



# The Brief

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## From bad to worse? J.D. Irving sells newspapers to Postmedia

By TRACY GLYNN



**The Carleton Free Press announced it was closing in 2008 after one year of operation in Woodstock. Editor Ken Langdon blamed the Irving-owned Brunswick News for making it impossible for his newspaper to survive.**  
Photo from The Carleton Free Press.

Media watchers in New Brunswick, including the NB Media Co-op, have long criticized the Irving group of companies’ cross-ownership of media and various industrial interests in the province. However, media critics are not celebrating the news of Postmedia’s purchase of Irving’s newspapers.

“Postmedia has a history of syndicating racist commentators and platforming far-right pundits across their chain so we can expect New Brunswick to become the latest battleground for these cynical attempts to divide our communities, something that the Irving media has also done,” said Aditya Rao with the NB Media Co-op.

“The Postmedia purchase of J.D. Irving’s newspapers also means that New Brunswick, which is already a news desert, will see even less accountability and news coverage than it currently does if this deal goes through,” added Rao.

Late on Thursday night, February 17, Postmedia Network Inc. announced they were buying several assets of Brunswick News Inc., including newspapers, a parcel delivery service and proprietary distribution software. Brunswick News is owned by J.D. Irving Ltd.

The approximate \$15 million deal involves the purchase of New Brunswick’s three dailies, *Telegraph-Journal*, *Times & Transcript* and *The Daily Gleaner*.

Besides the dailies, the fate of local newspapers, *Miramichi Leader*, Woodstock’s *Bugle-Observer*, Bathurst’s *Northern Light*, Sussex’s *Kings County Record*, Campbellton’s *Tribune*, and Grand Falls’ *Victoria Star* has also been questioned with the change in their ownership.

From Brunswick News, Postmedia has also bought French language newspapers, *L’Étoile* and *InfoWeekend*, and the printing shop that prints the province’s only French language daily newspaper, *L’Acadie Nouvelle*.

Postmedia is majority-owned by the American hedge fund, Chatham Asset Management. They boast ownership of 120 brands in Canada, including *The National Post*, *The Financial Post*, *Vancouver Sun*, *Calgary Herald*, *Edmonton Journal*, *Ottawa Citizen*, *Windsor Star*, and *The London Free Press*.

Postmedia was founded in 1998 by right-wing media baron Conrad Black. Black later spent time in a Florida prison for fraud and obstruction of justice. Donald Trump later pardoned Black, after he had written a flattering biography of the then U.S. president. Today, Black’s columns regularly appear in *The National Post*.

### What’s good for Postmedia is good for Irving

Erin Steuter is a sociologist at Mount Allison University who specializes in critical media studies. She has studied Irving’s media monopoly, including the dangers of the Irvings covering themselves as well as Irving’s dominant pro-business narrative.

“Irvings were ruthless in shutting down competitors and if they are getting out of the narrative management game, then some new voices may be allowed to emerge,” said Steuter. “The papers are presenting the view that what’s good for the Irving company is good for the province,” Steuter told the NB Media Co-op in 2010 when the province of New Brunswick proposed to sell NB Power to Hydro-Québec.

New Brunswick, one of the poorest provinces in Canada, is home to two Irving billionaires, Arthur Irving and James Irving.

Alain Deneault, a tax haven scholar and critic, has studied how the Irvings have made themselves billionaires by avoiding paying taxes.

“I am reminded of a hard-hitting sentence by Toronto journalist Diane Francis: ‘New Brunswick is a company town owned by the Irving family.’ But technically, that ownership is held in a series of trusts in Bermuda. Now that the family is divesting itself of its newspaper titles, it at least gives the appearance of greater independence on the part of journalists but the problem of the concentration of the media remains and is considerably detrimental to public debate,” said Deneault.

K.C. Irving’s son Jim Irving is the current owner of J.D. Irving Ltd. K.C. Irving entered the newspaper business after buying a Saint John weekly newspaper, *Maritime Broadcaster*, in 1936. By 1968, his company had bought all five English-language daily newspapers in the province.

With the Postmedia acquisition of Brunswick News Inc., the Irvings, Canada’s eighth richest family in 2015, are not completely out of the media business in Atlantic Canada.

Acadia Broadcasting, owned by Ocean Capital Investments, is a holding company that has represented the interests of John E. Irving’s group of companies. In 2018, the Irving Oil Family Trust made a deal with the John E. Irving family to take over control of Irving Oil.

Acadia Broadcasting owns Huddle, a digital business-focused media outlet, and 15 radio stations in Atlantic Canada and Ontario. John K.F. Irving is the president of Ocean Capital Investments. Besides broadcasting, Ocean Capital Investments has interests in real estate, construction, and petroleum service.

### Controlling information, winning elections

Besides media ownership, there are other ways that the Irvings control information. Irving companies are private companies so there is little information available to the public about their operations.

During the 2021 hearings where Irving Oil unsuccessfully sought to increase its fuel prices, Irving refused to disclose important information about their business practices. Not the media but anti-poverty groups, the Common Front for Social Justice and Grassroots NB, and the Canadian Union

## Legitimate grievances of truckers overshadowed by agitators

By MICHAEL FLEMING

Though truckers were supposed to be the central actors in the convoy protests in February that led to invocation of the *Emergencies Act*, the social grievances of truckers themselves have been strangely absent from any of the public discussion.

Just like the 1971 film *Duel*, which revolves around a deranged and unknown truck driver who terrorizes an unsuspecting salesman in the lawless landscape of the California desert, the unseen driver and his motives remain a mystery, receding behind the figure of their menacing truck.

The imagery generated by the spectre of threatening trucks and their anonymous drivers so skillfully brought to life in *Duel* has had a lasting impact on popular culture. The result has been that in even the best of times, truck driving is dismissed by some as a job of last resort chosen only by those with few other choices.

Of course, these are not the best of times for Canada’s often unseen truck drivers. It is precisely their anonymity and the symbolic menace of their trucks that have made them the ideal conduit for the sort of disruption and chaos anti-mandate protesters thrive on.

As the convoy rolled into Ottawa in February, it didn’t take long for the truck drivers participating in the protest, which arguably was never *really* about them to begin with, to become the focus of negative attention from all fronts. As the protest drags on, in smaller numbers in Ottawa but in satellite locations throughout the country, its many audiences have focussed almost entirely on the trucks themselves, as objectified representations of pent-up pandemic-driven, aggression, danger, radicalism, and menace.

As someone who has dedicated my professional life to championing the motivations truck drivers have for doing their demanding, lonely, and highly skilled work, it was first with interest and even a little excitement that I watched the growth of the so-called Freedom Convoy. Early on, I was encouraged by the renewed support for truck drivers who had once again been thrust into the pandemic spotlight.

COVID-19 pandemic was not all bad for truck drivers, after all. In the early days of the pandemic, truckers were one of the first groups to be valorized as essential workers. Recall the images of makeshift community-led drive-throughs providing meals for pandemic weary and stranded drivers as they delivered our essential goods.

Even before the convoy reached Ottawa, however, it was becoming clear that any space for legitimate discussion of Canadian truck drivers’ concerns was becoming quickly overshadowed by the motivations of opportunistic agitators, including the tiny percentage of truck drivers rolling into Ottawa, aligned with a wide range of largely anti-government grievances.

Discussion of truckers’ well-being was quickly subordinated to the convoluted demands of nationalist, sometimes white supremacist, and otherwise ill-conceived anti-vaccination, and anti-Trudeau rhetoric. Very quickly, it seemed, truck drivers – the apparent *raison d’être* of the convoy – stood to lose far more than they bargained for by supporting the demonstration, in person or otherwise.

Let me be clear: the work truck drivers do is tireless, dangerous, and wrought with vulnerability that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. This is especially true for those who own their own trucks, including most of the truck drivers caught up in the convoy.

The question must be asked: how would early-pandemic-inspired goodwill towards truck drivers and the glimpse of awareness into their unenviable working conditions, have been mobilized if the convoy had actually been about truck drivers to begin with?

Organizers could have legitimized the roots of truckers’ demands instead of diverting public attention

**Michael Fleming.** Photo submitted.

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of Public Employees (CUPE), had to press Irving for this information. In response, Irving chose to withdraw their application, considered a win by social justice groups accustomed to Irving getting its way.

In John Demont’s book, *Citizens Irving: K.C. Irving and His Legacy: The Story of Canada’s Wealthiest Family*, the author noted that one of K.C. Irving’s sons boasted that his father never lost an election in New Brunswick.

While J.D. Irving’s Brunswick News may not have officially endorsed one of the only two parties to ever govern in New Brunswick in their editorials, Postmedia has directed the editorial boards of its newspapers to endorse the Conservative Party of Canada.

“Postmedia systematically bullied the editors of their newspapers into endorsing the Harper Conservatives during the 2015 election. A month after the election, the Ottawa Citizen editorial board resigned in protest,” noted Rao.

Rao and Steuter are both worried that New Brunswick journalists will lose their jobs and that local content will suffer if Postmedia does what they are known to do: buy newspapers then shut them down. Postmedia is also known for turning local newspapers into advertising carriers.

Steuter notes that Irving’s influence over the media will not go away: “Irving’s will continue to have influence in media coverage of themselves in their capacity as advertisers for hundreds of companies.”

## Uncrossing the wires

Julian Walker, author of *Wires Crossed: Memoirs of a Citizen and Reporter in the Irving Press*, is a long-time critic of the Irving media monopoly. In his newly released book, he describes three national commissions on Canadian media that “viewed New Brunswick as the worst example of concentrated ownership and cross-ownership in the country.”

“While I see the end of the 75-year cross ownership between the Irving family media and its industrial holdings (beginning with KC Irving’s acquisition of the *Telegraph-Journal* in 1946) as a positive development, it does not relieve the federal government of its special obligation to the province of New Brunswick and its press,” said Walker.

Walker says the federal government showed leadership in supporting a more free press in the province when it forced the sale of CHSJ television and radio to CBC, clearing the way for the establishment of the province’s English CBC television station and three English CBC radio stations. Walker also notes that federal funds supported the establishment of New Brunswick’s French language daily newspaper, *L’Acadie Nouvelle*.

“The obligation on the feds with the sale of Irving media holdings to the Postmedia conglomerate is all the more real because the senior level of government looked the other way on the Irving acquisition after the year 2000 of all remaining independent weeklies in the province, except for the *Saint Croix Courier*. There is much more that the federal government needs to do,” said Walker.

Walker wants to see the federal government put in place a special trust fund to back a new independent, digital daily to serve the province.

While J.D. Irving shedding its newspapers was a shock to some and long expected by others, the Postmedia purchase has media watchers thinking about how to increase media literacy when white supremacist and hate groups deploy fake news and other subtle and not so subtle strategies on social media to win supporters.

The NB Media Co-op hopes to continue increasing media literacy in the province as it grows, hires reporters to provide local media coverage, and collaborates with

other independent media outlets such as CHCO TV and CHMA to create a more healthy information ecosystem in the province.

In 2015, the NB Media Co-op collaborated with *Canadaland*, known for its critical commentary on the media, to discuss JD Irving’s control of the media and forestry in the province.

“We cannot afford the Irving media monopoly in our province. We certainly will not be able to afford Postmedia’s relentless anti-worker, anti-immigrant and corporate-interest propaganda rags in New Brunswick. It is past time to break up these companies. Now, more than ever,” said Rao.

Tracy Glynn is the coordinating editor of the NB Media Co-op.

## Fossil and nuclear energy regimes threaten global security

By JANICE HARVEY

Vladimir Putin’s terror campaign against Ukraine has pulled back the curtain on the tightly integrated, brittle, and destructive energy regime that fuels the industrialized world. This regime poses an immediate threat to the survival of the people of Ukraine, and the longer-term survival of civilization itself. The deadly power of the troika of oil, gas and nuclear energy is unfolding before our eyes as Ukraine pays the price for a path all our countries have forged.

Energy is a source of two kinds of power – the kind that turns on lights, heats homes, and turns engines and the kind that drives politics. While there are many options for providing the energy services we all need, only some create authoritarian petrostates, transnational corporations with budgets larger than many nations, and billionaire oligarchs. Only some finance wars and inflict gross injustices on those in the paths of rigs and pipelines. Only some emit pollutants that kills millions every year. Only some create deadly wastes that will persist longer into the future than humans have walked on this Earth. Only some turn a conventional missile into a nuclear weapon. Only some destroy the climate that makes Earth liveable.

All these existential threats are associated with the global networks of political and economic power built by transnational energy corporations. Energy policy has long been dominated by ‘iron triangles’ of energy business interests, ‘client’-oriented energy bureaucrats, and captured politicians. Whether it is Putin’s transnational petrodollars, Western Europe’s energy tap line to Russia, or nuclear plants dotting the European landscape, governments and whole countries have become entangled in a dangerous, brittle system that now threatens global security.

The inevitable outcome is the world on a knife-edge.

In the midst of Russia’s oil-financed terror campaign, the international climate science body issued its latest report documenting our collective descent into climate hell. UN Secretary-General Guterres called the report ‘an atlas of human suffering and a damning indictment of failed climate leadership.’

Enter the nuclear industry. After languishing for decades in Western countries due to intractable liabilities, and a legitimacy crisis following narrow escapes and full-blown disasters at Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and Fukushima, opportunistic nuclear interests have seized on the climate emergency to promote itself as the ‘clean’ energy solution. This falsehood has now been exposed in Ukraine. Every nuclear reactor and nuclear waste storage site is a potential nuclear weapon, minus the blast and fireball. All Putin has to do to wreak radioactive havoc across Europe is target a nuclear facility or two with conventional missiles. Uncontrolled nuclear reactions and wind currents will do the rest.

Yet, the Liberal government’s climate action plan includes pouring hundreds of millions into an industry that would build modular nukes to export around the world, each one a target for a despot or a terrorist. This is all laid out in the federal “SMR Action Plan” that the nuclear industry helped to write, with funding disguised within the \$8 billion “Net Zero Accelerator”.

New Brunswick is vying to become the hub for producing this deadly commodity. Nuclear experts from the United States have exposed the security threat inherent in the plutonium feedstock – the stuff of nuclear weapons – that one of the New Brunswick models requires. But even without diverting that fuel into a nuclear weapons program, the plant only needs to exist to be a nuclear target.

The Ukraine catastrophe should be enough to halt nuclear expansion in its tracks. Trading one existential threat (fossil fuel dependency) for another (an even wider network of nuclear targets) is a callous, willful betrayal of the public trust by those politicians enabling it.

Equally perverse is the opportunistic clamouring of transnational oil interests invested in Canada and their political backers to quickly expand Canada’s oil and gas reach to Western Europe. Climate science couldn’t be more clear: the fossil fuel industry needs to wind down fast, not expand. What part of climate catastrophe do politicians not understand?

In June 1988, the Canadian government hosted the first international conference on climate change called,

Legitimate grievances of truckers

to the demonstrably minimal impact of vaccine mandates – 90 per cent of truck drivers are fully vaccinated, after all. Or, they could have brought the impacts of the race-to-the-bottom ethos of the deregulated trucking industry, which forces drivers into dangerous and sometimes illegal situations to survive, to the attention of the policymakers so often eager to see and be seen at the protest.

They could also have rallied media attention to the persistent inability of the trucking industry to professionalize the occupation – a vital step needed to replace a shortfall of 55,000 truck drivers in Canada by the end of 2023. Or, they could even have used the convoy’s social media presence (and considerable fundraising capacity) to draw attention to the toll that trucking takes on truckers’ and their families’ health and economic security, with many drivers struggling to survive amidst growing fuel and operating costs and stagnant or declining real wages.

Certainly, all these issues predated COVID-19 and the convoy, but instead of being empowered to demand change on any of these fronts, the only option for truck drivers involved was to honk for social change – anonymously and menacingly – in solidarity with a protest organization that is demonstrably less concerned with truck drivers than its own agenda.

Two weeks after the convoy rolled into Ottawa, and with similar protests popping up throughout the country, the only thing that is clear is the murky and confusing motivations, increasingly tangential to the truck drivers’ realities.

Ultimately, these protests will end. Money and energy will run out, and even the most stalwart of its supporters will return home. What does the finality offered by the convoy look like for its key supports and audiences?

While condemning the protest from afar, the trucking industry will undoubtedly stay the course by relying on its long-lived mantra – *If you’ve got it a truck brought it* – without any commitment to finding solutions for the very real problems it has created for truckers. The pandemic-weary public will remember only the menacing and disrupting behaviours that ground their lives to a halt.

In *Duel*, finality is achieved when the unseen driver’s truck is sent careening over a cliff and order is restored. For the truck drivers participating in the convoy, and indeed for the unseen majority of Canada’s 225,000 truck drivers who cannot afford the financial burden of protesting, the finality of the protest will come with no tangible gains, as they continue to teeter perilously close to the edge of a financial cliff.

Mike Fleming is acting president of FAUST, the faculty union at St. Thomas University. He engages in research on truck drivers, including truck drivers’ health and working conditions.

The Changing Atmosphere: Implications for Global Security. Prophetically, the final report of the conference opened with this statement: “Humanity is conducting an unintended, uncontrolled, globally pervasive experiment whose ultimate consequences could be second only to a global nuclear war.” Today, the world is simultaneously facing climate breakdown and the threat of nuclear catastrophe.

Fortunately, the means exist to deescalate on both fronts by embarking on a rapid transition to a resilient, efficient, locally-controlled renewable energy system. This option exists now, is the cheapest source of new power, and can be built out quickly, as the European Union’s REPowerEU initiative and Canadian studies demonstrate.

Political leaders in Canada and abroad have two choices before them. They can deepen domestic and global energy and security vulnerabilities and hasten climate breakdown by building more pipelines, escalating oil and gas production, and enabling the expansion of the nuclear industry. Or they can work towards the elimination of energy as a geopolitical weapon and an existential threat to civilization. It is up to us citizens to hold them accountable for the choice they make.

A version of this commentary was originally published in *The Hill Times*.

Janice Harvey is an Assistant Professor of Environment and Society at St. Thomas University. For 25 years, Harvey worked on environmental and energy policy at the Conservation Council of New Brunswick.

