18. The Linguistic Distribution of the Press in Québec

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It has become a permanent feature of Québec history: media there are born bilingual. This was the case with television in 1952 and with public radio in 1936. This was also the case for nearly a quarter of a century with the first Canadian newspapers. And, when the phenomenon began to ebb at the beginning of the nineteenth century, an Anglophone press in full vitality emerged, which contrasted with a Francophone press which had long been anaemic.

From the founding of the first newspaper, La Gazette du Québec / The Quebec Gazette, in June 1764, to the very beginning of the nineteenth century, bilingual publications had almost absolute supremacy. Eight of the nine newspapers established between 1764 and 1804 were bilingual. The only exception was La Gazette littéraire, the first newspaper entirely in French, launched by Fleury Mesplet in 1778, which survived only a year.

At first glance, this seemingly equal treatment of the two linguistic communities whose respective demographic weights were nevertheless totally disproportionate appears to be surprising. In 1764, at the time of the publication of The Quebec Gazette/Gazette de Québec, there were 300 Anglophones in the province versus 65,000 Francophones, that is to say less than 0.5 per cent of the population. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, this proportion did not reach 10 per cent of a total population of 250,000 inhabitants. The explanation for this must
therefore lie in the socio-cultural character of each of the two communities. Regardless of their number, Anglophones, more educated and more preoccupied with the news because of their duties and activities, as well as having already acquired a certain experience of newspapers and being wealthier (at a time when newspapers were almost a luxury item)\(^9\), thus represented a privileged clientele for printers. All the more so as their numerical inferiority was compensated by their concentration in Québec City and Montréal where, at the time, all newspapers were launched. Anglophones also supplied most of the advertising during these laborious early stages, which often enabled printers to balance their budgets. Canadians, although a strong majority, were scattered over the entire territory and were not very literate, not very familiar with the press, less wealthy and their activities did not give them a natural inclination towards newspapers. However, there was a cultivated elite among Francophones which, at the end of the eighteenth century, constituted a small professional and merchant bourgeoisie of over a thousand people, concentrated in Québec City and Montréal, which the newspaper owners could not overlook. The bilingual formula, aimed at both linguistic groups, could thus reach a critical mass of subscribers. This calculation is justified by the few circulation figures available. For the years 1770 to 1794, the 300 to 500 subscribers of *The Quebec Gazette/Gazette de Québec* were distributed almost equally between the two groups; after 1794, the number of Francophones fell and stabilized around 42 per cent and around 45 per cent at the turn of the century.\(^{10}\) An evaluation carried out for the *Montreal Gazette/Gazette de Montréal* at the end of the 1780s produces similar proportions.
Of course, this situation also illustrates the status of the languages in Lower Canada and justifies the bilingual nature of the first newspapers. French, the language of the overwhelming majority, could not be overlooked. Yet, on account of the Conquest, it was considered a “language of translation.” In the newspapers of the era, the English text came first and the French section was usually just its translation. This priority was also emphasized in the layout: the traditionally privileged left-hand column was reserved for English with French occupying the right-hand column. Furthermore, this priority can also be attributed to the situation at the time. On the one hand, the vast majority of newspapers were in the hands of Anglophones. On the other hand, the subject matter of these publications was taken directly from foreign newspapers which were essentially British or American. The French text was thus inevitably a translation. A noteworthy fact is that the contents were more or less perfectly identical in both languages.

This situation changed significantly during the first half of the nineteenth century. First, English and French texts began to differ. The translation on the opposite page represented a waste of time, space and money on account of the additional costs involved, while at the same time knowledge of both languages was progressing. Moreover, this evolution heralded the difficult birth of an independent French-language press.

The second major change was the sharp drop in the number of bilingual newspapers. These represented less than 5 per cent of the 160 newspapers launched between 1805 and 1845. In 1845, of the 32 papers published during the year, only one was written in both languages. This shift to unilingualism coincides precisely with the politicization process which strongly marked
the Lower Canada press from 1804-1805 onwards. The dividing line between the two sides largely coincides with the one separating the two linguistic groups. Publications of a political nature, the vast majority of which were widely distributed, naturally had to choose one language or the other. Moreover, there was a noticeable increase in the number of Anglophones, from nearly 20,000 in 1800 to 170,000 in 1841. Still concentrated in Québec City and Montréal, from that time on they represented a sufficient market to support a press exclusively in English. However, in 1845, they still represented only 24 per cent of the population. And yet, the number of newspapers they supported was inversely proportional to their demographic weight. Indeed, of the 160 publications launched during this first half of the nineteenth century, 92 were in English as opposed to 61 in French. Alexis de Tocqueville, when passing through Lower Canada in 1831, pointed this out: “Almost all the newspapers printed in Canada are in English.”

Similarly, in August 1837, the editor of the *Populaire* complained:

There is a shameful disproportion between French-language and English-language newspapers printed in the province of Lower Canada. In view of the vast majority of those who demand the use of French, this inequality becomes even more striking. A foreigner would be unable to conceive how 4 public papers could suffice for 400,000 French descendants, while 100,000 English manage to support 10 periodicals (August 10, 1837).

With immigration intensifying during these decades, Anglophones certainly considerably increased their numbers. Yet a more decisive factor in the increase of newspapers seems to have been the heterogeneity of this Anglophone immigration: British, Americans, Irish and Scots each created newspapers to serve their specific interests and express their particular values, thus multiplying the birth rate of the Anglophone press.
In comparison, the Francophone press was developing with difficulty. Newspaper owners and editors lamented the situation. They condemned the “lack of support” from their compatriots and attributed its cause “to their attitude of indifference” towards public affairs, “to their lack of curiosity” and “to their lack of interest in reading.” Furthermore, Canadians were bad debtors and newspapers were constantly renewing reminders to recover one, two, even three or four years of subscription… if they managed to survive that long. And, of course, the death rate of Francophone newspapers was distinctly superior to that of English-language publications.

The law of numbers, then, did not apply during these decades. Instead, the linguistic distribution of the Québec press reveals the balance of power established between the two groups. According to Hector Langevin, the 1837-1838 political crisis, which at first provoked a drastic thinning out in the French-language press, also led to a new awareness: in 1855 he wrote that a Canadian had realized “that to assert his expectations and wishes, he needed to have mouthpieces.”