

# **The Sound of Silence: The Absence of Public Service Values in Canadian Media Discourse about the CBC**

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**ABSTRACT** *Public service broadcasting (PSB) across the world is in crisis. This article examines how, if at all, normative academic ideals of public service broadcasting inform discussion about the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in Canadian news media. The researchers undertook a quantitative (N = 467) and qualitative (n = 29) content analysis of five years of Canadian news media coverage about the CBC published between January 1, 2009, and April 30, 2014. Their systematic analysis of this research found little connection was made between the CBC and discussions of public service values. This study contends that the pre-eminence of neoliberal discourse represents a serious assault to broadcasters with a public service ethos.*

**KEYWORDS** *Media; Public broadcasting; Public service broadcasting (PSB); Public sphere; Neoliberalism; CBC; Democracy*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Partout dans le monde, la radiodiffusion en tant que service public est en crise. Cet article examine comment les idéaux normatifs académiques de la radiodiffusion publique contribuent à alimenter le débat sur la Société Radio-Canada (SRC) dans les médias canadiens. Dans le cadre d'une analyse de contenu quantitative (N = 467) et qualitative (n = 29) portant sur cinq années de couverture médiatique canadienne à propos de CBC (1<sup>er</sup> janvier 2009 au 30 avril 2014), nous avons constaté qu'il y avait peu de relation entre les valeurs de la SRC et celles qui sont liées au service public dans les nouvelles diffusées par les médias canadiens. Cette recherche fait valoir la prééminence dans le débat d'un discours néolibéral qui soulève plusieurs enjeux éthiques quant à son adéquation avec les valeurs liées au service public en tant que tel.*

**MOTS CLÉS** *Media; Radiodiffusion publique; SRC; Néolibéralisme; Démocratie; Sphère publique*

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## Introduction

This is both a dubious and potentially defining moment for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Although the Liberal government announced plans in its 2016 budget to invest \$675 million over five years to “modernize and revitalize CBC/Radio Canada in the digital era” (Morneau, 2016), this article argues that the logic of neoliberalism continues to threaten the CBC and specifically how Canadians think about the role and merit of the public broadcaster. With the CBC already in a state of perpetual crisis for decades, a recent string of high-profile events has drawn more critical attention toward the public broadcaster. In October 2014, former radio star Jian Ghomeshi was fired from the CBC and subsequently charged with, and subsequently found not guilty of, multiple counts of sexual assault. An external report in the wake of the Ghomeshi scandal concluded that the Crown corporation failed to ensure a workplace “free from disrespectful and abusive conduct” (Rubin & Nikfarjam, 2015, p. 43). The CBC also abruptly terminated its prominent political journalist Evan Solomon in June 2015 after a *Toronto Star* investigation revealed that the host of CBC News Network’s *Power and Politics* and Radio One’s *The House* had helped to broker art sales with influential people he interacted with as a reporter/presenter (Levinson King, 2015). Moreover, the public broadcaster faces continuous—and intense—scrutiny from the crowdfunded news site *Canadaland* (Haupt, 2015a). To be sure, these are complicated times for the once esteemed public broadcaster.

The CBC’s troubles extend beyond the recent headline-grabbing actions of its talent. Writing in this journal in 2001, in fact, Hoskins, McFayden, and Finn argued the CBC then needed to refocus in order to remain relevant. Fast-forward 15 years and the CBC remains, on a per capita basis, one of the most poorly funded public broadcasters in the developed world (Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, 2014). For at least the past three decades, Canada’s national public broadcaster has existed in a state of crisis. During this time, it has downsized, digitized, and restructured. The ongoing squeeze has resulted in multiple rounds of cuts to services and jobs, with estimates that the CBC will eliminate up to 1,500 additional positions by 2020 (Haupt, 2015b). In sum, this *perfect storm* of scandal, shrinking budgets, and a climate of neoliberalism makes the once venerable public broadcaster more vulnerable than ever before, to the point where prominent Canadian media scholar David Taras recently described the CBC as being on “life support” (Taras, 2014, p. 232).<sup>2</sup>

While precarious and fragile, public support for the CBC remains high in Canada. A 2013 survey of Canadians found that 80 percent of respondents felt the “CBC plays an important role in strengthening Canadian culture and identity” (Nanos, 2013). Moreover, thousands of “We Vote CBC!” signs were sprinkled amid all the party signs across Canada during the 2015 federal election (Bain, 2015). The mandate, value, and effectiveness of the country’s only national public broadcaster continues to be a popular topic for debate and discussion within and by news media. Recognizing the constitutive and informational role of news media as a source, reference point, validator, and barometer for topics of social, cultural, and political significance, this article examines how the CBC, as public broadcaster, is imagined, discussed, and debated publicly in Canadian news media. Of specific interest are how, if at all, normative academic

ideals as to the role and value of public broadcasting inform discussion about the CBC. This line of inquiry is advanced through a quantitative study ( $N = 467$ ) of Canadian news media coverage about the CBC published between January 1, 2009 and April 30, 2014 as well as a qualitative analysis ( $n = 29$ ) of editorials and opinion articles drawn from the larger sample ( $N = 467$ ) that made reference to, or associated the CBC with being a public broadcaster, being involved in the act of public broadcasting, and/or being a public good or service.

The article is structured as follows: It begins with a synopsis of the traditional theoretical understandings of public service broadcasting (PSB)<sup>3</sup> and its role in Western democracies. In recognition of the contemporary climate of neoliberalism and its crucial constitutive role in modern broadcasting and media, the article then reviews select theories of neoliberalism with a mind to understanding how the totalizing quality of the ideology (Brown, 2015) has profoundly transformed how public broadcasting is imagined and debated in Canada. Next, specific details as to the methodological choices are provided and their accompanying rationales. The bulk of the article is dedicated to presenting the quantitative and qualitative findings of the content analysis, while their implications are considered together in the discussion. As the coming pages make clear, while the CBC—as a public service broadcaster—may be conceptualized normatively by academics and policymakers in Habermasian dimensions (contributing to a discursive, democratic discourse through its news and information programming) (Habermas, 1989), the reality of how the public broadcaster is imagined in Canadian news discourse is radically different and decidedly neoliberal in its orientation.

### **PSB and the public sphere in the neoliberal era**

A palpable pessimism pervades much scholarly analysis about the future of PSB, or public service broadcasting, since the 1980s (Golding 1995; Katz, 1996; Keane 1995; Tracey, 1998). As Born (2005) and Hendy (2013) astutely observe, all the components of PSB—*public*, *service*, and *broadcasting*—are continually contested. Broadcasting, after all, seems almost antiquated amid an increasingly digital world. The rise of individualism and neoliberalism—with its focus on the individual and choice—clashes with traditional notions of a single, unified public. Moreover, notions of service come across as “patronizing”—as if a *nanny-state* broadcaster will decide—unilaterally—what is best for the public (Hendy, 2013, p. 1). Yet much of the literature addressing PSB defends—and even champions—its contributions to modern liberal democracies (Born, 2005; Curran, 2006; Curran & Seaton, 1997; Dahlgren, 2000; Garnham, 2000; Hendy, 2013; Rowland, 2013, 2015; Scannell, 1992, 1996). Raboy and Taras (2007), for instance, contend that public broadcasters such as the CBC, especially in our ever-changing modern media landscape, “remain essential instruments of national culture, civic engagement and public life” (p. 101). Rowland (2013, 2014, 2015), similarly, equates the Crown corporation to a *public good* akin to schools, hospitals, universities, and public museums, arguing that public broadcasting helps to “enhance public life, and enrich individual lives” (Rowland, 2013, p. 8). The normative sentiment toward public broadcasting expressed in Rowland’s writing is well established in the literature (Curran, 1991; Curran & Seaton, 1997; Garnham, 1986; Scannell, 1989) and is one the authors also share.

To this end, this research adopts Brevini's (2013) definition of PSB as a "media policy arrangement" driven by a "set of normative values that aims to fulfill the democratic, social and cultural needs of the society" (p. 30). Brevini's definition takes a "public sphere approach" (McCauley, Peterson, Artz, & Halleck, 2003; Raboy & Price, 2003), which views PSB as both contributing to and constitutive of a Habermasian (1989) "public sphere." Raboy (2006) eloquently sums up this perspective as one that sees PSB as being able to help create "a public sphere through which people could be empowered to take part in civic affairs, in enhancing national and cultural identities, in promoting creative expression and dialog" (p. 295). Although idealized in this way, Raboy (2006) also notes that this "conventional" and nationally bound perspective toward PSB must acknowledge changes in the "communicative space" (Keane, 1995) brought about by the rise of ICTs and digitization that have made media "abundant" and global. Indeed, this is a pre-eminent challenge for those working in the field of public service broadcasting and media policy in Canada (Collins, Finn, McFadyen, & Hoskins, 2001; O'Neill, 2006; Raboy, 2003, 2006; Raboy & Taras, 2007; Taras, 2014; Taylor, 2013). However, these challenges—and they are significant—do not diminish the conceptual utility of the public sphere as normative ideal for PSB to strive toward (Raboy, 2006; Ramsey, 2010).

Underwriting both policy challenges of conceptualizing PSB—in an age of media abundance as well as value that the wider public ascribes to the importance of PSB—is the spread of neoliberal rationality. Neoliberalism (Friedman, 1962; Rand 1964)—with its attendant notions of free markets, free speech, and free choice—dominates the discourse surrounding PSB (Curran, 2006; Freedman, 2008; Lipsey, 2002). Of note, McChesney (2004) contends that neoliberalism colonizes economic and political discourse, stressing the ideology has become "hegemonic" among politicians of all stripes—conservative and progressive (pp. 49–50). Similarly, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) warn of neoliberalism's "hegemonic character" creating "a new definition of reality" (p. 176). Harvey (2005) contends neoliberalism "seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market" (p. 3).

As Bourdieu (1998) pointedly observes, neoliberalism evokes an ideal world with its talk of freedom and democracy, contending neoliberalism is "so strong and so hard to fight because it has behind it all the powers of a world of power relations" (p. 95). Fairclough (2001), in a similar way, describes how such powerful ways of thinking are stripped of their ideological characteristics on the "royal road to common sense" (p. 76). Lacking an ideological tone—and possessing an intersubjective value—the struggle becomes neutral and "power derived from it takes on a hegemonic form" (van Dijk, 2008, p. 34). In the words of Cammaerts (2015), "The neoliberal project positions itself as a post-narrative—as facticity, as non-negotiable and thus as quintessentially anti-ideological, while positioning their constitutive *Others* as deeply ideological, as biased, as mad or nostalgic—of a gone area" (p. 7, italics added).

Such discourse, following Foucault's (1980) logic, shapes—and even dictates—the serious dialogue and thinking about the field of PSB. It "rules in" and "rules out" how topics are constructed (Hall, 2007, p. 44). Moreover, this way of thinking—or what Foucault calls episteme—transcends language and texts, limiting the range of discus-

sion and constituting supposed regimes of truth. As a result, this “hegemonic rationality” (Peet, 2007, p. 10) “reduces the complexity” of the world to “spaces of potential competition that need to be organized as markets, blocking other narratives from view” (Coudry, 2010, p. 6, italics in original). Foucault’s lecture series about the “birth of biopolitics” delivered between 1978 and 1979 raises pressing questions about neoliberalism and describes a normative rationality, constituting an “art of government” (Foucault, 2004, p. 2) whereby the *market* represents the ideal model to which government and its attendant agencies must aspire. All of society, in fact, should be regulated by the *logic* of the market. The “reason of the least state” or “frugal government” spreads its rationality across bureaucracy and *limits* what the state can do (Foucault, 2004, p. 28). “[S]ocial policy must not be something that works against economic policy and compensates for it [or that] follows strong economic growth by becoming more generous” (p. 144).

This normative rationality spreads, taking on a common-sense value as the “reasoned way of governing best” (Foucault, 2004, p. 2). Building on Foucault’s (2004) lectures, Brown (2015) argues that neoliberalism’s rationality and values have spread across *all* spheres and action, composing everything and everyone into agents of the market.

[N]eoliberalism transmogrifies every human domain and endeavour, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic. All conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized. In neoliberal reason and in domains governed by it, we are only and everywhere *homo oeconomicus* ... (Brown, 2015, p. 10, italics in original).

In addition to interpolating all human activity, neoliberalism also offers the metric by which everything is evaluated. Risk exposure and expected yield, argues Brown, are the only valid measure offered in a world dominated by neoliberal values. The solution during crisis, offers Brown, “is always more markets, more complete markets, more perfect markets, more financialization, new technologies, new ways to monetize” (Brown, 2015, p. 221). Progressive decisions-makers and governments, arguably, struggle with the power of this discourse, making regulating communication systems a contested dynamic between market and public service values (Lunt & Livingstone, 2012).

In Canada, neoliberal values infuse and underwrite much of the public debate concerning the CBC. Political pressure on the public broadcaster began early on in the corporation’s history (Raboy & Taras, 2007). More recently, in 2004, Stephen Harper, then Leader of the Official Opposition—the Conservatives—expressed the view that “government subsidies in support of CBC’s services should be to those things that are not ... do not have commercial alternatives” (Morrison, 2009). Conservative members of Parliament also circulated a petition among their constituents in 2011 calling for the CBC to be sold or privatized (Bolen, 2011). Both the subtle and open hostility to the CBC is consistent with a neoliberal perspective, viewing nothing—including public services—as outside of the reach of markets.

Neoliberal ideology is evident in not only words but also action, as evidenced in the decline of the CBC’s public funding. Former Conservative prime minister Brian

Mulroney began cutting the broadcaster's budget soon after taking office in the fall of 1984. Conservative cabinet ministers talked publicly about privatizing the CBC—and Mulroney also appointed the outspoken critic and privatization supporter John Crispo, a University of Toronto political economist, to the corporation's board (Nash, 1994). Throughout the 1990s, the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien cut taxpayer funding to the CBC by nearly \$400 million—or about 25 percent of the corporation's parliamentary spending (Thompson, 2014). The Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper continued the trend of reducing the CBC's budget. Public spending on the CBC amounted to \$1.07 billion (in 2014 dollars) in 2007–2008 (Smith, 2014). But by 2014–2015, the parliamentary appropriation for the public broadcaster amounted to \$929.3 million. The Liberal government of Justin Trudeau has recently committed more money to the Crown corporation, but the CBC still remains poorly funded compared to other public broadcasters in the developed world (Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, 2014).

### Methodology

Content analysis (CA) remains a useful method for quantifying what media do with public discourse. Leaders in the field of CA (e.g., Bauer, 2007; Krippendorff, 2013; Neuendorf, 2002; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2008) contend that the research tool offers an efficient means for analyzing media messages. For this CA, a potential pool of news media samples about the CBC ( $N = 2,263$ ) produced by Canada's large English daily newspapers and *The Canadian Press* was identified using Infomart.com (an Internet news archive) and the search terms “CBC” and “funding.” From this, a corpus ( $N = 422$ ) was harvested in a systematic fashion<sup>4</sup> to produce representative texts for analysis (Krippendorff, 2013). In addition to the articles obtained from the Infomart database search, 45 articles from Sun Media were also systematically chosen to incorporate into the corpus using the *Toronto Sun's* online search engine.<sup>5</sup> We deemed it important to include Sun Media newspapers in our analysis because the media organization had actively campaigned against the CBC.<sup>6</sup> The entire corpus of media samples ( $N = 467$ )<sup>7</sup> were all produced between January 1, 2009, and April 30, 2014, to coincide with the public broadcaster's announcement about how it planned to deal with the April 2014 cut to the CBC's parliamentary appropriation. This study's media samples come from 17 English-language daily newspapers and *The Canadian Press* news service (see Appendix A for a list of the media organizations). Table 1 provides a breakdown of the type of samples evaluated in this content analysis.

**Table 1: Sample news articles by article type**

Type ( $n = 467$ )	%	$n =$
News	51.8	242
Commentary	31.5	147
Editorial	4.9	23
Letter to the Editor	11.1	52
Other (e.g. Feature)	0.6	3

After determining this study's aims, questions, and theoretical grounding, this research moved to an inductive phase of reading dozens ( $n = 36$ ) of representative media samples. This careful reading of media texts revealed themes and consistent media frames surrounding the CBC. This two-step approach resulted in this study's coding categories (see Appendix A for the coding schedule). In an attempt to be mindful of "how much interpretation can be involved in applying a schedule," some extra keywords and definitions were added to the coding schedule or *rulebook* during preliminary coding (Deacon, Pickering, Goldring, & Murdock, 1999, p. 128). A systematic interpretation was applied to all the samples during the coding (Bauer, 2007; Deacon et al., 1999; Krippendorff, 2013). Both researchers—independent of each other—each coded 10 percent of all of the samples (20% of the total corpus). The first researcher then coded the same samples the second researcher had coded and vice versa, in an effort to validate this study's findings (Neuendorf, 2002). This *double-checking* produced an intercoder reliability above 80 percent for all of the variables (see Appendix B for intercoder reliability). Reliability higher than 80 percent indicates a well-defined coding scheme and a robust sampling validity that can stand the test of being replicated (Bauer, 2007; Krippendorff, 2013).

As quantitative analysis can only capture the presence or absence of discussion, we conducted a subsequent qualitative analysis of how the role and value of the CBC was discussed in relation to notions of PSB. Our sample was constructed by identifying all articles that were coded as making a link between the CBC and public service ( $n = 49$ ). Within this we excluded news stories ( $n = 14$ ) and Letters to the Editor ( $n = 6$ ), focusing only on editorials ( $n = 7$ ) and commentaries ( $n = 22$ ). Given that both editorials and commentaries are not constrained by the norms of journalistic objectivity and offer space to develop and advance arguments (Hindman, 2003), these article types were deemed appropriate to explore discourses surrounding the CBC.

The corpus of articles ( $n = 29$ ) was analyzed using theoretically driven thematic coding (Flick, 1998) grounded in the literature on public service broadcasting discussed earlier. Particular attention was paid to how the notion of public service broadcasting and public broadcasting was defined and discussed. An effort was made to think consistently about the thematic interrelations across and between sampled articles, with an objective of identifying common themes and codes across the sample to boost the "internal validity" of findings (Bauer & Gaskell, 2003, p. 350). Dominant themes emerged around the CBC's mandate as articulated in the *Broadcasting Act*, opinion as to the implementation and effectiveness of the CBC's mandate, and opinion as to the relationship between advertising and the CBC, as tension between the CBC's role as a public entity and its perceived private sector pursuits. The qualitative software package ATLAS.ti was used to assist with managing and implementing the coding process. The results of the analysis are discussed in the section titled "From absence to presence" later in this article.

### **The sound of silence: The absence of public service values in mediated discourse about the CBC**

Nearly two-thirds (65.1%,  $n = 304$ ) of our media sample made mention of the CBC's troubled or precarious situation.<sup>8</sup> These articles cast doubt on the CBC's stability

(financial, cultural, and political), focusing on its financial woes, job losses, and uncertain future. This high proportion of articles may be explained by the event orientation of news, whereby announcements such as job cuts or budget shortfalls match with the news cycle. While the discourse of a troubled CBC was prevalent, discussion of the CBC as a public service is largely absent, appearing in only 10.5 percent ( $n = 49$ ) of news media focusing on the Crown corporation.<sup>9</sup> A *Globe and Mail* news story, for instance, links the Crown corporation to notions of public service with a quote from former CBC chairperson Carole Taylor, who describes the CBC as “providing a service that cannot be found anywhere else” (Bailey & Alphonso, 2009). Similarly, a commentary published in *The Toronto Star* suggests the CBC can offer a *public service* in “an era of fragmentation” by becoming “an essential platform for discussion” (Tapscott, 2011). The head of the advocacy group Friends of Canadian Broadcasting is more explicit in a March 2009 news story, arguing that a new funding model for the public broadcaster “could bring the CBC closer to the international tradition of the public service broadcaster, and might also benefit commercial broadcasters such as CanWest and CTV as well” (Barmak, 2009).

Only 28.6 percent ( $n = 14$ ) of the news reporting about the CBC, it should be noted, draws a direct connection between the broadcaster and public service. Moreover, 71.4 percent ( $n = 35$ ) of the media samples linking the CBC to values of public service were found in editorials (14.3%,  $n = 7$ ), commentaries (44.9%,  $n = 22$ ), and Letters to the Editor (12.2%,  $n = 6$ ),  $\chi^2(4, N = 467) = 18.994, p = .001$ . Although only a minority of news media about the CBC made an explicit connection between the CBC and public service, those that did also said the CBC fosters values of citizenship (42.9%,  $n = 21$ ),  $\chi^2(1, N = 467) = 36.211, p = .001$ , democracy (34.7%,  $n = 17$ ),  $\chi^2(1, N = 467) = 44.178, p = .001$ , and arts and culture (42.9%,  $n = 21$ ),  $\chi^2(1, N = 467) = 35.232, p = .001$ .

### Ratings, efficiency, and accountability

The CBC’s popularity or ratings is the focus of 15.6 percent ( $n = 73$ ) of Canadian news media’s coverage of the public broadcaster. This, of course, is not a surprising finding. The corporation is, after all, a broadcaster that relies, in part, on advertising revenue. The source of *ratings talk* about the CBC is, however, of note (see Table 2 for a complete breakdown of the sources of *ratings talk*). Interestingly, statistical analysis (two-sided Fisher’s exact test) confirmed journalists and authors (46.6%,  $n = 34$ ,  $\chi^2(7, N = 467) = 388.303, p = .001$ ; FET) often highlight the corporation’s ratings in their news and commentary.

**Table 2: Sponsors of ratings talk in samples**

Ratings Sponsor ( $n = 73$ )	%	$n =$
CBC Official	27.4	20
CBC President Hubert Lacroix	2.8	2
Journalist/Author	46.6	34
Conservative Politician	5.5	4
Academic/Expert	4.1	3
Public/Letter to the Editor	11	8

CBC officials, also of particular note, represent the second-largest source (30.1%,  $n = 22$ ,  $c^2(7, N = 467) = 388.303$ ,  $p = .001$ ; FET) of *ratings talk* in Canadian media coverage of the public broadcaster between 2009 and 2014. CBC president Hubert Lacroix warns of more “dark clouds on the horizon” in February 2014 because of poor TV ratings and lower-than-expected revenue (Houpt, 2014). A column in *The National Post* in 2013 highlights the CBC’s focus on ratings, stressing

creative types who work on even successful CBC series will acknowledge that they do so always with one eye fixed firmly on the ratings. A show that is too edgy or too serialized—too cable, in other words—is at risk for low numbers, even if it draws a smaller viewership that loves it. Boutique audiences don’t help sell ads. (Stinson, 2013)

Efficiency and accountability are themes of interest weaving their way through media coverage of the CBC. Overall, 13.3 percent ( $n = 62$ ) of media about the CBC focus on notions of efficiency and how the public broadcaster uses dwindling resources to maximize production. While not a significant finding in itself, of interest is who are the sources of the *efficiency talk* in Canadian media coverage of the public broadcaster. CBC officials were the largest source, 45.2 percent ( $n = 28$ ,  $c^2(1, N = 467) = 252.925$ ,  $p = .001$ ; FET), of *efficiency talk* in Canadian media coverage about the Crown corporation. A feature in *The Toronto Star* in 2012, by means of example, highlights how the CBC receives the third-lowest level of public spending of 18 major Western countries (Contenta, 2012). Moreover, the feature-length print story details how the Crown corporation consolidated services to deal with declining federal money. The corporation’s editor-in-chief Jennifer McGuire stresses that *CBC News* “probably spend[s] more time than [its] private competitors looking at how [it] can work efficiently” (Contenta, 2012). Nearly 20 percent ( $n = 91$ ) of media coverage of the CBC focuses on questions of accountability such as Access to Information requests, executive and program spending, and overall spending at the public broadcaster. Of note, Sun Media—under the banner “CBC Money Drain”—waged a campaign highlighting supposed *waste*, *inefficiency*, and *lack of accountability* at the CBC. Table 3 breaks down the different types of concerns about accountability present in Canadian media coverage of the CBC.

**Table 3: Accountability and transparency**

Questions of Accountability ( $n = 91$ )	%	$n =$
Ambiguous Questions about Accountability & Transparency	8	7
Access to Information	46	42
Program Spending	12	11
Executive Spending	5	5
Critique of CBC Spending	19	17
Multiple Questions about Accountability and Transparency	10	9

Sun Media is also much more negative than neutral when compared to the rest of the media samples. The probability, in fact, of Sun Media being negative about the CBC is 87 percent, compared to a 20 percent chance of all media organizations writing

negatively about the public broadcaster. In other words, the odds of a Sun Media being negative is 6.5 times the probability of other news media. Of importance for the coming discussion, if Sun Media is eliminated from the sample, only 11 percent of the sample is classified as negative. To be sure, neoliberal values largely underpin the ideological basis for much of Sun Media's critique of the CBC. As this study's content analysis found, Sun Media largely dominated and defined the parameters of the public debate about the CBC between 2009 and 2014. The news organization was—by far—the most consistently negative media source criticizing the CBC. Considering Sun Media coverage together with the general silence about *public* and *service* in the rest of the news media, neoliberal values, regrettably, dominated how the CBC was imagined and discussed in mediated discourse.

### **The silence of public service discourse and power of neoliberal discourse**

Only 10.5 percent of all articles examined made a link between public service and Canada's national public broadcaster. This absence is pronounced, telling, and a meaningful presence. "There is not one but many silences," contends Foucault (1990), "and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses" (p. 27). From this perspective, the absence of media stories linking notions of public service with the CBC is not really *outside* media and popular discourse but, in fact, constitutive of how the CBC is imagined and reflective of the power dynamics at play surrounding the public debate about the Crown corporation. This absence or silence *authorizes* a discourse that privileges neoliberal or market values over public service values. Neoliberal ideals or criteria are the dominant sensibility by which the public broadcaster's importance or worth is determined. It has, in other words, become natural to imagine the CBC with little—or often no—connection to ideals of public value or public good. This ideologically motivated negation of public and service is invisible (Hall, 1988) and corrosive.

When the CBC is talked about, its precariousness features prominently. Indeed, the precariousness of publicly funded institutions is a key feature of our neoliberal condition (Brown, 2015). Much of the news media's coverage (65.1%,  $n = 304$ ) highlights the Crown corporation's troubled financial position and uncertain future. This content stream of *negative* information casts doubt on the CBC's financial, cultural, and political stability. Much of this coverage is narrow and episodic (Iyengar, 1991) in nature and consequently lacking important context about the public service provided to Canadians. These mediated messages—which ignore public service values—are, arguably, shaping how Canadians view the CBC. Iyengar (1991) concluded that how poverty is portrayed or framed in news coverage changes the way people categorize responsibility. That is, stories framed in "episodic" terms led to white middle-class viewers placing blame on the individual rather than on the structure of society or on government. Conversely, thematic stories, placing the blame for poverty in a social context, led audiences to be less critical of the poor. Episodic coverage of CBC's instability, which does not include public service values, likely amplifies a "hegemonic" understanding, perpetuating incomplete public understandings of the CBC's importance—democratically, culturally, and socially (Iyengar, 1991, p. 137).

As highlighted above, neoliberal values of ratings, efficiencies, and accountability are reoccurring values sponsored by CBC officials. This suggests that the Crown corporation's leadership has internalized the neoliberal *logic* of ratings, efficiency, and accountability as measures to imagine and value the public broadcaster. Like many public institutions in Canada, the CBC has not been able to resist the strong discourse or *common sense* values of spending public resources wisely or getting value for money (Bourdieu, 1998). The vice-president of English programming at the CBC in 2006, for instance, set the high bar (in the Canadian context) of one million viewers as a benchmark for determining the success of television programs (Dixon, 2006).

Georgia Born, in her writing about the BBC and ratings, argues that in order for the British public broadcaster to “*demonstrate its popularity*,” it must submit to the “ratings game” (Born, 2005, p. 54). The CBC's seeming obsession with ratings has also become a similar paradoxical problem for Canada's public broadcaster. Neoliberal critics deride government spending on public broadcasting, but at the same time judge the Crown corporation by commercial values of popularity and ratings (Mihaly, 2009). Moreover, CBC officials, including president Hubert Lacroix, often heralded the importance of popularity and ratings. CBC officials, it appears, interpolated the hegemonic positions of neoliberalism, nudging them in a powerful and pivotal way to mostly envision and talk about the CBC in neoliberal terms. After all, “we use” discourse—but it also “use[s] us” (Dahlgren, 2014, p. 232).

CBC executives, arguably, struggle with the power of this discourse, making the balance between public service and the market an “uneasy compromise between free market and state intervention approaches” (Lunt & Livingstone, 2012, p. 35). The discourse becomes natural and *common sense*. The impact of neoliberalism as an ideology results in “the practical denegation of the ideological character of ideology by ideology” (Althusser, 1984, p. 49). “Common sense tends to be articulated as objective truth as rational, and thus as anti-ideological” (Cammaerts, 2015, p. 5). These hegemonic ways of seeing and talking about the world, as a result, become “connected to and implicit in practical life” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 330). As the coming qualitative analysis makes clear, these hegemonic positions are increasingly pronounced in news media commentary and editorials about the CBC.

### **From absence to presence: Neoliberalism as an underwriter of public broadcasting discourse**

While the logic of neoliberalism exists in the absence of discourse about public broadcasting in Canada, it is also visible in the small sample of articles that make a connection between the CBC and the normative ideal of public service broadcasting. To explore this point further, this section examines themes from the qualitative analysis of editorial and comment articles ( $n = 29$ ) taken from the larger sample ( $N = 467$ ) that explicitly connect the CBC to notions of public service or the act of public broadcasting.

The importance of the CBC as tool for national unity emerged as an explicit theme across the news media samples analyzed (3 editorials; 6 commentaries). This notion is captured well in an *Edmonton Journal* editorial that opines the “CBC has been and remains an important public institution, helping to sustain a national culture and keep all parts of Canada, in both languages, informed about each other” (“CBC Must Change

with New Reality,” 2012). In fact, all explicit references to the CBC’s “national” role in uniting Canada in the sample were positive. The CBC in this role, however, was not immune from criticism. While one commentator took issue with the CBC’s programming, arguing it often failed to attract large audiences, and the success it did have was dependent on remakes of international shows, the majority of critiques were based on suggestions that the CBC was drifting away from its mandate and starting to trespass on the terrain of private media. This was, the critiques argued, bad for both public and private media. In advancing these critiques, critics articulated clear discursive boundaries between private and public media. However, before considering these tensions, we must first consider how the relationship between public service broadcasting, the CBC, and its mandate was articulated.

The 1991 *Broadcasting Act*, which legislates the CBC’s mandate, was mentioned by name in only two of the twenty-nine articles analyzed. Instead, sampled articles referred to the CBC’s “mandate” (19 articles from the total qualitative sample of 29) but either selectively quoted or paraphrased the *Broadcasting Act*. In referring to the CBC’s mandate, sampled articles emphasized the public broadcaster’s duty to inform, enlighten, and entertain Canadian audiences from a uniquely Canadian perspective. A collection of three articles described the CBC’s mandate as either “clear” (2 articles) or “very clear” (1 article) and did not flag any problems with it. Related, in discussing the broadcaster’s mandate, articles sometimes positioned this mandate as a guide to be followed or a compass for organizational direction. However, as a guide, the CBC’s mandate was seen by some as problematic, with a cluster of seven articles viewing the public broadcaster’s mandate as either too broad, in need of refinement, or even “impossible” given the corporation’s funding.

Beyond descriptive mentions and brief opinions, the CBC’s mandate was strategically cited in both commentaries and editorials as a boundary marker to differentiate public media—the CBC—from private media. For example, *Globe and Mail* columnist John Doyle opined, “Public broadcasting should show us the best of our own storytelling, news and entertainment, and do those tasks that private broadcasters balk at” (Doyle, 2010). Similarly, a *Toronto Star* editorial noted: “CBC can’t hope and shouldn’t try to be all things to all people. It must specialize and adapt. It must focus on doing things that the private sector will not do—and so should not mourn getting out of sports coverage” (“Give CBC the Focus and the Funding . . .,” 2014). These quotes share a predominantly apophatic view of public media. That is, the role of the CBC is defined by the absence and disinterest of private media. This viewpoint is even more pronounced in a November 29, 2013 *Globe and Mail* editorial that sought to summarize what it saw as the most convincing case for Canada’s national public broadcaster:

The strongest argument for the CBC goes something like this: There are some public goods that the free market will not deliver, or will not deliver well enough, and so we create public institutions to do the job. Think of museums, libraries and parks. These would be very different without public support, and in some cases they might not exist at all. There’s a compelling logic to taxpayer backing for the National Gallery of Canada or the Canadian War Museum, or hundreds of other cultural institutions and his-

torical sites. The CBC is, in part, such an institution. (“The CBC: What’s It Good For, Without Hockey?” 2013)

The aforementioned passage together with the previously cited examples capture what Brevini (2013) calls a “market failure” argument for public service broadcasting. This neoliberal perspective sees the role of public service broadcasting as doing what the private sector does not want to or simply will not do.

In tandem with the theme of market failure, the issue of advertising dollars was a prominent and contentious topic in our sample. The topic’s prevalence can be explained by the fact that articles were collected during the CBC’s 2013 licence renewal where it applied to the CRTC for—and was granted—permission to run advertisements on Radio Two. In discussing the public broadcaster’s desire to run advertisements, there was a discernible discursive dichotomy between the private media that, as profit-oriented businesses, were entitled to run advertisements and a public media that cannot. The CBC was portrayed as encroaching upon private media territory by chasing advertising dollars.

This normative view reinforces the boundary between private and public media and was justified by arguing that efforts to chase advertising dollars would inevitably lead the CBC—its content and organizational culture—down a path unfaithful to its public service mandate. A *Toronto Star* editorial, for example, opined that what it perceived as the CBC’s populist programming tendencies would wane if the public broadcaster were to “get out of advertising” (“CBC Needs Focus, Funds,” 2010). Similarly, a *Calgary Herald* editorial opined: “The way forward for CBC, however, isn’t to make itself more like private media, competing with them for advertising dollars. It needs to be true to its founding principles, maintaining the depth and diversity of its news and current affairs programs” (“CBC Needs Better Script,” 2012). To be fair, the aforementioned *Toronto Star* editorial (“CBC Needs Focus, Funds,” 2010) goes on to call for the CBC’s “steady funding” but from public sources, not advertising. This perspective mirrors a traditional but dated view of public service broadcasting identified by Raboy (1996) in which “commercial and public service objectives are wholly incompatible and cannot be combined within a single service” (p. 8). At first glance the “incompatibility” arguments articulated in the sample may be read as being in the CBC’s interest, helping it stay on task and realize its public broadcasting potential.

Yet, this “incompatibility” argument creates a false division between private media that are entitled and even obligated to compete for advertising dollars within a private media sphere and public media—the CBC—that are duty bound to abstain from such activity. As Raboy (1996) notes, there are competing perspectives toward the relationship between PSB and advertising, including a view that sees PSBs and private media coexisting and competing for advertising dollars. The use of an “incompatibility” as opposed to a “coexistence” argument may be understood as a discursive boundary by private media protecting their market interests. A critical reading recognizes the blatant self-interest underwriting this stance, whereby discourse linking advertisements, the CBC, and its mandate frames the public broadcaster as an unentitled competitor looking to *eat the supper* of private media. Read from this perspective, the views expressed in the media toward the CBC are consistent with Syvertsen’s observation

that “private media operators see public broadcasting institutions as powerful competitors and put pressure on policy makers to withdraw privileges and tighten obligations so as to make the public broadcasters less of a threat” (2003, p. 162). Private and public media are framed as equals. However, their purposes are fundamentally different. Whereas the goal of private media is to make a profit, the goal of public service broadcasters is to “enhance the quality of public life, empowering individuals and social groups to participate more fully and equitably” (Raboy, 1996, p. 13).

## Conclusion

The normative theorization of public service broadcasting as a public good that both contributes to and is constitutive of democratic, social, cultural, and communicative needs of a society is well established in the literature (see, for example, Brevini, 2013). However, what this quantitative and qualitative analysis makes clear is the disconnect between the idealized academic conceptualization of public service broadcasting and the conversation within popular media in Canada. First of all, there is a marked absence of news media discussion connecting the idea of public service with Canada’s national public broadcaster. Thus, while academic literature extols the cultural, social, and democratic value of PSB, it is extremely rare for this to be discussed in the popular news media. This privileging—through absence—represents the hidden power of neoliberalism. Power, contends Lukes (2005), “is at its most effective when least observable” (p. 1). Street (2001) stresses that mediated discursive power perpetuates dominant groups’ distinctions or definitions—and, therefore, frames and narrows how institutions such as the CBC are debated publicly. Ultimately, as Silverstone (1999) aptly emphasizes, media scholarship is about “the media’s power to create and sustain meanings; to persuade, endorse and reinforce” (p. 143). By highlighting the absence of *public service*, this research seeks to strip away the power embedded in the mediated public discourse about the CBC. Moreover, it hopes to highlight for supporters of public broadcasting—both academic and non-academic—the importance of equating the CBC to other public services, such as museums, libraries, and schools.

In place of references to normative ideals of public service are markers associated with contemporary discourses of neoliberalism. As this article has outlined, neoliberal discourse has seemingly colonized the way CBC officials talk about the public broadcaster. It is, as Dawes (2014) argues, totalizing. Neoliberal values *rule in* and *rule out* how the CBC is imagined internally and externally (Hall, 2007). Its “hegemonic character” has created “a new definition of reality” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 176). Public broadcasting in Canada is viewed—in large part—as an extension of the market. Efficiency, ratings, and accountability define and narrow the *horizon of possibilities* for communication and action surrounding the public broadcaster (Laclau, 1990). Values of citizenship, democracy, and bolstering arts and culture are largely marginalized—and rarely given a full-throated defence by CBC officials and any others.

There were, of course, a handful of articles in our media sample linking the CBC to public service values. However, as our analysis makes clear, the editorials and commentaries articulated a “market failure” perspective of public service broadcasting, which ascribes the role of the PSB as filling the gaps and picking up the pieces where private media will not operate. Restated, public broadcasting is seen as taking direction

from the market and thus viewed as a *commodity within the market*, as opposed to a *public good outside of it*. This totalizing discourse, as a result, “economize[s] the social” value of the CBC (Brown, 2015, p. 62), ensuring that the public good or service offered by the public broadcaster does not interfere with the market values (Foucault, 2004).

Critics may argue that the CBC’s decision to focus on ratings and efficiencies and cut staff are business decisions, not political ones. Yet, relinquishing power to a “markets know best” thinking neglects important social benefits provided by the public broadcaster (Brown, 2015). Neoliberalism’s totalizing quality has influenced how public broadcasting is being imagined, talked about, and enacted in Canada. To abate and reverse the corrosive impact of neoliberal logic on public broadcasting, the market discourse surrounding the CBC must first be exposed and understood. This analysis represents a small step in this process. However, more critical work in this arena is needed, critical work that also feeds into a public conversation about the vital role public broadcasting plays in Canada. Moreover, careful and critical reflection is also needed as to where Canadians learn about and are exposed to the normative ideals of public service broadcasting that are hidden away in academic literature. To be sure, the academy must play a larger role in participating in public discourse about the CBC—and making plain the vital role PSB plays in Canadian democracy. Exposure to and discussion about these ideas is vital to enable the public to appreciate the place and role of public service broadcasting in society. As this research makes clear, it would be a mistake to rely on the private media system to extol a view of public service broadcasting beyond a market stopgap.

## Notes

1. Brooks DeCillia worked for 15 years as a journalist with CBC News.
2. As part of Budget 2016, the Liberal government committed \$75 million to the CBC and promised an additional \$150 million annually between 2017 and 2020 (Abma, 2016).
3. In much of the literature, *public service broadcasting* (PSB) is defined as electronic media primarily focused on serving the public. In the UK context, for instance, the publicly owned British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the commercial TV network ITV are considered public service broadcasters because of both organizations’ commitment to news and current affairs programming. In Canada, *public broadcasting* is the more common term and refers mainly to the CBC and other publicly funded media, such as TVOntario or the Knowledge Network in British Columbia. The authors are aware of the difference between *public service broadcasting* and *public broadcasting* and use both terms deliberately in this work.
4. Using a random start point, every eighth sample was harvested for this research’s systematic sample selection. This method produces an approximation of a random sample. That is, every sample had an almost equal chance of being added to the corpus (Riffe et al., 2008).
5. Forty-five samples represent nearly half of the *Globe and Mail*’s samples contained in this research corpus. The *Toronto Sun* has half the circulation of the *Globe and Mail* (Newspapers Canada, 2014).
6. During the period of time this CA analyzed media, the majority owner of Sun Media’s parent company, Québecor Media Inc. (QMI), was Pierre Karl Péladeau. QMI owns Québec’s largest media empire, including book publishing houses, a music distributor, magazines, newspapers, and its television station, TVA. The French-language network is a major competitor of CBC/Radio-Canada. Intense “animosity” marks the “feud” between Québecor and Canada’s public broadcaster—and “the rivalry intensified” when Québecor purchased TVA in 2000 (Patriquin, 2013, 2014). Québecor newspapers

and Sun Television Network frequently highlighted the supposed *waste, inefficiency, and lack of accountability* at the CBC with a regular series of stories and commentaries dubbed “CBC Money Drain.” Moreover, many Sun Media commentators and hosts derisively—and oddly—refer to the public broadcaster as the “state broadcaster.” Péladeau owns 72 percent of Québecor’s voting shares, worth at least \$600 million. He promised to put his holdings into a blind trust if elected Parti Québécois leader. The animosity between the CBC and Québecor is a two-way street. CBC president Hubert Lacroix accused Péladeau of using his media empire to smear the public broadcaster (“Conservatives Summon Sun Journalists to Testify in CBC Fight,” 2011).

7. This corpus represents a random sample of 20 percent of the population of media coverage about the CBC.

8. The coding schedule is available at: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/854zltmviiu8ucg/CBC%20Content%20Analysis%20Coding%20Schedule%20.pdf?dl=0>

9. This finding is, of course, not surprising given the search terms “CBC” and “funding” were used to collect the corpus.

10. The coding for this variable examined whether the media sample connected or linked the CBC to a public service or public good.

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## Appendix A

### Intercoder Reliability

Variable	% Agreement	Scott's Pi	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha	<i>N</i> Agreements	<i>N</i> Disagreements	<i>N</i> Cases	<i>N</i> Decisions
V5: Public service	87.2093023256	0.447913627079	0.448074679113	0.451123431573	75	11	86	172
V6: CBC troubles	97.6744186047	0.929738562092	0.929738562092	0.930147058824	84	2	86	172
V7: Public support	86.0465116279	0.57080474111	0.573553719008	0.573300062383	74	12	86	172
V8: Relevance	93.023255814	0.802412406663	0.8026013772	0.80356117174	80	6	86	172
V9: Source of V8	97.6744186047	0.931746031746	0.931800158604	0.932142857143	84	2	86	172
V10: Ratings	89.5348837209	0.467492260062	0.469135802469	0.470588235294	77	9	86	172
V11: Source of V10	90.6976744186	0.583661119516	0.584541062802	0.586081694402	78	8	86	172
V12: Efficiency	90.6976744186	0.708474576271	0.70921386306	0.710169491525	78	8	86	172
V13: Source of V12	86.0465116279	0.669654289373	0.673624288425	0.671574903969	74	12	86	172
V14–Altering funding	83.7209302326	0.779990863408	0.781646717446	0.781269986295	72	14	86	172
V15: Source of V14	83.7209302326	0.677298311445	0.678246926777	0.679174484053	72	14	86	172
V16: Privatize	93.023255814	0.217589082638	0.219364599092	0.222137983321	80	6	86	172
V17: Source of V16	98.8372093023	0.883862255233	0.883940620783	0.884537474679	85	1	86	172
V18: Accountability	82.5581395349	0.61038961039	0.61296129613	0.612654787073	71	15	86	172
V19: Source of V18	89.5348837209	0.76513427401	0.765241128298	0.766499772417	77	9	86	172
V20: Critique of CBC	89.5348837209	0.773783428321	0.774212368728	0.775098640947	77	9	86	172
V21: Source of V20	91.8604651163	0.824413008604	0.824489795918	0.825433863205	79	7	86	172
V22: PBS/NPR	97.6744186047	0.844484629295	0.844484629295	0.845388788427	84	2	86	172
V23: Source of V22	97.6744186047	0.849122807018	0.849122807018	0.85	84	2	86	172
V24: Alternative funding	96.511627907	0.868199233716	0.868232890705	0.868965517241	83	3	86	172
V25: Source of V24	90.6976744186	0.654271356784	0.654964894684	0.656281407035	78	8	86	172
V26: CBC citizenship	90.6976744186	0.503607503608	0.504322766571	0.506493506494	78	8	86	172
V27: Source of V26	90.6976744186	0.523710626514	0.524533517623	0.526479750779	78	8	86	172
V28: CBC democracy	97.6744186047	0.654618473896	0.654618473896	0.656626506024	84	2	86	172
V29–Source of V28	97.6744186047	0.657711442786	0.658051689861	0.659701492537	84	2	86	172
V30–CBC culture / arts	91.8604651163	0.417513304306	0.431001890359	0.420899854862	79	7	86	172
V31: Source of V30	89.5348837209	0.272898074213	0.283996299722	0.277125410991	77	9	86	172
V32: Tone	97.6744186047	0.948847583643	0.94887039239	0.949144981413	84	2	86	172