

20  
YEARS/ANS



Forum of Federations  
The Global Network on Federalism and Devolved Governance



Forum des Fédérations  
Le Réseau mondial sur le fédéralisme et la gouvernance dévolue

---

# MODERN MEDIA AND FEDERALISM

*Jeffrey Simpson*

---



Federal states are often hard for citizens/taxpayers to figure out. They ask themselves: Which level of government is responsible for what? Which is taxing me, and for what? To whom do I complain, or whom do I praise?

Ask any national or regional elected official. She or he gets these questions a lot. And often rightly so. Experts and practitioners of federalism have time to plumb the depth of its complications, and lawyers always enjoy federal systems because federal constitutions are legal documents to be argued over by lawyers and often interpreted by courts. Garden-variety citizens have better things to do than study federalism's complexities.

---

These complexities are daunting for the media, too. Media prefer straight story lines; federalism seldom provides them. Media prefer conflict to consensus, so that even when federal arrangements are administratively harmonious, there is frequently some degree of political conflict over constitutional powers or responsibilities. It is the nature of media to highlight these conflicts. Some aspects of federalism are straightforward, easy for citizens and media alike to understand. National governments run the armed forces; sub-national governments issue drivers' licenses. But in many federal states various responsibilities are shared between two levels of government, in areas such as health care, transportation, funding universities and the like, to say nothing of national/provincial/state funding arrangements. These sorts of issues are hard for citizens to fathom and for the media to report.

In 1946, the iconic academic student of federalism, K.C. Wheare, portrayed federal systems as containing silo-like governments, national and regional, each sovereign within its jurisdiction. Federalism remains on paper as Wheare described it, but only to a point. With the expansion of governments especially since the 1960s jurisdictions have increasingly overlapped. Depending on the federation, revenue-sharing programs have developed whereby the national government provides funds to the “lower” levels of government either through fixed formulas, political negotiations or both. This increasingly tangled federalism makes pinpointing accountability sometimes difficult. And since one of the media's responsibilities is to hold governments accountable, tangled federalism makes the media's job harder.

In Canada, to take one example among federal states, the federal and provincial governments both levy income and sales taxes. They both negotiate conditions for the Canada Pension Plan, although Quebec has its own plan. The constitution gives both levels of government power over environment, immigration and agriculture. The provinces control natural resources, but the federal government reviews projects (pipelines, for example) that cross provincial boundaries. The federal government is constitutionally responsible for Indigenous communities, but provinces deliver various services such as education and social welfare to Indigenous reserves.

Provinces operate the health-care systems (except for the military and Indigenous populations which are federal responsibility) but the federal government annually transfers money to the provinces for those systems – sums routinely dismissed as insufficient by the provincial governments. Provincial governments fund some of the operating costs of universities – student fees each year account for ever-larger shares of university operating budgets -- but the federal government finances the majority of university research.

The list of overlapping jurisdictions or policies is long and complicated, but the grandmother of all Canadian federalism’s complications is a program, enshrined in the Canadian constitution, whereby the federal government distributes tax money it raises in “equalization payments” to provinces. This program is designed to allow all provinces to provide a basic minimum of services so that citizens in a poor province (New Brunswick, for example) can have roughly comparable public services to those in a rich province (Ontario, for example.)

How “equalization payments” are calculated is based on a formula involving tax-raising methods across the country and a variety of other calculations that would confound all but a handful of economists and civil servants to understand let alone explain. These calculations ascertain provinces’ “fiscal capacity.” Those provinces with below the national average receive money through the federal government because money is transferred through the federal treasury to poorer provinces from taxpayers in more affluent ones. Six provinces regularly receive equalization payments: the four Atlantic provinces (Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador), Quebec and Manitoba. And although they are not called equalization payments, the federal governments also delivers billions of dollars each year to the Indigenous governments. The transfers, however large, are always deemed inadequate by the receiving Indigenous governments whose populations usually lag far behind the national average for education, employment and health outcomes.

To these already complicated matters – complicated for citizens to understand and for media to report and analyse -- are now added relations with Indigenous “nations” in certain federations such as Canada and the United States. These “nations” declare themselves sovereign. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) states they must give “free, prior and informed consent” to anything that happens on territory they claim. Under these circumstances, what does “sovereign” mean in the K.C. Wheare sense of the word?

These Indigenous “nations” vary greatly in the size of traditional territory; indeed, their territorial claims sometimes overlap. The “nations” are ethnically, culturally and linguistically hugely diverse. According to 2016 data from Statistics Canada, there were 977,000 First Nations people, 587,000 Metis (mixed Indigenous and European ancestry) and 65,000 Inuit. Among Indigenous “nations” more than half had fewer than 1,000 people. These “nations” have different forms of internal government.

A handful retain hereditary chiefs with effective power, an archaic form of government that remains only in a few jurisdictions around the world. Some of these “nations” are fortunate to have territories rich in natural resources or within or close to urban boundaries; others do not. Very few are

“sovereign” in the sense that they can provide enough revenues to finance essential services for their populations as do national or provincial/state governments. Fiscally, many are wards of other levels of government.

Responsibility for services to these “nations” is usually assigned to the national government – making relations “nation-to-nation,” a daunting task in Canada with its 635 self-described First Nations, or in the U.S. which has more than 500 “tribes”. Demands of Indigenous peoples for sovereignty for their “nations” are made without in many cases the financial resources or population base necessary for genuine sovereignty. Financing for First Nations services such as schools or health or welfare falls to national government under treaty obligations. A fourth level of government – Indigenous self-government – can therefore be added within certain federal systems to national, regional and local ones, although it must be observed that the emerging practice of sovereignty among Indigenous “nations” is conceptually and in practice very much a generational work in progress.

Compounding the media’s problem with this fourth level of government is understanding how and where they fit inside a federal system given the sheer variety of “nations,” their scattered geographies and differing traditions. Public self-criticism by the indigenous media in covering their societies can be seen as aiding negative stereotypes about those societies and is therefore very rarely observed. The coverage by Indigenous journalists is therefore very much “them-against-us,” which given the history of colonialism in North American is somewhat understandable.

Explaining federalism is of course the job of elected officials who must try to communicate with the public – but it is also the responsibility of the media in democratic societies to inform the public as clearly and accurately as possible. The trouble is that complications are the enemy of straightforward narrative and personality-driven coverage of the kind much preferred by the electronic media and large swaths of the print media. That the media would dive into the complexities of “equalization payments,” which total billions of dollars and keep various provincial budgets afloat, presumes the media could understand the subject, let alone explain it in ways that non-experts might too. Neither assumption would be correct. Coverage of this pillar of fiscal federalism is mostly about gripes and grievances from those sub-national governments that complain their payments are inadequate, and complaints from wealthier provinces that their taxpayers are being unfairly soaked.

Within federal systems, levels of government episodically quarrel over money, power and publicity. When things go poorly or problems multiply or it becomes politically expedient, fingers are pointed at the other level of government. The resulting “blame game” usually plays itself out through

the media, which reports the salvos directed from one level of government at another. Theatre, after all, is what most of the media craves and where possible delivers. Observers of federalism elsewhere, say in India or Switzerland, report the same media challenges with different national iterations of course. Fiscal federalism in Australia, with its Commonwealth Grants Commission, seems straightforward by comparison although one wonders just how much the citizens of Queensland or New South Wales can parse how the Grants Commission works.

The media in federations is split between regional/local and national outlets for reasons of geography, language and ethnicity. As such, the split also reflects the constitutional nature of federalism and the facts of population dispersal. In such circumstances, the media will often reflect more than challenge a local audience's interests and perceptions rather than covering the national perspective, although this is not the case in a federation such as Nigeria where the central government is preponderantly powerful vis-à-vis regional ones.

Both national and regional media outlets across federations have been shrinking because the media has suffered huge losses in advertising and struggled to adapt to the younger generation's preference for digital media, accessed especially through now-ubiquitous hand-held devices. In the early years of digital, newspapers assumed that advertising would follow as eyeballs moved from the printed page to the screen. That assumption proved incorrect and newspapers began to charge for access to their digital edition. But young readers in particular had become so accustomed to getting news for free on television or from the digital giants such as Google that they balked at paying for newspapers online. Although social media does provide opportunities for in-depth websites that offer detailed coverage of major issues, much social media features quick hits and abbreviated information nuggets, both the enemy of complexity and therefore of coverage of federalism.

The changing media landscape is evident in all democratic countries, federal or otherwise. The data reported below for Canada is of course sui generis, but the trends this data reflects are conspicuous in many countries, including federations. Journalists in European federations, India, Australia, the United States will all attest to shrinking resources, the decline or death of many newspapers, the loss of personnel at radio and local television stations, and a profound and likely irreversible shift to digital media in all its manifestations.

In 1950 (before the advent of television) there was one newspaper per Canadian household. In 1995, 49 per cent of households received a newspaper. By 2015, the ratio had fallen to 15 per cent and, according to an authoritative study by the Ottawa-based Public Policy Forum, that ratio might fall to 2 per cent of households receiving a newspaper by 2030. Two per cent! Between 2004 and 2018, nearly one in five U.S. newspapers closed and print newsrooms shed nearly half of their employees [1].

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the media’s financial plight as advertising budgets were slashed. The Postmedia chain closed 15 community newspapers in Ontario and Manitoba, furloughed some employees, and imposed salary reductions for employees earning more than \$60,000. Torstar eliminated 85 positions and cut its operating budget. (the Toronto Star, once among North America’s most profitable dailies, was sold during the pandemic for a pittance compared to its value a decade ago). Saltwater Media, Atlantic Canada’s largest newspaper chain, laid off 40 per cent of its staff and shut down all its weekly newspapers. Private television and radio stations, too, were hit by advertising reductions, and responded as did print outlets.

Digital outlets have been created in both Canada and the U.S., some of them quite large and lively. And podcasts have become a staple of the digital world, their scope expanding all the time. They tend, as does much of social media and cable television channels, to attract like-thinking audiences drawn by common interests. Indeed, it would seem that the media world in the digital age, far from expanding overall knowledge, tends to cluster consumers by pre-conceptions which are then reinforced by what they hear and see on social media, thereby abetting political polarization. This generalized observation, however, should be tempered by the recalling that newspapers in their heyday were often fiercely politically partisan and given more often than we now remember to offer exaggerations and falsehoods, or what today would be called “fake news.”

Overall, digital operations employ a fraction of the personnel in traditional newsrooms. Some elite newspapers – notably the New York Times – have found thousands of new digital subscribers and reversed a long-term decline. The Globe and Mail, Canada’s self-proclaimed “national newspaper,” has implemented by contrast three rounds of staff buyouts in recent years. Local and regional newspapers have suffered the most. Many have closed; others have barely enough staff to cover municipal councils let alone the provincial government. Pre-COVID-19, local and even national television newsrooms were shrinking drastically too, except those at the state-subsidized Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

What do these changes mean for media coverage in a federal country? Fewer journalists mean less news about everything from courts to politics, sports to culture, business to city governments. Inevitably, coverage of federalism and its complications is diminished. In better financial times, the electronic and print media played three roles in reporting on federalism.

Firstly, the national media, such as the nation-wide television networks and The Globe and Mail newspaper (or The New York Times in the United States) with sales across the country, reported regional perspectives because they had viewers and readers everywhere, but as national organizations they also paid special attention to the federal government. They covered the national perspective of

the economics and fiscal arrangements of federalism, but also constitutional reform efforts that were a staple of Canadian federalism under Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments from the 1970s to the early 2000s. Those efforts came in response to the threat of Quebec seceding from Canada. Federal governments offered constitutional (and other) changes to satisfy Quebec about its place in Canada. These efforts – and the debates they spawned -- were covered thoroughly by the major national media, although the extent to which Canadians understood the details of proposed constitutional changes was another matter.

A case in point: In the late 1980s, the government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney negotiated with the provincial premiers five constitutional changes, grouped in something known as the Meech Lake accord. Meech Lake produced a national psychodrama with passions inflamed across the country, especially around a clause that would have required the Supreme Court in interpreting the constitution to recognize Quebec as a “distinct society” within Canada. This clause conjured up “special status” for Quebec, a simple reflection of everyday reality for Quebecers, but a controversial idea outside the province.

Whole forests were felled to produce the newsprint for stories and even special sections in national newspapers explaining the content and implications of the Meech Lake accord. Television organizations, especially the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/Radio-Canada, did special broadcasts about the proposed accord, with politicians, academics and other “experts” debating its merits or otherwise. The country’s detailed understanding was limited, likely in part because constitutional arguments quickly centred not on details and wording but emotional or even existential questions of identity and, let it be said, whether leaders proposing change were admired or not.

A poll commissioned by The Globe and Mail after many weeks of extensive media coverage revealed that only a minority of respondents knew the five points in the accord. The one they did know – Quebec as a “distinct society” -- was considered not on its implications but on its symbolism. Since most Canadians then got most of their information from television, it was a revealing moment when one of the country’s leading television broadcasters admitted later that, despite television’s best efforts, his medium was not very good at explaining complicated matters.

Secondly, Regional media outlets pay attention to provincial governments and their role in the federation, although these outlets are shrinking in size and capabilities. The outlets report what provincial authorities say and do at home, and when those authorities are briefly on the national stage. In the six Canadian equalization-receiving provinces, they report what share of the provincial budget comes from Ottawa under that scheme. They focus, in other words, on the provincial scene, which is appropriate given the important services provinces deliver: health, roads and public transit,

welfare, education. And they generally echo but do not challenge assertions from provincial governments about Ottawa's shortcomings. They usually root for the home team.

The shrinkage of media resources within federal states is more evident in provincial/state coverage because the number of reporters laid off, the newspapers that have disappeared, the radio stations that have gone silent are more evident locally than nationally. Formerly great regional nameplate newspapers throughout North America are shadows of their former selves.

What has gone missing with the shrinkage of media resources is not just coverage within one region but also of what governments and populations in other regions are thinking and doing. In an ideal world, citizens in one region should have available information about their region and information about their national government and perspectives from other parts of the federation. Otherwise, federations become silos with a sense of national purpose withering.

This third perspective – knowing how others in the federation feel – used to be somewhat more available in Canada. There were several national newspaper chains – FP Publications and Southam News – with correspondents across the country. Their coverage from, say, Alberta would then be available to editors in the chain elsewhere in Canada. These national news services are now gone. Individual newspapers such as the Toronto Star closed bureaus across the country. What remains by way of national coverage is The Canadian Press wire service and correspondents from The Globe and Mail, although the number of these correspondents has been reduced.

In French-speaking Quebec, there never was much out-of-province coverage. Except briefly, when La Presse newspaper opened a bureau in Toronto, no French-language newspaper or private television network ever had a correspondent anywhere in Canada outside of Quebec. When challenged on this gap, the reasons offered by Quebec media leaders were lack of resources, lack of interest by staff to work outside Quebec, lack of interest among readers. English-language media until recently all had correspondents (and often many of them) in Quebec. But the French-language media remained stubbornly parochial, even though in previous times the media was profitable in the province.

In the debates over secession, Quebec citizens were only vaguely aware of what they could expect if the province voted to leave Canada. They had little or no sense of the interests at stake in the rest of the country and how governments there would mobilize to defend them in the event of Quebec secession. In a sense, their lack of awareness about the attitudes in the rest of the country was not their fault, due to their media's scant coverage of developments outside Quebec. Quebecers therefore labored under the illusion that the rest of Canada, with three times more people than Quebec

would somehow consent to accepting whatever demands Quebec might make so that the path to an independent Quebec would be walk in the park. The same kind of illusions infected Brexiteers who imagined all sorts of erroneous assumptions of how much the European Union would be forced to “give” Britain. But that is another story.

Radio-Canada, the government-subsidized network, is the exception in Quebec. It does provide coverage of the rest of Canada. Even Radio-Canada’s coverage often portrays federalism as a bilateral affair between Ottawa and Quebec with little appreciation of the multilateral dynamics of the entire federal system.

As antidote to shrinking media resources, and therefore coverage, the federal government has proposed a series of fiscal measures designed to help the media. These Canadian measures reflect uneasiness in other countries, too, about the decline of traditional media and the growth of social media giants, U.S.-based and -owned, that take and disseminate material from local sources without paying for it.

Quebec has gone even further in attempts to assist the media in the province through tax breaks. The main broadsheet newspaper, La Presse, has been turned by its previous owners, Power Corporation, into a charity. Whether these measures will help secure the media’s financial future remains to be seen.

It is a sign of the shrinking coverage in so much of the Canadian media, (and media elsewhere in English-speaking federations), how many Canadians are now subscribing digitally to foreign news sources: the New York Times, The Washington Post, The Economist, The Guardian. But, of course, these outlets are only episodically interested in Canada (although the New York Times has made a major investment in covering Canada), and among the stories the foreign media will not cover in Canada is federalism. That is a story, with all its intricacies, for Canadians alone.

But media trends do illustrate that at least for English-speaking readers there is both a broadening and a localizing of content now available, courtesy of the digital age. Whether this will assist understanding of the dynamics of federalism within countries is doubtful.

Someone in Adelaide, Australia, or Calgary, Alberta can subscribe to international publications at the push of a button and thereby be connected to a range of information likely not available even in the national media of Australia or Canada. Digital, in this sense, shrinks the world and can make citizens better informed. On the home front, in the face of the decline of traditional media, have appeared small but often lively digital websites that focus exclusively on the very local. The trouble

is that these worthy local endeavours lack the advertising traditional media use to have, and so tend to operate on shoestring budgets with few, although dedicated, staff.

In this changing media environment, public broadcasters stand out for their national scope and relatively stable funding. As national entities, however, they tend to pay attention disproportionately to national governments, and in a federal country such as Nigeria, where local governments are relatively powerless, the national media pays them little heed.

In one sense, these broadcasters are the enemy of traditional media, hitting struggling regional/local media particularly hard. When, some years ago, newspapers and television tended to compete for different advertising streams, there was enough money for both to be profitable. But now, as both newspapers and public televisions try to expand their digital offerings, they compete for the same advertisers. Except that the state broadcasters are backstopped by public funding, whereas the private media interests are not. Private newspapers and broadcasters are therefore competing with one hand tied behind their backs against the publicly funded state broadcasters. (Public broadcasting in the United States – PBS and NPR – is not supported by state money but by listener contributions and private advertising.)

The relative strength of public broadcasting can intensify issues surrounding relationships with governments. Nigerian observers suggest that in their country the public broadcaster carries the government's suitcases. And it is generally the case that conservative political parties, in and out of power, tend to view state-owned broadcasters as left-of-centre in their coverage, which is certainly true of Canada where the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has become haven for identity politics and grievance-centred coverage [2].

Indeed, it might be argued in some federations (Canada being one, with perhaps Australia and U.S. reflecting some of these trends) that the traditional coverage of federalism of relations and conflicts between the levels of government has been eclipsed by coverage of identity politics. The older cleavages in all federations among regions, language groups, and two levels of government, while still around, seem to be yielding in the North American federations' media to newer ones around racial identities which know no federal boundaries and make for a very different kinds of national discussion.

[2] CBC. 1994. '1.1.1 CBC Mandate'.

See Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's official website:

<https://cbc.radio-canada.ca/en/vision/governance/programming-policies/programming-mandate>

This is the author's interpretation of these mandates.