



Not just any news, it's city news

November 11, 2008

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You'd be hard-pressed to find a city this side of the Atlantic better served by news media, especially newspapers. So what do we need in Toronto, where your feet get you there faster than the Queen St. streetcar outside city hall? Another newsletter – this one paid for by your tax dollars.

Oh, this one is different. It'll be a propaganda sheet to disseminate news that's been carefully crafted to paint the politicians in the most positive light. But you need this.

You know there is just not enough "good news" written about the good councillors you pay good money to provide good government oversight at 100 Queen St. W.

After all, who can trust those "nattering nabobs of negativity," otherwise known as the news media, to get the word out to unsuspecting citizens.

Toronto is littered with four daily mainstream newspapers, ethnic daily newspapers, several subway dailies distributed free, and a string of weekly and monthly publications, all vying for your attention. Journalists work 'round the clock competing against each other to bring you every tidbit of information. And on any given day you can comfort or afflict yourself with news and analysis written from disparate points of view.

Sounds like a healthy democracy, doesn't it? Maybe, too much so.

Apparently, this vigorous marketplace of ideas doesn't sit well with the mind-benders at city hall. They've figured that they need to get their news out exactly how they want to – unfiltered and masked – and it will cost you twice as much it does now. The new offering, *Our Toronto*, hits your mailbox this week, and you'd better enjoy reading it because it costs \$800,000 to get it to you.

Never mind that there is little here that you haven't read in the *Mirror* or *Times* or *Era* or *Banner* or *Post* or *Metro* or *Star* or *Share* or *Sing Tao* or *Corriere* or *Etc.* or *Now*.

Several of the smaller publications, challenged with rising costs and fewer staff, reproduce verbatim news releases churned out by the city's numerous communications specialists. But that's not enough. City hall aims to control the talking points, direct the

news, manage the news agenda.

The strategy kicked into gear as soon as Mayor David Miller was re-elected. His communications staff started attacking the picayune points of departure from the mayor's dogma. If the mayor says it's raining and a reporter suggests it is drizzling, expect a memo, maybe even a letter to the editor, describing the difference between the two, replete with documentary evidence of the history of precipitation.

Not satisfied with that, the city has entered into the publishing business, no doubt showing the professionals how to run a paper.

The first edition opens up to a letter from the mayor, spread across two pages, picture appended, of course. The mayor's visage or name is on nearly a third of the pages. And when his name or title doesn't appear, language directly from his election brochure is substituted.

There is one great page: How can we help? But the type is so tiny and faded as to challenge the aged among us. And it is the kind of information that could be added to the recreation guides, water or tax bill, councillors' newsletters or e-news bulletin. In other words, there are ample outlets to get the word out to citizens.

Currently, the city spends \$400,000 on newsletters for waste and water and transit. *Our Toronto* consolidates them. But instead of saving money, *Our Toronto* morphs into an \$800,000 expenditure.

All this in a city strapped for cash.

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