these, we see the specialized newspapers which function like catalogues for person-to-person exchange, selling automobiles or real estate; and, finally, amidst these, *24*, the free daily launched by the Quebecor Company, publishers of, among other titles, the ailing *Toronto Sun* tabloid newspaper.

This image is very different from that of the newspaper kiosk, familiar to urban dwellers for over a century and a prominent part of the cityscape today, in cities like New York, Budapest, Paris, Mexico City and Buenos Aires. In the 1920s, the German theorist Siegfried Kracauer, wrote, of the newspaper kiosk, that it offered an image of the city's capacity to hold different views of the world in a harmony. That harmony was rooted in the ways in which newspapers of very different, even opposed political opinions sat comfortably side by side:

Out of the hubbub rise the newspaper kiosks, tiny temples in which the publications of the entire world get together for a rendezvous. Foes in real life, they lie here in printed form side by side; the harmony could not be greater. Wherever Yiddish papers supported by Arabic texts come into contact with large headlines in Polish, peace is assured. But, alas, these newspapers do not know one another. Each copy is folded in on itself, and is content to read its own columns. Regardless of the close physical relations that the papers cultivate, their news is to completely lacking in any contact that they are uninformed about one another (Kracauer, 1995: 43).

We may take the newstand as an agent of mystification, hiding conflict within the comfortable juxtaposition which it makes possible. Or, we may see it as an emblem of the city's tolerance, of its reduction of political conflict to the silent proximity of multiple voices. In our age, in any case, we are witnessing the death of the newsstand. In Canadian cities, its disappearance began in the 1950s and 1960s, with the move towards suburban living and the home delivery of newspapers. The rise of the supermarket as an outlet for periodicals, and related rise of the supermarket tabloid, in the early 1960s, is the best example of this shift, though the decline of the newspaper stand or kiosk was broader in its effects. In Montreal, newstands have long been outlawed by the city government, which has capitulated to the pressures of store owners who resent their competition.

In any case, Kracauer's image of the news kiosk as a place of harmony seemed most resonant in the early years of the 20th century, when the comfortable

coexistence of different viewpoints had replaced the often violent clashes between newsboys–the newshawkers who were part of the folklore of 19th century urban journalism. One of the most striking aspects of the new free daily newspapers, then, is their resuscitation of the news hawker. From 1995 onwards, men and women with bags of newspapers began appearing at the entrances to subways and bus exchange points throughout the Western world, seeking, through shouts and physical gesture, to make travellers take their newspapers. A whole body of social-psychological thought has taken shape around this activity of newshawking: The publishers of *CityAM*, a free daily in London, England, train their staff to stand at some distance from the exits to subways, to give commuters time to convince themselves that they should take a copy of the paper ("City AM signs new distribution deal in circulation campaign", 2005).

Following the emergence of the free daily, their publishers sought agreements with city transit authorities which would guarantee them exclusivity over strategically important spaces. Montreal's version of the global title *Metro* was launched in 2001, as a co-venture between Transcontinentale, Canada's largest printing company, and the European based Metro International. As an aside, it is important to note that, in Canada, all versions of Metro are co-ventures with strong Canadian partners. Foreign ownership of newspapers in Canada is not illegal, but tax regulations make it highly unprofitable for foreign companies to buy them and so all Canadian newspapers are predominantly owned by Canadian firms. The free dailies are testing the limits of foreign investment in the Canadian press, through the participation of Metro International in the launch of *Metro* in cities like Montreal. Toronto's version of *Metro* is a partnership between the Luxembourg-based Metro International and the Canadian firms Torstar and Canwest Global.

At the time of its launch, Montreal Metro signed a deal with the Montreal Urban Community Transit Commission, giving it the exclusive right to distribute its newspaper within metro stations; this deal, in its first three years, brought the Commission almost a million dollars in revenues. The Quebecor Company, publishers of the *Journal de Montréal*, quickly launched its own competitor to Montreal Metro, the free daily newspaper *24 heures.* Quebecor then began a lawsuit to force the Montreal Urban Community Transit Commission to allow its own newspapers to be distributed upon Transit property. This suit was turned down. In 2005, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the Transit commission was allowed to maintain its exclusive agreemeent with the publishers of Montreal *Metro*. Those who managed the subway, in other words, were under no obligation to make that space open to competing voices.

The case was a complicated one, nonetheless. If *24* heures was denied access to the city's transportation system, it nevertheless enjoyed exclusive distribution

in Videotron video stores, the Archambault and Renaud-Bray music and book stores, and innumerable outlets within the vast Quebecor corporate family. If *Metro* had exclusive rights to public space, 24 Heures benefitted from its attachment to the notoriously synergistic Quebecor corporation, a major player within every facet of Quebec media and entertainment.

The free daily newspaper has made explicit the competition between newspapers for readers–a competition which had become invisible within the civic life of Western cities over the past several decades. A century ago, that competition had often organized itself around different political perspectives, as in the battles between reform-minded and political-machine-owned newspapers in New York City. Now, that competition is embodied in the struggle for those public spaces in which the newshawker stands. In New York City, fights have broken out in recent years between those hawking competing dailies in the Spanish language. In Paris, unions of workers working for traditional newspapers have undertaken often violent action against the hawkers of the new free dailies, invoking laws which prohibit the handing-out of newspapers and require their distribution through kiosks or bins.

The reintroduction of the newshawker has come to seem, in many Canadian cities, like an unwelcome challenge to metropolitan gentility. This has been the case, in particular, in the Vancouver region, where free dailies struggle for attention at particularly strategic nodes of urban circulation, like the entrances to the ferry system which take people to and from the mainland. The proliferation of newshawkers and newspaper boxes was described, in one tense moment in Vancouver, as another sign of the Torontoization of Vancouver, its subjection to an exhausting barrage of competitive voices and signs (Seaton, 2005).

In Vancouver, more than any other city, the effects of the free daily newspaper on the broader ecologies of urban life have been the focus of often intense debate. The huge numbers of newspapers discarded by commuters have been blamed for fires, on the Vancouver Skytrain system as on the Toronto subway, but the proliferation of newspaper boxes has become a more constant concern. Since the early 1990s, cities have sought ways of stopping the proliferation of boxes on city streets offering alternative, commercial or community newspapers. In 1998, in a move observed and copied by other cities, Chicago experimented with so-called multi-title newsboxes, which gathered together a multiplicity of titles within a single box. Those who complained most about these devices were the publishers of alternative, cultural weeklies and non-dominant language community newspapers. With their papers now hidden amidst dozens of others, reduced to a kind of equivalent abundance and wastefulness, these papers had no way of signalling their distinctive historical rootedness in tradition or community.

In Vancouver, the number of newspaper boxes on city streets doubled between 2004 and 2006. Vancouver and its neighbouring cities, like Richmond, are torn between the desire to increase the fees charged to put boxes in public places, so as to limit their proliferation, and the longstanding acceptance that such fees might constitute limits on free expression. When non-dominant language and community newspapers are subject to these charges, as inevitably happens, their economic viability is reduced. More ominously, the new free commuter dailies target themselves increasingly to immigrant communities, through supplements and specialized advertisements which acknowledge the high levels of immigrant participation in the commuting workforce. The shift in advertising to such papers further reduces the economic condition of community newspapers, as they are pulled into competition with publishers now anxious to reach their own readers. (See, for one discussion, McCullough, 2001).

To those who publish free daily newspapers, the crucial battles for readership have to do with age and with the future of the newspaper in its competition with the internet. A widely circulated statistic notes that the readership of newspapers among those aged 18-24 dropped 55% over the past 20 years in the United States (Gard, 2005.) The publishers of mainstream daily newspapers set up free cultural weeklies in the 1990s as a way of holding onto youth markets for their advertisers: *Hour* and *Ici*, in Montreal, both owned by Quebecor, are the result of such moves. The more recent move of traditional newspaper publishers into the free daily field is usually justified as an attempt to hold onto youthful readers–to train them, as industry hopes express it, in the practice of newspaper reading, so that, as they age they will move towards the traditional dailies for which they will pay or subscribe. These claims are faulty and distorting in two ways, I would suggest. One is that few really believe, anymore, that people will graduate from free to subscription newspapers as they grow older, forsaking the internet for the traditional pleasures of the mainstream newspaper. More importantly, I think, the publishers of free newspapers talk about age because they do not want to talk about ethnicity, immigration and class–factors which, I would argue, are much more determinant of their readership and of their future.

The most awkward questions surrounding the free daily newspaper, then, have to do with newspaper literacy and its relationship to both social class and ethnicity. In 1833, Benjamin Day inaugurated one revolution in newspapers with his introduction of the daily newspaper, the New York Sun. The New York Sun was distinctive in three ways: Firstly, it was sold for three cents a copy, much more cheaply than any of the existing newspapers in New York. Secondly, rather than being delivered to the homes of the city's middle class populations, it was sold on street corners, to be bought on impulse by those traveling to work B and so it became intimately interconnected with the broader circulation of populations within urban life. And, finally, the New York Sun differed from existing

newspapers in that it was not explicitly partisan in a political sense. Indeed, it aimed at a readership which it imagined was cut off from political processes and from the reasoned exchange of political ideas. With time, of course, the popular tabloid newspaper became a powerful force for political reform, in ways which both reinforced and undermined the power of established political interests.

The New York Sun, and its successors, helped to democratize the reading of newspapers. In doing so, they integrated immigrant populations into the target audiences of advertisers and into the embryonic industries of media-based sensation. The new free daily commuter newspapers seek in similar fashion to extend newspaper access and literacy, but they are also engaged in something more insidious. They are looking to extract value from those populations who, for a few years at least, will lack the time, money or skills required for access to on-line sources of information. The commuting worker with the low paid job, for whom English or French may well be a second or third language, has long been abandoned by other advertising-based media. As classified advertisements move to Craig's List, movie listings and stock market data to the internet, and journalistic opinion to blogs or the on-line versions of established newspapers, the free commuter newspaper is left with a readership for whom only certain kinds of news and advertising are appropriate. Despite all the rhetoric about free newspapers training people to read traditional newspapers, to which, it is assumed, they will one day graduate, free newspapers may be seen as really interested in milking the last available revenues from what many consider a dying cultural form.

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