

A L B E R T A
P R E S S C O U N C I L

PRESS RELEASE

May 20th, 2009

Ed Kamps, chair of the Alberta Press Council is pleased to announce that the 2009 Essay Competition Scholarship of \$2,000 will be presented to Ms. Erin C. Valentine, a grade twelve student at Strathcona High School, Edmonton, AB. Ms. Valentine plans on attending the University of Alberta in the fall in the Bachelor of Science program.

Erin's essay titled:

Canadian Newspapers: Upholding the Ideals of Freedom of the Pres"

was judged to be the winning essay over 19 submissions received on the topic:

Canada's Newspapers: Last Bastion of Freedom of the Press

Dr. Ian MacLachlan, chair of the Scholarship Committee states: the scholarship committee comprised of Tanis Fiss, public member, Calgary Herald readership area; Clare Gauvreau, press member, AWNA and Steven Wright, public member, Fort McMurray Today readership area "has now completed its work and read and graded 19 essays that were received from across the province from grade twelve students." "The scholarship committee spent considerable time reviewing and scoring each paper based on creativity, style and content. The winning essays were selected from among a large and competitive field with many fine qualities and interesting arguments about freedom of the press and Canada's newspapers. The difficult adjudication process was made all the more challenging by the high quality of essays received." Each student submitting an essay "brought their intellect to bear on the increasingly important issue of freedom of the press and this was done very well indeed."

The text of Ms. Valentine's essay follows below.

Member newspapers are invited to publish it.

.....

- continued

Canadian Newspapers: Upholding the Ideals of Freedom of the Press

By Erin C. Valentine

In a democratic country, freedom of the press is considered to be not a luxury, but a necessity to give the public the information required to make the informed decisions about politics, economics and society for which they are responsible. Indeed, freedom of the press is guaranteed to Canadian citizens as a fundamental freedom in the Canadian constitution.¹ Described by the Alberta Justice Glossary² as the “the dissemination of expression of thought, belief or opinion through the medium of the press, without censure,” freedom of the press is a key factor in the spread of information through the public. However, although media, particularly news media, willingly spreads factual information, the spread of thought and opinion is far less common. Regular citizens are often not given a voice in the press at all, and this, in effect, is a failure to uphold the ideals of freedom of the press. Beyond this, freedom of the press is never entirely without censure. Some censorship must exist to protect the rights of individuals. Nonetheless, if the press provides truthful and complete information in the face of these restrictions, it still exercises the freedom granted in the constitution. While some media in Canada has allowed its reporting to fall short of the ideals of freedom of the press, Canada’s newspapers still uphold them to their fullest. With a concentrated commitment to spreading opinion as well as fact, to ensuring that this opinion comes from citizens as well as those in the media, and to producing honest, inclusive reporting even under minimal censorship, Canada’s newspapers are proving to be Canada’s last stronghold of freedom of the press.

¹ <http://www.efc.ca/pages/law/charter/charter.text.html>

² http://www.justice.gov.ab.ca/public_education/vocabulary.aspx#jumpRec3005

A typical evening news program has a complete lack of editorial or opinion pieces. Radio news features very little subjective material. However, freedom of the press is principally about making available the various views and perspectives in the world and allowing the public to respond accordingly. When radio and television segregate factual reports from opinion-based responses by giving each their own separate program and time slot, circulation of thought and opinion is limited to only those who choose to seek it. This effectively detracts from the liberty to spread opinion to the general public that is granted to the media under freedom of the press. In contrast, newspapers take full advantage of this liberty. By printing editorial columns alongside current events or concert reviews alongside interviews with the artist, newspapers give importance not only to factual occurrences, but also to the opinions surrounding them. Editorials have become both common and expected within newspapers, and even culture, sports, and life section articles may be written from a more subjective point of view. Only newspapers encourage such opinion-based writing and promote the spread of opinion as well as fact. An extension of this is the popularity of advice columns, exemplified in the reputation of sisters Dear Abby and Ann Landers³. No other medium promotes such free-flowing dialogue and question-and-answer between the media and the average citizen. The freedom of interaction and the exchange of opinions through the medium of the newspaper is an ultimate expression of freedom of the press, and demonstrates how Canada's newspapers are the last remaining medium to uphold these values.

The concept of citizen participation in freedom of the press is taken one step further when readers are given the opportunity to share their feelings and opinions with the public, as in the case of newspaper fixtures like Letters to the Editor. Another

³http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/290638/whatever_happened_to_advice_columnists.html?cat=49

example, the Edmonton Journal's mainstay, Venting⁴, gives readers a forum to publicly voice a short complaint or criticism, and has become so popular that specialized Culture, Election, and Sports Venting columns may be found in their respective sections. Readers are invited to submit concert reviews for publication, and even high school students are given a chance to share their thoughts through The Edmonton Journal's NextGen student writers' program⁵ and the Cappies program,⁶ which prints student reviews of high school theatre in Edmonton and Ottawa. Such freedom of expression embodies the ideals of freedom of the press. After all, freedom of the press designates freedom to have thoughts, beliefs and opinions publicized, regardless of from whom these opinions have come. When this is exercised in radio or television, outlets for public opinion are kept separate from facts and from the opinions of those who work in the media. Only newspapers recognize the necessity of intermingling public opinion, media opinion, and factual reports within one document to produce a complete view of society and events. Therefore it is only newspapers that truly embrace the concept of freedom of the press.

Of course, freedom of the press can not possibly be absolute. Regulations are in place to prevent slander, discrimination, plagiarism and breaches of privacy, as well as to ensure truthful reporting and prevent the publication of "obscene or indecent material."⁷ Therefore there are restrictions on the opinions that can be publicized in television, radio, and newspaper. The role of the press, then, is to give a complete and honest report while complying with these limitations, and the success of the media depends on its ability to do just that. A recent poll by Ipsos-Reid⁸ shows the considerable trust Canadians have in

⁴ <http://www.edmontonjournal.com/Venting/1315087/story.html>

⁵ Malika Ladha. "So you think you can graduate." *Edmonton Journal: NextGen*. 13 Feb 2009. Sec. B11.

⁶ <http://www.cappies.com/about/>

⁷ <http://www.ncra.ca/resources/mediaLaw/Index.cfm>

⁸ <http://www.cna-acj.ca/en/news/cna-news/newspaper-advertising-works-good-and-bad-times>

Canada's newspapers to provide reliable information in times of change, with, for example, one in four Canadians depending on newspapers for information about the present economic situation. This proves the aptness of Canadian newspapers at upholding high standards and exercising freedom of the press, even within the restrictions placed, to provide a high quality broadcast of thought and opinion to the Canadian public.

Freedom of the press is a necessary element in the distribution of both information and opinion throughout a population. In a democratic country with a primarily capitalist economy like Canada, the effectiveness of the government and the behaviour of the economy are both reliant on capable, well-informed citizens. The media is an integral part of this. However, of the various media that makes up Canadian press, it is newspapers that uphold the ideals of freedom of the press - the uncensored dispersion of thought, belief and opinion to the public - most strongly. Newspapers have a concentrated focus of integrating opinion with fact to produce a balanced picture of society, and of including opinion from regular citizens to make this picture even more comprehensive. Moreover, even while restricted by media regulations, newspapers garner a great deal of trust from the Canadian public. By this, it becomes is clear that through the dissemination of thought and opinion by Canada's newspapers, newspapers truly are Canada's last bastion of freedom of the press.