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Communication 431

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Money, Mandates and the Masses: How Ownership Influences Election Coverage

All over the place, from the popular culture to the propaganda system, there is constant pressure to make people feel that they are helpless, that the only role they can have is to ratify decisions and to consume.
Noam Chomsky

Framing an important debate surrounding the role of the individual in democratic societies, Chomsky addresses the lack of opportunity citizens have to participate in the governance of their world. As consumer culture infiltrates all facets of social life, not even the political process is insulated from its reach. Election campaigns are increasingly dictated by financial constraints and private agendas; eroding the electoral process to a battle to be fought with twenty-second sound bites and political advertisements. As a central socializing agent, the mass media, particularly television, foster a milieu within which viewers are treated as such – spectators on the sidelines of the political ring. The democratic principle of power to the people is undermined, as

publicly owned news broadcasters illustrates how different structural systems may influence the final presentation of the news. Using the entirety of a democratic election campaign as a sample, this study aims to answer the following research question:

How do publicly and privately owned Canadian broadcasters differ in their coverage of the 2005 BC Provincial Election?

The most effective way of comparing privately and publicly owned broadcasters is to examine a specific broadcaster from each structural system. Global was selected as a private broadcaster because it is the most highly watched news program in BC and Canada, and therefore is very pertinent to this study. CBC is the only national public broadcaster in Canada, so naturally it was selected as the opposing broadcaster in this study.

Research Methodology & Logic

political orientation, gender and ethnicity, and amount of time quoted, to assess the quality and diversity of individuals used.

Overview of Public & Private Structural Systems

CBC and Global operate under fundamentally different structural systems, and as a result embrace distinctly different objectives. The purpose of this study is to determine how the objectives of each company are reflected in how they present the news. However, their mandates, financial resources, and corporate philosophy must first be identified.

CBC

to be responsible and to execute journalism in a comprehensive, accurate, and objective manner (Uzelman et al., 2005, p. 157).

The CBC relies primarily on parliamentary appropriation as a source of revenue. However, it is important to note that even though the CBC is a publicly owned company, not all of CBC's revenue comes from the government. In 2003/2004 the CBC was granted 933 million dollars i

and programs (Tracey, 1997, p. 267). The development of technologies presents a hindrance to public broadcasting as they have challenged the hegemony of national broadcasters world-wide (Tracey, 1997, p. 273). With political and public pressures, along with its dwindling audiences, the CBC is beginning to suffer from an “identity crisis” as its societal value is being questioned.

On a quest for survival, it must rely secondarily on ad revenue generated by higher ratings. In order to generate higher ratings, the CBC must ensure that its programming appeals to audiences - enough to be able to realistically compete against private broadcasters who have a financial advantage. Recent studies of mass communication have argued for the importance of preserving a public sphere – one that is open and accessible to all – as a “key component of modern, participatory, democratic life” (Garnham, 1986). But in a nation that is commercially driven, theoretical notions may not be enough to preserve public broadcasting. Thus, the CBC has two pressures: to inform and empower the Canadian public, and to attract and maintain audiences.

Global

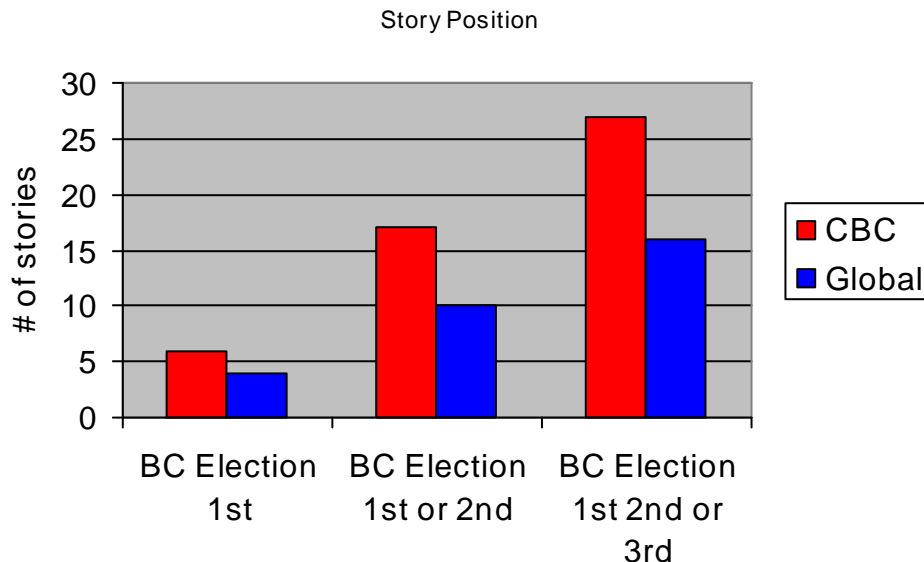
The Global News Hour in BC is one of the most highly watched television programs in North America. It is by far the leading source of news for most British Columbians. Its success is due in part to the fact that it is owned by one of the largest privately owned media companies in Canada, CanWest Global Communications Corporation

public, and there is no internal reason for their existence. One could speculate that Global could essentially frame the news in whatever manner they desired if it were not for the presence of rival broadcasters such as the CBC. Thus, Global has a single objective – to generate profit and provide advertisers with audiences. Though it must maintain the appearance of legitimate news and objective reporting, its only real responsibility is to its investors. The informing and empowerment of the public is merely a necessary pretense for their product. The division between public and private broadcasters is highlighted through their respective journalistic styles as evidenced through various studies of past elections and television news broadcasts. In particular, the findings of Maier and Potter's study of the 1996 American presidential campaign were reflective of the mandates of each respective broadcaster. Public broadcasters approached stories in a manner of "objectivity," choosing to focus on issues and public participation in contrast to private broadcasters who pursued scandal-laden and

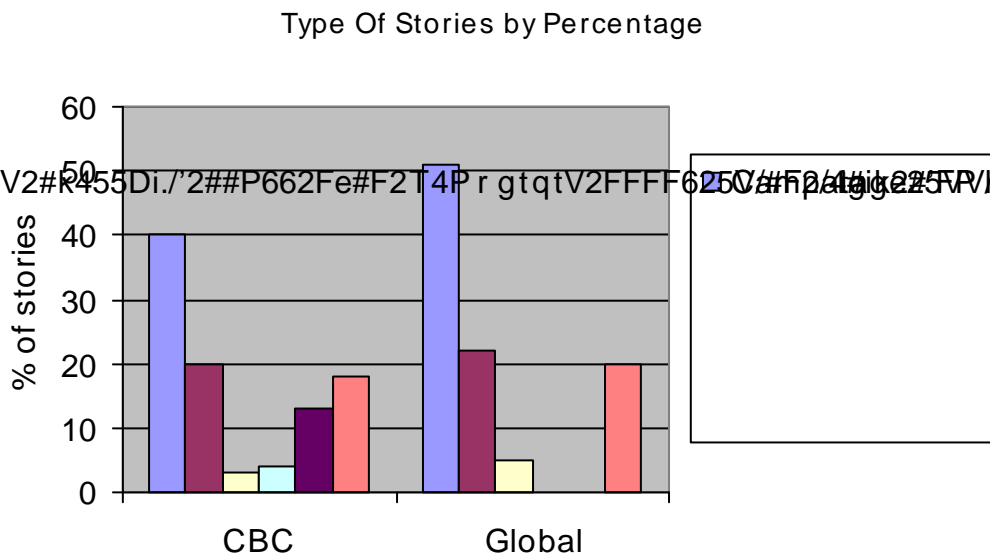
most common story categories were Canadian Politics, Crime, and Disaster/Accident/Fire. As this diagram demonstrates, the CBC covered each category relatively equitably, whereas Global placed much more emphasis on crime rather than Canadian politics.

Keeping in mind that this data was recorded during a provincial election, when many British Columbians were considering their political options, it is remarkable that Global covered so few stories about other Canadian politics compared to CBC. Even more striking is the drastic difference i

of Canada Now



CBC's emphasis on Canadian identity and local diversity is indicative of a broader trend in their programming. CBC addresses viewers as critically engaged Canadian citizens with keen interests in local political issues. Rather than presuming their viewers to be passive receivers of information, they simultaneously target and construct a more knowledgeable and involved audience. The following chart illustrates the types of election stories each broadcaster covered. It has been calculated by percentages in order to compensate for Global's smaller sample of election stories.

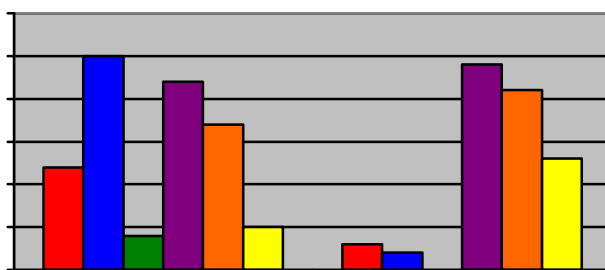


This chart illustrates a number of differences between CBC and Global’s strategy regarding the coverage of this election. While CBC engaged its audience with several different types of election stories, Global focused much more heavily on campaign stories, which are defined in the coding protocol as “stories that focus primarily on the campaign” (see Appendix for further details). Also of note is the complete absence of Fact Checking/Analysis stories and Interview Panels across Global’s coverage of the election campaign.

It is clear that Global did not have any intent on probing further into the claims made by leaders, or of hosting interviews which may have provided viewers with a more comprehensive understanding of some of the important issues and policies debated throughout the course of the election. For example, when seeking informed commentary throughout the election coverage, CBC turned to academic sources more than twice as much as Global did (23 times vs. 11 times). Although this figure is due, in part, to CBC’s large number of election stories, the fact remains that throughout the course of their coverage, Global did not offer the public as much access to informed sources regarding the election.

A Lethargic Approach to News

The majority of election news stories were campaign stories, which served to inform the public about the daily activities of the various leaders and candidates involved in the election. CBC and Global each took different approaches to covering campaign stories. The following chart illustrates how CBC tended to separate its coverage of campaign stories into different party profiles offering the viewer thoughtful insights into their strategies and objectives.



Global took an approach which effectively combined all the campaign news together as stories about the general state of the campaign, often citing a prediction for the win or a vague suggestion of who might be leading. There are comparatively very few Global stories which dealt exclusively with a particular party's campaign – rather, their stories covered both Liberal and NDP as a single story, or featured an even broader story about the campaign as a whole. Although the Green party gained unprecedented momentum in this year's election, Global did not feature a single story about the Green campaign.

Ultimately, the different approaches to presenting the news taken by each broadcaster reveal their philosophy regarding their own audiences. The CBC is intent on including political analysts and academic pundits into their coverage as a means of encouraging critical thought amongst its viewers. More structured and organized, their coverage allows for more specialized news stories. CBC targets every issue, regardless of region, and makes a point to present it in a creative and thought-provoking manner. Global reduces the complexities of the election to a relatively brief, packaged summary of the general situation of the election, simultaneously appealing to and creating an audience of apathetic viewers.

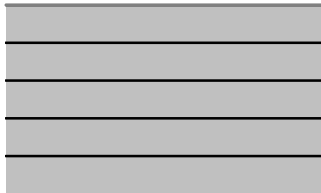
News Framing

The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter,
but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining.
Neil Postman

It is clear there are differences between how CBC and Global approached

The Looming Threat of a BCTF Strike

meant to accuse the NDP of consorting with unions, ultimately hindering big business and undermining Campbell's claims of economic growth and stability.



On the same day, Global led with a story about an NDP candidate's possible connection to vigilante gang The Hell's Angels, which was completely unrelated to the debate. Global's second story did concern the debate – particularly on the effect it may have had on the vote. Global acknowledged the fact that Carol James was considered by most to have won the debate, but was quick to point out that Gordon Campbell did not necessarily lose. Rather, Global

programming and often molds key events in congruence with the Liberal campaign.

According to Nielsen Media Ratings, the Global News Hour's rating in late May 2005, were at 8.6%, whereas Canada Now was not even present (Nielsen Media, 2005). Global News Hour is often rated the top program in Vancouver. Since Global has far more viewers than CBC, more British Columbian citizens are receiving their news from a comparatively irresponsible source. As a result, the general public is not being sufficiently informed about important issues which could have a significant effect on the vote. Global's tendency to neglect the importance of the election re-enforces voter apathy and discourages the public political discourse that is essential to the democratic process. Their favorable framing of the Liberal party, however subtle and imperceptible it may appear, is flagrantly deceptive. Their strategy serves only to perpetuate public indifference and discourage independent thought, which may result in political change.

Comparatively, CBC offers the public a forum in which to actively interact with the policy making of this province. Rather than simply stating facts and quoting figures about which candidate is likely to emerge victorious, the CBC encourages political discourse and perpetuates public involvement in the democratic process by offering extensive avenues to access information and express personal concerns. The fact that Global is a far more popular source of news is evidence to support the argument that the general public is not interested in political involvement. If entertainment based news is more popular than legitimate and informative reporting, than it stands to reason that Global simply provides the public with what they want. If this is the case, then the problem is not necessarily that Global has an agenda to foil democracy and maintain a Liberal government, but rather that Global simply treats the news as a product, and the public as its consumer.

Substantiated by the results we have gathered, it is clear that television coverage on both private and public broadcasters does not suffice to fully inform the public about political issues, nor does simply viewing a news broadcast substitute direct political participation. In orde

of democracy, the media should consistently devote coverage on stories pertaining to the rights of citizens and the progress made by politicians, such as updates on whether government action is reflective of their previously proclaimed platforms.

Limitations and Areas of Future Research

While content analysis provides helpful descriptive statistics, a comprehensive qualitative analysis is necessary when analyzing broadcast news. However, this study was limited by time constraints, and an inability to research the methodologies reporters and editors employ when presenting the news.

Imperative to this study was the combination of both quantitative and qualitative analytic methods. Certain ambiguities in the coding protocol would have led to false conclusions without the qualitative reading (Gina & Hackett, 1997, p.17). Because this study was limited by an allotted time frame, a thorough qualitative analysis was only possible for a limited selection of news-stories. However, the total sample was small enough for every election story to be watched several times, so a broad qualitative analysis was suitable for this study. The research may have been enhanced by a more profound understanding of the methods used by editors and reporters when making key decisions about their programming. This study provides an interpretation of CBC and Global's news strategy, but is unable to provide a description of how their strategies are manifest in the every-day decision processes of the people involved in each news hour.

When discussing the impact of election television coverage on the democratic process, it is evident that one area of research lacking in our study is audience research. By creating a focus group of random television news viewers or creating a questionnaire, one can begin to assess the true impact of the media

on the democratic process. This area of research should be complemented with in-depth interviews with journalists and producers, or the respective local television station since they could help one gain further insight as to why a story either leads, or fails to lead a broadcast as well as why individuals are chosen for “street” interviews. With honest answers, we can begin to formulate solutions to the problems associated with election coverage, such as whether these are issues inherent to the structure of the media, or whether the downfalls of election coverage can be solely attributed to the individual choices of journalists.

Conclusion

The priorities and motivations of broadcast media companies are determinate of their news strategy, and ultimately of the way in which the news is presented.

CBC: Balancing Two Important Priorities

Since the CBC is publicly owned, and therefore has a federal mandate to inform the public, their news should theoretically be absolutely objective, inclusive, and as informative as possible. Their adherence to this mandate is clearly reflected in their programming. However, the constraints of television as a medium, and the necessity of maintaining ad revenue for survival, means they must harmonize two conflicting agendas. The result is a news program which effectively disguises substantially informative news as engaging and thought-provoking entertainment. Their coverage of the 2005 BC Election displays passionate dedication to covering BC politics and the issues surrounding the election. The CBC constructs an audience of critically thinking citizens,

undoubtedly a contentious task, but one that we have already begun. Such an evaluation is necessary if debate is to be stimulated surrounding the role of the citizen in democratic societies, the role of the public broadcaster to balance corporate interests, and the role of elections as a legitimate form of political expression. The necessity for the presence of a public broadcaster to provide equitable, creative, and substantive coverage is best captured by Bill Moyers, a PBS journalist, as he states:

An unconscious people, an indoctrinated people, a people fed

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Appendix

Coding Protocol

Each coder must complete a separate coding sheet for each news item being

- 08. Children/Family
 - 09. Women
 - 10. Visible Minorities
 - 11. Urban Affairs
 - 12. Disaster/Accident/Fire
 - 13. Religion/Spirituality
 - 14. Human Interest
 - 15. Lifestyle
 - 16. Consumer Issues
 - 17. Entertainment/Celebrity
 - 18. Sports
 - 19. Weather
 - 99. Other (Define)
10. Type of Story: Code One. The type of story will be coded based on a fifty-percent plus one model. For instance, a story may look at the campaign trail and election issues, but only one will be coded in this section depending on how much of the story is dedicated to a particular theme.
01. News Campaign Focus: all stories that focus primarily upon the details of the campaign, including leader's activities, rallies, campaign strategies, elections polls, etc. These event-based items frame news about the election in terms of its impact upon the campaign and upon the electoral success (or failure) of a particular leader, party, or candidate.
02. Issue Focus: all stories that focus primarily upon substantive social , political, and/or economic issues associated with the election campaign, including the policies, programs and positions of parties that providing significant background and/or historical information that goes beyond the event-based focus of the news. These items frame news about the election in terms of the substantive policy and ideological differences between parties.
03. Leader/party feature: all stories that focus upon an individual or party, providing significant background and/or historical information that goes beyond the event-based focus of the news.
04. Fact-Checking/Critical Analysis: all stories in which reporters engage in a critical assessment of claims made by political parties.
05. Interview/panel: an uninterrupted interview by a reporter with one or more guests. These would include political panels featuring guests representing a variety of political viewpoints.
06. News, Other Focus: all news stories that do not focus upon the election per se, but cover news stories that directly mention the election in some form.
99. Other: describe all other types of stories that do not fit this model.

11. Story Topic: All coders are expected to identify the major or dominant, primary topic of the story, followed by a secondary topic. The primary topic may not be the first topic in the story but is the most dominant. There are two steps to documenting the topics for each item, outlined below.

Step One: Put the topic in your own words: At first, do not code the topic. Instead, the coder is to write what their perception of the topic is in their own words.

Step Two: Code the topic using the general categories provided: There are a number of categories of stories provided. The coder needs to indicate which of the general categories each of these topics are included

08. Employment: Including unemployment, loss of employment, employment insurance, etc.

09.

does not fit with any of the above issue topics.

Campaign Topics

27.

46. Campaign Finance: All stories about campaign finance, including allegations of impropriety.
12. Sources or 'Story Actors': There are six values to code for when examining story actors or sources that are to be filled out in the given coding sheet. A Source or 'Story Actor' includes any person who contributes to the understanding of an issue, whether the rhetoric is of an emotional, political or academic stance, excluding the narrating journalist/anchor.

Step One: Identify the name of the source or actor.

Step Two: Provide the source's affiliation. Code the source according to the following schematic:

Affiliation

01. Gordon Campbell (Liberal Leader)
02. Carole James (NDP Leader)
03. Adrienne Carr (Green Leader)
04. Liberal candidate/worker/supporter
05. NDP candidate/worker/supporter
06. Green candidate/worker/supporter
07. Other party leader/candidate/worker/supporter/
08. Former provincial politician
09. Other politician (federal or municipal)
10. Corporate/trade association spokesperson
11. Union/labour association spokesperson
12. Pollster
13. Academic/Neutral political pundit
14. Activist
15. NGO spokesperson
16. Citizen, concerned about and/or directly affected by political action/inaction
17. Citizen, 'person on the street'
99. Other

Step Three: For each source, identify the political orientation of the speaker – do they clearly articulate either a preference or a dislike/criticism of a particular political party as framed in the story? If the political orientation of the speaker is unclear, please identify the source as neutral/indeterminate. Use the following schematic:

Political Orientation

01. Pro-Green
02. Anti-Green
03. Pro-Other party

- 04. Anti-Other party
- 05. Neutral/indeterminate
- 06. Pro-Liberal/Anti-NDP
- 07. Pro-Liberal/Anti-Green
- 08. Pro-NDP/Anti-Liberal
- 09. Pro-NDP/Anti-Green
- 10. Pro-Green/Anti-Liberal
- 11. Pro-Green/Anti-NDP

Step 4: Identify the gender of the source using the following schematic:

- 01. Female
- 02. Male

Step 5: Identify the ethnicity of the source using the following schematic:

- 01. Visible Minority (Asian, East Indian, First Nations, Hispanic, etc)
- 02. Caucasian
- 03. Indeterminate
- 04. Other

Step 6: Identify the duration of time each source is quoted in the format HH:SS.

13. Party Coverage

Identify the party coverage in the provided graph.

Parties:

02. Cariboo Chilcotin Coast: For definition, please see map.
 03. Thompson Okanagan: For definition, please see map.
 04. B.C. Rockies: For definition, please see map.
 05. The Islands: For definition, please see map.
 06. Whistler
 07. Squamish/Pemberton
 08. Lower Mainland: any part of the lower mainland as defined by the map excluding the locations mentioned below (09-17).
 09. Burnaby
 10. TriCities: Port Moody, Port Coquitlam, Coquitlam
 11. Whalley area
 12. Surrey: any part of Surrey excluding Whalley
 13. North/West Vancouver
 14. Downtown Vancouver
 15. East Vancouver: Chinatown would be coded here.
 16. East Hastings: This will include any streets in the downtown "East Hastings" area.
 17. West side of Vancouver: UBC, Kits, Point Grey
 18. No mention/Not relevant to the story.
-
15. Use of Visuals: For the purpose of this study, visuals will be limited to graphs, charts or illustrations.
 01. Yes
 02. No
-
16. How Was the Viewer Addressed: State in your own words how you would describe how the show addressed the audience (such as consumer, citizen, or collective public).
-
17. Additional Comments: How did the broadcast appellate the viewer – as a consumer, citizen, or a collective public? If possible, note how the coverage addresses issues of democracy, political participation and the role of the media in the electoral system.

14. Party Coverage	
Liberal: <input type="radio"/> Focus <input type="radio"/> Mention	Campell: <input type="radio"/> Focus <input type="radio"/> Mention
NDP: <input type="radio"/> Focus <input type="radio"/> Mention	James: <input type="radio"/> Focus <input type="radio"/> Mention
Green: <input type="radio"/> Focus <input type="radio"/> Mention	Carr: <input type="radio"/> Focus <input type="radio"/> Mention
Other: <input type="radio"/> Focus <input type="radio"/> Mention	Other: <input type="radio"/> Focus <input type="radio"/> Mention
<input type="radio"/> No Party Focus	<input type="radio"/> No Leader Focus
<input type="radio"/> No Party Mention	<input type="radio"/> No Leader Mention

15. Geographic Focus (identify, then Code): _____

16. Use of Visuals ___ Yes ___ No

17. How was the viewer Addressed? _____

18. Additional Comments _____
