

FRAMING THE
PHILANTHROPIC RELATIONSHIP
WITH NEWS MEDIA COMPANIES:

The Atkinson Foundation and
Toronto Star Experience

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INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the Atkinson Foundation and the Toronto Star formed a relationship to create a “work and wealth” beat, adding a full-time, renewable contract position to the Star’s newsroom. Three years later, these two separate legal entities created a second beat focused on democratic renewal, including electoral reform and innovative civic engagement strategies.

The first of its kind in Canada, this “philanthro-journalism” experiment is part of Atkinson’s ten-year program to tackle rising inequality by creating more decent work, more equitable economic growth, and more civic engagement that benefits everyone -- especially those who are persistently excluded. These projects follow the example set by the Ford Foundation and the Los Angeles Times in responding to coverage deficits created by economic and technological disruption in the media industry.

Back in 2012, Ford recognized the critical connection between journalism and democracy, and the need for innovative philanthropic strategies to keep everyone informed and engaged during confusing times. “Our interest is in supporting principled journalistic coverage of complex social issues. How that is done is entirely up to the newsrooms.” Ford’s investment expanded four different beats “to make sure complicated issues get the deep, broad and nuanced coverage they deserve.”

A similar commitment and comparable interests brought Atkinson and the Star together. Atkinson was concerned about the coverage of labour issues in the run up to Ontario’s Changing Workplaces Review, scheduled to start in 2015. Further, the introduction of a federal Minister of Democratic Renewal in 2015 raised flags about the dearth of accessible information on the Minister’s mandate and activities, and the field of democratic innovation.

Since its inception, Atkinson has monitored the role of the media in a democracy as a watchdog for those whose voices are often not heard and are excluded from decisions that affect them. People and communities that have historically benefited from Canadian charitable tax law (e.g. anyone living in poverty) continue to be a higher priority for the foundation than the media industry’s innovation process.

After considering a range of philanthropic strategies, Atkinson decided to enter into a contractual relationship with the Toronto Star to establish a “work and wealth” beat. This contract is pursuant to the foundation’s charitable objects and in keeping with its usual administrative procedures for vendors. The Star’s robust corporate culture, with its emphasis on initiative and enterprise alongside editorial principles tied to social and economic justice, is compatible with the foundation’s mission, guiding principles and values. The company has a large, diverse and national audience -- over 3.3 million weekly readers in print alone. This reach has the potential to deliver a significant return on Atkinson’s investment.

Atkinson-Star projects are overseen by the foundation and managed day-to-day by the newsroom. This relationship is grounded in the principle that the paper has complete editorial and managerial independence. These beats were created in consultation with Unifor Local 87-M and are subject to the company’s human resources policies and practices.

The Atkinson-Star relationship depends on a set of guiding principles and practices -- guardrails that keep projects on track and deliver desired outcomes.

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

Journalistic ethics. The foundation expects the media company to operate within its professional ethical framework and through professionally trained journalists who act solely in the interests of readers -- without input or interference from sponsors or advertisers.

Editorial and managerial independence. The foundation protects the media company from perceptions of bias and utilizes the company's full capacity to produce high-calibre investigative journalism -- editors, fact checkers, legal counsel, and other supports that reduce risk and ensure quality.

Impact measurement. The foundation monitors the media company's coverage and ensures it is reporting stories and issues within the scope of the contract and which would not otherwise be adequately covered during a transitional period in the media industry.

Contract carefully. The following factors must be considered in the contracting process:

- *If you are a registered charity, the contract must demonstrate that the project is pursuant to your charitable objects.* For Atkinson, this means being clear that the foundation does not provide funding or grants for newsgathering. Atkinson-Star projects are about the inequality of voice that exists in society and that is, in part, mitigated by public interest journalists. James Wolfensohn, a one-time president of the World Bank, says it best:

"What differentiates poor people from rich people, is lack of voice. The inability to be represented. The inability to convey to the people in authority what it is they think. The inability to have a searchlight put on the conditions of inequality ... a free press is absolutely vital to that objective. Freedom of the press is not a luxury. It is not an extra. It is absolutely at the core of equitable development."

- *The contract must clearly identify the governance/accountability structure for the relationship.* Atkinson, represented by its Executive Director, entered into a renewable annual agreement for services with the Star represented by its Editor. Atkinson maintains control over the use of resources, and delegates authority for day-to-day decisions to the Star. The Star assumes legal liability for the projects. Atkinson has a copyright provision in each contract to authorize its use of the Star's content.
- *The process for setting and monitoring results and impact must be determined upfront.* Atkinson regularly monitors the projects through annual reports generated by an external consultant and by the Star. The foundation tracks article output, print placement, online reach, popularity, impact and influence. A key metric is whether or not an issue would be adequately covered if the beat did not exist.

- *The contract must respect the media company's existing human resources policies and practices.* The Atkinson-Star projects are subject to the Star's collective agreement and corporate human resources policies. Atkinson reserves the right to approve the choice of final candidate for the beat reporting position.

LEARNINGS SO FAR

Over 75 years, Atkinson has made substantial investments in the field of journalism – from the first graduate-level journalism education program for Indigenous students to the Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy for seasoned reporters. Demand continues to outstrip available resources. The foundation is committed, however, to playing its part in the evolution of philanthropic strategies to mitigate inequality through high quality public interest journalism. Atkinson has drawn four conclusions from the experience so far:

- *Never underestimate the importance of shared commitment, principles, and trust built over time.* While Atkinson and the Star are autonomous entities, they share DNA and have been long-time collaborators. Cultural compatibility and a high degree of strategic alignment may be the key to a successful relationship given the fast-moving, volatile and unpredictable world of investigative reporting and the mission-driven world of philanthropy.
- *Investments in communications and journalism are fundamentally different.* Communications is about enrolling stakeholders, including the media, in a cause and persuading them of its efficacy. Journalism is about informing citizens to support their engagement with the governments that represent them and the public policy decisions that affect them. Atkinson's communications objectives are compatible with this investment, but they are secondary to strategic objectives related to coverage deficits on issues related to income and wealth inequality. It follows that expectations for outcomes and impact are different too.
- *Expanded coverage of decent work and other justice-related issues should not create more precarious work and injustice.* Philanthropic investments in a for-profit or non-profit media company have to take into account its capacity to treat reporters, and those who ensure the quality of their work, fairly. The presence of a union at the Star and management's engagement with union leaders on the beat indicates an appropriate level of workplace democracy.
- *Editorial independence and other professional standards/ethics must be protected.* The credibility of journalists and media outlets supported by philanthropic investments is at risk when credit or editorial input and control are expected. The full value of this investment will only be realized when readers see this philanthropic strategy as a necessary and essential intervention on behalf of those who simply do not have the means to independently drive market forces in the media industry.

CONCLUSION

It is not yet clear to Atkinson if changes to federal laws defining and governing charitable activity are necessary. A focus on the ends (equality of voice and opportunity) should be more important than the means (public interest journalism). For this reason, Atkinson is supporting the Public Policy Forum's research into this issue. At the same time, the foundation is continuing to learn from responding to the immediate and urgent challenges posed by a growing number of coverage deficits and news deserts.

Even as this national debate continues, Canada needs more philanthropists, media companies and journalists who are ready to acknowledge the negative impact of coverage deficits in a democratic society. In particular, this country must pursue transitional strategies like the one developed by Atkinson and the Star. Turning a blind eye to the disappearance of labour reporting or the emergence of a federal democratic renewal portfolio until media companies develop new business models is not an option.

There are large segments of the population who need access to relevant information now to participate fully in our democratic processes -- or they will be disenfranchised and unable to exercise their rights. "Workers are less scared of organizing when the press is covering them," wrote Mike Elk in the Pacific Standard two years ago. He says it's up to media workers and workers of all types to build a movement to write about the situation of workers today.

It is this emerging movement, informed by Toronto Star journalists like Sara Mojtehdzadeh and Sabrina Nanji, that Atkinson looks to for the reporting that will counter the rapid rise in inequality of voice, means and opportunity in Canada today.

For more information on the Atkinson-Star Projects, please contact:

Colette Murphy, Executive Director, Atkinson Foundation

cmurphy@atkinsonfoundation.ca

Pat Thompson, Director of Social Impact, Atkinson Foundation

pthompson@atkinsonfoundation.ca