For much of this summer, the international news headlines covered the travails of the Rupert Murdoch empire. The tabloid predators found themselves as prey, with legions of paparazzi chasing down the media barons. Testifying before the British House of Commons, Murdoch admitted that, to escape their prying eyes, he had entered 10 Downing Street by the back door to visit current Prime Minister David Cameron. When politicians feigned shock, he explained that he had used the back door route to visit previous PM Gordon Brown.

The ‘hacking scandal’ consumed the legendary News of the World. It was shut down in a desperate attempt by Murdoch to protect his efforts to take over yet another network, SkyTV.

Murdoch’s empire is enormous—the second largest in the world. It includes the Wall Street Journal and Fox News. In additional to extensive holdings in the UK, US, and Australia he owns TV holdings in Hong Kong and beyond.

So while the US FBI begins to investigate potential hacking of phone records in the US, does any of this hold lessons for Canada?

Murdoch has been influential in Canadian politics. Over lunch at Davos with Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his then communications director Kory Teneycke, Murdoch is alleged to have persuaded them of the benefits of having a hard right TV network in Canada. Teneycke left PMO and went to Quebecor to head up the embryonic SUN-TV.

Whether Murdoch had a hand in the creation of SUN-TV or not, there is no doubt of the influence of his model. The point was made powerfully on July 8 in an unrelated event.

A relatively unknown young CTV bureau chief, Kai Nagata, posted a blog headed ‘Why I quit my job.’ The posting went viral on the internet and became an immediate topic on most news networks. (Posted at: http://thetyee.ca/Mediacheck/2011/07/11/KaiNagata/). It is all worth reading, but I found this comment particularly compelling:

‘Consider Fox News. What the Murdoch model demonstrated was that facts and truth could be replaced by ideology, with viewership and revenue going up. Simply put, you can tell less truth and make more money. When you have to balance the interests of your shareholders against the interests of the viewers you supposedly serve, the firewall between the boardroom and the newsroom becomes a very important bulwark indeed.’

How strong is the Canadian firewall? How much freedom is felt by our press? How much truth gets told?

In my last book, I set out the history of unheeded warnings about concentration and vertical integration of corporate media ownership. As far back as the Davey Commission in the 1960s, we have been warned. The Kent Commission report in the 1980s described the fact that so much of the Canadian news media ownership was in so few hands as ‘monstrous.’ And the situation has become far more concentrated now.

Things have changed since 2009 when my book came out. The giant CanWest empire broke apart when the Aspers over-extended their corporate reach, going deeply into hock to buy Australian media.

The result was that the television assets of CanWest and its newspapers were sold to different corporations. Global TV was purchased by Shaw Cable, which also owns 20 specialty channels and 20 online operations. Shaw Media’s website boasts it brings us ‘Canada’s most trusted entertainment news show, Entertainment Tonight.”
The 46 CanWest daily papers, including flagship and famously unprofitable National Post, should have been open to any bidder to break up the unhealthy degree of corporate control, but the trustees in bankruptcy only accepted bids for all 46 papers (including all BC’s dailies). Paul Godfrey, ideologically aligned with the National Post’s historical editorial stance, bought all 46 for over $1 billion. The Green Party suggested CanWest’s bankruptcy was the perfect time to expand the number of owners of Canadian media and sell the papers (or at least offer the papers for sale) to the highest bidder. No media covered our press release.

BellGlobe Media is another huge player, owning 28 TV stations, including CTV, 15% of the Globe and Mail, 29 specialty channels, 33 radio stations, including big players in Toronto and Ottawa CFRA and CFRB, as well as dozens of online products and internet networks (such as Sympatico).

Quebecor controls Sun Media as a wholly owned subsidiary. That conglomerate is the largest newspaper publisher in Canada, including 43 paid and free dailies (including the once great London Free Press, Kingston Whig-Standard and Peterborough Examiner), as well as 200 community papers (they bought up Osprey), as well as the new channel SUN-TV, and the largest commercial TV station in Quebec—TVA. Quebecor also runs Canoe providing English and French internet properties, online servers, and a host of other companies, now known as media properties.

If this were a board game, it would be called Monopoly. We have CBC and Radio-Canada, but as Kai Nagata pointed out (he worked at CBC before CTV), CBC brass has made all reporters terrified of expressing what could be construed as a left-wing opinion.

Look for an independent newspaper in Canada? We have two large dailies that fall outside the Bell, Shaw and Quebecor conglomerates—the Chronicle Herald in Halifax (owned by the Dennis family) and the Toronto Star, owned by a trust, Torstar. Small, but mighty, we have Island Tides. And brave independent journalism from The Tyee.

We need a serious policy debate in this country. With eyes on Murdoch, maybe we are ready to look at our own news media and see if new tools are needed. Current competition laws only operate to hold in check the price of papers. CRTC only looks at Canadian content. Bottom line—we need anti-trust laws to break up excessive media control in 5-6 hands for the whole country.