

Readers' Comments as Popular Texts: Public Opinions of Paid Duty Policing in Canada

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ABSTRACT

Background *Despite paid-duty policing and associated public opinions being an increasingly controversial topic in Canadian news media, there has been limited research about them.*

Analysis *This article combines discourse and content analyses to examine the public opinions towards paid-duty policing in Canada expressed in the online readers' comment sections of news articles. Conceptualizing comments as popular texts, the article discerns several themes, including police impartiality, reputation, expertise, and performance. Most comments centered on the economics of paid duty.*

Conclusion and implications *The article concludes by considering why economics prevailed over other themes and reflects on core concepts in the literature on online comment boards, including interactivity and counter-publics.*

Keywords *Public opinions; Readers' comments; Discourse analysis; Content analysis; Audience reception; Media theory; Policing*

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte *Il y a eu peu de recherches sur les services rémunérés de la police ou sur l'opinion publique envers ceux-ci, même s'ils deviennent un sujet de plus en plus controversé dans les médias canadiens.*

Analyse *Nous effectuons des analyses de discours et de contenu pour examiner les sections de commentaires en ligne accompagnant certains articles sur l'actualité. En envisageant ces commentaires comme textes populaires, nous discernons divers thèmes relatifs à la police, y compris son impartialité, sa réputation, sa compétence et sa performance. La plupart des commentaires font mention de l'économie des services rémunérés.*

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Conclusion et implications *Nous terminons notre article en considérant pourquoi l'économie a prévalu sur d'autres thèmes dans les commentaires en ligne et en nous interrogeant sur des concepts centraux dans la recherche sur ce sujet tels que l'interactivité et les contre-publics.*

Mots clés *Opinions publiques; Commentaires des lecteurs; Analyse du discours; Analyse de contenu; Réception publique; Théorie des médias; Maintien de l'ordre*

Introduction

In November 2015, the Manitoba branch of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) turned off its online comment section for news stories about First Nations issues (Houpt, 2015). The CBC was not the only media outlet to restrict online comment sections. The Sun newspaper chain shut down comments for all stories across Canada in September, 2015, followed by the *Toronto Star* two months later. In each case, the concern was uncivil statements (Cammaerts, 2009; Loke, 2012; Meltzer, 2015; Rowe, 2015). Public reactions to these changes ranged from claims of censorship to congratulations for ending the bigotry. These cases demonstrate that media outlets and the public pay attention to these fora as sites for debate and discussion. As research regarding online commenting shows (Graham & Wright, 2015; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011; Reader, 2012; Santana, 2011; Thurman, 2008), such “popular texts” deserve scholarly attention as proxies for public opinions.

This article examines online comment sections for news stories related to paid duty policing in Canada. In the United States and Canada, paid duty policing entails uniformed public police being paid—upward of \$100/hour/officer in Canada—by private corporations, business owners, and other mostly private users to provide a visible presence at sporting events, malls, night clubs, movie shoots, weddings, festivals, and other sites. Paid duty policing is a neglected area of policing scholarship. In Canada it is variously labelled “special duty,” “off duty,” or “extra duty,” and informally called “moonlighting” to denote police officers’ extra night-time employment. Little is known about public opinions regarding this development in policing, and no traditional public opinion research has been conducted.

As part of a project on the expansion of and rationales for paid duty policing in Canada, as well as public controversies surrounding the practice, we systematically collected content from online comment sections¹ for news stories about paid duty policing. Based on discourse and content analyses of these data, we extend the notion of “interactivity” (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012; Weber, 2013) used in previous research on online comment sections, and reflect critically on the concept of “counter-publics” in this context (Dahlberg, 2011; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). Engaging with literature on new media, news, and communication, the article argues that there are multiple levels of interactivity that deserve future study, and that the counter-public concept, though applicable in other settings, is sometimes misapplied to online readers’ comments. To focus on levels of interactivity without incorporating the baggage of the counter-publics idea, the article draws from John Fiske (1987) to conceive of online comments as “popular texts.”

This article has four parts. First, it reviews literature on paid duty policing as well as news forms and media comment sections. Second, it explains our methodological choices. Third, it discusses results from our discourse and content analyses of readers’

comments about paid duty policing. Finally, it contemplates why the economics of paid duty policing in Canada superseded other themes, and reflects on core concepts in this field of study, in particular interactivity, counter-publics, and popular texts.

Previous research on paid duty policy

Paid duty policing, also called “private employment of public police” (Gans, 2000; Lippert & Walby, 2013; Reiss, 1988) or “user pays” policing (Ayling & Shearing, 2008), has become an increasingly prominent area of study in sociology and criminology (Lippert & Walby, 2014; Lippert, Walby, & Taylor, 2016). One of the earliest academic studies on the subject was Albert Reiss (1991), who identified, similar to prevalent paid duty arrangements in Canada, a “department contract” model whereby U.S. police departments arranged employer assignments for officers and oversaw payment to officers by employers. Complementary to research on paid duty, there has been broader research conducted on police moonlighting and public safety and legal issues (e.g., Vaughn & Coomes, 1995), job satisfaction (e.g., Grant, 1977), and officers’ perceptions of moonlighting (Jenks, 2009). However, questions about public opinions of paid duty policing remain under-researched.

The first *Hallcrest Report* (Cunningham & Taylor, 1985), a major three-year study commissioned by the National Institute of Justice on the growing private security industry in the U.S., assessed the extent of police moonlighting, stakeholder’s concerns, and conflict of interest. One reason that users turn to paid duty policing is to avoid the “tainted trade” stigma associated with private security and its assumed lack of legitimacy (Thumala, Goold, & Loader, 2011). Another is symbolic borrowing, in which users seek to purchase the authority of public police for private purposes (Thumala, Goold, & Loader, 2011). The question of whether users understand paid duty assignments as free market “purchases” or as merely costs of doing business due to legal requirements (e.g., to hold a for-profit event on public streets) or subtle police coercion (Ayling, 2014; Gans, 2000) are presently under investigation in the literature. An under-researched but equally important set of questions concern public perception. The negative, morally tainting effects on paid duty arrangements on the legitimacy of police on paid duty documented in the literature underscores the need to understand *public* opinions perhaps more than any other perspective.

Previous research on online comment sections for news stories

Literature on news forms (e.g., Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001) highlights the diversity of forms that news can take. Joshua Greenberg (2000) distinguishes between hard and soft news. He conceptualizes hard news as fairer, more balanced, and better researched; soft news is overtly biased. Traditionally, there has been little interaction between hard and soft news. Yet the hard and soft news distinction is eroded or undone by user-driven content in online arenas. Arthur Santana (2011) suggests that online comment sections for news stories differ from traditional newspaper op-eds because commenters are rarely named (although they can be) and do not necessarily need to substantiate their claims. In this article, online comments are treated as a form of *user-generated content and public opinion with the potential to interact with hard news* in the multiple ways elaborated below.

Interactivity is a key focus in literature on new media, news, and communication. Tanjev Schultz (2000) has commented on the lack of interactivity in traditional mass media, including major daily newspapers. Schultz (2000) pointed to online comment boards as a new development in media communication that would increase the interactivity of mass media and add popular voices to debates. During the 2000s online comment sections for news stories were established with greater frequency. As Carlo Ruiz, David Domingo, Josep Micó, Javier Diaz-Noci, Koldo Meso, and Pere Masip (2011) suggest, online discussion can connect people across boundaries and bolster public awareness of social issues. The framing of news articles shapes the direction of the comments too, although how this unfolds varies. Readerships differ from one jurisdiction and media outlet to the next, and moderators may be more or less effective in steering the discussion (Canter, 2013).

Alongside research on interactivity there is a parallel literature on the potential of the internet to increase public discourse and democratic engagement. Much of this literature draws on Jürgen Habermas's theory of ideal speech and free and open communication as the cornerstone of democracy (Lee, 1992; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2016). Such a conceptualization of ideal speech promotes the notion of universal access (Habermas, 1991) and critiques the idea of the bourgeois public sphere. Reasoned debate without regard for rank or status are other tenets of Habermas's conceptualization of ideal speech. From this perspective, the internet creates unprecedented opportunity for citizens to participate in the fourth estate. More critically, Florian Toepfl and Eunike Piwoni (2015) suggest comment sections of news websites may act as counter-publics that challenge hegemonic representations of news (also see Dahlberg, 2011). Research on the potential of the internet to increase public discourse and democratic engagement has been critiqued by those who point to the digital divide, which prevents universal access, and by those who argue media remain mostly corporate controlled (Katz & Rice, 2002; Margolis & Resnick, 2000) and thus a platform for elite and populist ideologies rather than reasoned debate.

As Manos Tsagkias, Wouter Weerkamp, and Maarten de Rijke (2010) observe, online comment sections for news stories resemble personal blogs more than traditional opinion pieces in newspapers. The goal is to express an opinion, not fret over whether it can be substantiated. Bill Reader (2012) echoes this theme in his reflection on the anonymous character of most news comments. He suggests anonymity allows commenters to disregard negative feedback they would be unable to ignore if their name was attached to the comment. Anonymous online comment sections for news stories can become more a venue for volatile outbursts about social issues than fora for informed and reasoned debate. It may be for this reason that Lindsay Conlin and Chris Roberts (2016) found the presence of online reader comments reduces the perceived credibility of news sites.

The focus in this article is how online comment sections impact news production and vice versa—the issue of interactivity. Carolyn Nielsen (2014) found journalists in the U.S. tend to ignore reader input and disagree with the anonymous dimension of online fora. Santana (2011) found reporters with large U.S. dailies were more apt to ignore online comments than smaller, local news outlets. Still, some reporters follow

online comments in search of new leads. Others attend to online comments to check if their angle and research resonated with members of the public. In this way, Santana (2011) claims that online comments can lead to citizens influencing mass communicators and shaping news production (also see Meltzer, 2015). Yet other forms of interactivity, such as the initial story's framing and its capacity to shape online debates should not be overlooked. As Pablo Boczkowski and Eugenia Mitchelstein (2011) note, interactivity is a contested term. Below the article focuses on article-comment and comment-comment forms of interactivity in readers' comment boards.

Rather than categorize online comment sections as soft news, a means of creating a public sphere, or simply an internet-based forum for bigotry, we draw from Fiske (1987) to conceptualize online comments as texts characteristic of popular culture. Therefore, we are analyzing public *opinions*.² According to Fiske (1987), popular texts have various traits. First, popular texts are "producerly" (p. 103) in requiring action to constitute them. Second, these texts may not follow rules or customs around text production and have a capacity to expose limits or disrupt preferred or politically correct meanings. Third, popular texts do not necessarily use proper or accepted language conventions. Fourth, popular texts allow people to engage in thrills and excess unavailable in everyday life. Fifth, these texts may distinguish the self and the other by creating boundaries between the self and an imagined folk devil. Sixth, following from the last trait, they may be used to promote what Fiske calls popular discrimination. Seventh, Fiske (1987) identifies a poverty of meaning in the individual popular text. Popular texts need other similar texts to have an enduring meaning. Otherwise, these texts may be forgotten or overseen. Finally, this ephemerality is part of their character since audiences and text producers alike switch topics "as their attention wanders" (p. 53).

The concept of popular texts is preferable to the alternative counter-publics concept (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015) because the latter presumes comment fora are critical and contrary to the original framing in the news story. Yet as is shown below, comments may simply mimic the framing contained in the original story, rendering them no less producerly, but not necessarily counter-hegemonic. We examine the online comment sections of news stories as popular texts deserving analysis in their own right (not only compared to hard news) to assess how they are produced, how the framing of the initial story impacts their content, how they interact with one another, as well as the meanings they communicate.

Data and method

We analyzed online newspaper comments from eight articles in six different Canadian news sources: the CBC, *Toronto Sun*, *Toronto Star*, *Vancouver Sun*, *Sudbury Star*, and *Ottawa Sun*. Articles were identified using the Canadian Newsstream database. Our initial sample consisted of five articles from the first three news sources (CBC, *Toronto Sun*, *Toronto Star*), which focused on Toronto, the most controversial site for paid duty policing in Canada, and which were purposively selected for the proportionately high number of readers' comments they received. Articles from the latter three sources (*Vancouver Sun*, *Sudbury Star*, *Ottawa Sun*) were added in a second phase of sampling and selected based on two criteria: reader comment frequency and substantive focus on a police department other than the Toronto Police Service. Based on these criteria,

we selected three articles: one on the Vancouver Police Department, one on the Greater Sudbury Police Service, and one on the Ottawa Police Service. These three articles were added to broaden the sample and assess if the framing of the news articles and content of readers' comments around police in other cities notably varied from those about Toronto. Feeling that we had hit a point of "saturation" in the emergent themes in readers' comments, we opted not to add any additional articles.

We used a purposive rather than random sampling strategy as it was the most effective way to identify articles with high readers' comment frequencies. At present, databases such as Canadian Newsstream do not archive readers' comments. To get around this, we used the database to identify news articles on paid duty policing, and then tracked down the original online version to tally and access the comments when available. Readers' comments and replies to readers' comments were manually extracted from the news websites and saved onto our computers for analysis.

We analyzed 1,946 unique comments. To address the problems of "intercoder reliability" (Lombard, Snyder-Dutch, & Campanella Bracken, 2002), and given our relatively small sample size, the same coder analyzed all data. Our analysis had three aims. First, we sought to represent the range of recurring public opinions expressed on paid duty public policing. We accomplished this by incorporating all central and recurring themes into our analysis and maintaining an analytical attitude open to surprise (Altheide & Schneider, 2013; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Besides content, we analyzed each comment's logic and broader underlying framing of paid duty policing. Second, we sought to account for not only the range of recurring public opinions expressed, but also their frequency. We did this by using Provalis's QDA Miner Lite, a computer program that assists coding datasets according to prefigured keywords and phrases we generated via our discourse analysis. Individual comments could have multiple codes. Other comments were not coded because they were either contextual statements of agreement/disagreement or centred on an unrelated topic. We coded 1,332 of 1,946 (68%) comments in total. We also analyzed the newspaper articles to discern if any themes in readers' comments were present. Such an approach allowed thinking about interactions between the content and framing of the news article and of readers' comments that tended to mimic rather than disrupt hegemonic news representation.

As with in-person conversations and debates, online readers' comments are full of digressions, tangents, and lengthy side conversations about unrelated subjects. The more readers that commented, the more an array of themes became available for other readers' engagement. Therefore, readers' comments were not only bound by the framing of the original newspaper article but also operated as an expanding, semi-autonomous space in which new readers' comments could interact with older content in what we call pathways. Readers' comments covered everything from police body cameras to affirmative action policies, from police attendance in court to speeding tickets, and from racialization to the estimated education level of another commenter.

A limit of our study is that we do not analyze news articles about paid duty from every newspaper or police jurisdiction in Canada. Thus, we cannot claim our findings are nationally representative. Yet, our selection of Toronto as the major case was not merely for convenience. Of cities in Canada, paid duty policing in Toronto has generated

the greatest breadth of news coverage and public controversy. This is partially due to the relatively high hourly rate of paid duty officers in this city and a municipal bylaw requiring sworn, paid duty police officers for simple traffic control functions. Compared to Toronto, paid duty policing in other cities tends to receive less frequent media coverage and in our observations generates less commentary from readers. While we identified media coverage of paid duty in other cities, such as Calgary and Winnipeg, these were generally one-off articles with little-to-no reader comments. Given the widespread and high-profile media coverage surrounding paid duty policing in Toronto, and the circulation of news coverage pertaining to the Toronto case, often in nationally consumed news sources such as the CBC, it is probable that this coverage and the public opinions represented in readers' comments could shape readers' sentiments about paid duty in other cities. In other words, Toronto paid duty is more than an isolated case; it is relevant to understanding the dominant framing of paid duty issues elsewhere too.

Public opinions of paid duty public policing

We discerned 11 recurring themes concerning paid duty policing in Canada: economics, policy alternatives, training and expertise, corruption, free market versus state monopoly, unionism, reputation, job performance, institutionalism, fairness and impartiality, and increased presence. Themes related to the economics of paid duty policing were most prevalent. This is especially true for news articles about the economics of paid duty policing. When other themes were raised in readers' comments, we found that they were also likely to be raised in the news articles (see Table 1). We use the notion of interactivity to conceptualize this relationship between the framing and content of the news article and that of readers' comments.

Table 1: paid duty themes in readers' comments and news articles

	CBC		T. Star		S. Star		O. Sun		T. Sun		V. Sun		Total
	NA	RC	NA	RC	NA	RC	NA	RC	NA	RC	NA	RC	
Economics	X	288	X	154	X	18	X	39	X	311		3	814
Policy alternatives	X	75	X	44	X		X	10		23			152
Training & expertise	X	88	X	37		2	X	13		20			160
Unionism	X	11	X	36					X	33			80
Free market versus State Monopoly	X	30	X	20	X		X	2		37			79
Reputation	X	35	X	25				3		10	X	1	74
Corruption		75		10		1				34	X		55
Job performance		12		9						34			55
News representation		10		10						7		20	47
Race						1				21		16	38
Institutionalism		23		8						7			38
Fairness & impartiality	X	26		6						3		2	37
Increased presence		18		5		1				1			25

Notes: NA = News article; RC = Readers' comments; X = Theme's presence

We coded for other themes relevant to literature on readers' comments. Comments removed by moderators, discussion of moderation by readers, mentions of race and gender, and instances of journalist/moderator interaction with commenters were also coded. The research team found that interactivity between journalists and moderators in readers' comments boards was rare ($n = 2$). However, we were only able to code comments removed by moderators in certain newspapers ($n = 98$). Online news outlets, such as the CBC, screen comments while they are posted, making censorship invisible except to the commenter. As a proxy, the research team tried coding comments referring to moderation on the assumption that readers who had their comments removed might voice frustration with moderators or otherwise mention it ($n = 18$). Comments about race and gender were also coded. Given the propensity of readers' comments boards to be fraught with racism and sexism (Reader, 2012), we wanted to know the extent to which race and gender surfaced in comments on paid duty ($n = 38$). In the *Toronto Sun* article, discussions of race appeared in comment pathways on affirmative action and policing in Ferguson, Missouri, while mentions of race in the *Vancouver Sun* article were directed at the alleged racism of the columnist. The issue of gender rarely surfaced in readers' comments ($n = 10$). The only journalist to interact with readers was the *Vancouver Sun* columnist Kim Bolan (2008). Frustrated with allegations of racism, Bolan responded to one reader in the comments board itself and published a formal response article to the readers' comments in the *Vancouver Sun*. Only one instance of a moderator interacting with a readers' comment was found.

We discuss our findings on opinions of paid duty policing in Canada, moving from most to least frequent. Rather than discuss only the most frequently recurring themes (e.g., top three), we elaborate all 11 to retain the range and complexity of public opinions represented in readers' comments. This has been done to contribute to literature on paid duty policing. Although themes such as institutionalism, fairness and impartiality, and increased presence were less frequent than others in readers' comment boards that the research team analyzed, they are central in the growing academic literature on paid duty. By retaining these themes in the discussion, our analysis is not only a contribution to communication and content analysis literature but to future literature on paid duty that addresses how these different themes emerge, if at all, in readers' comments fora.

Economics

In discussing the economics of paid duty policing, readers mostly debated officer pay rates and *who* was paying them: the taxpayer, the user, or both. While other themes emerged, it was the discussion of the public/private financing of paid duty and its bearing on the individual taxpayer that dominated the framing and substance of comments, a point that is revisited in the conclusion.

The theme of police pay appeared in the comments, first via discussions of how much pay police officers deserved for regular and paid duty. Listing average salaries of police officers along with rates for paid duty was commonplace in articles and readers' comments. Pay was considered unreasonably high. The main reason posited in defense of these high rates was the idea of "danger pay," which was a major topic of debate. As one reader wrote: "Guys, guys! Policing in Canada is very dangerous work!"

... We therefore have neither any right nor sense whatsoever to challenge or criticize anything they do" (Casey & Loriggio, 2015). But most readers' comments rejected arguments about danger pay. Readers rejected the danger pay argument by contending that public policing is less dangerous than other kinds of work, such as construction. Part of the issue, as one reader remarked, is that police officers' fatalities receive more national media attention than other work-related deaths: "Statistically, policing in Canada is very safe. Construction work is far more dangerous. But when a construction work[er] dies on the job it might make the local news only. If a police officer dies it will be in national news for days" (Casey & Loriggio, 2015). Moreover, in a rare counter-hegemonic comment, one reader invoked gender, suggesting police officers (an occupation still dominated by men) are paid highly not because of danger pay but because of their masculinized representation as heroes:

When society—particularly men—get over their hero worship of the "policeman" and the "fireman" then maybe their pay will be more line with both reality and with the rest of society. It's interesting that paramedics don't get the same level of hero worship, nor the same level of pay. (Peat, 2015)

Nevertheless, such counter-hegemonic comments were infrequent.

Many readers thought police officers earned too much for regular and paid duty because of the low minimum education requirements for the job. Readers tended to be bitter and sarcastic in their comment on this issue. As one reader put it, "And forget getting an education and going in debt doing so, just be a cop in Toronto!" (Peat, 2015). Comments about police officer pay and required education frequently referenced the "Sunshine List" (an Ontario term used to denote the mandatory publication of public sector workers making \$100,000 plus annually), which was also discussed in many news articles to delegitimize officer pay rates. Here the underlying assumption was that no officer, especially not of low rank, should make this list: "So more than half are now on the sunshine list. No post-secondary schooling required. Where can I sign up?" (Peat, 2015). References to the Sunshine List in readers' comments were also contested by other readers who sought to defend paid duty policing and officer pay by undermining the list's validity: "The Sunshine list is antiquated device that hasn't been tweaked since 1996. If adjusted for inflation the number of people on it would not have increased much since it started" (Powell, 2014). The same criticism was raised in a quotation from the Toronto Police Association head in a *Toronto Star* article (Peat, 2015).

Another way discussions of police pay surfaced in readers' comments was through discussion of costs to the taxpayer, an issue also raised in many of the news articles. A considerable number of taxpayer-focused comments were based on misunderstandings of paid duty, causing many readers to respond by asking if the commentator had read the adjoining article. The common misunderstanding was that paid duty policing was being paid entirely by the government and therefore with tax dollars. As one reader commented on the CBC article: "Police inside a hockey arena is a very poor use of tax payers' money" (Casey & Loriggio, 2015). Such comments were quickly corrected by other readers: "This has been said time and time again—the police service is not footing the bill for the paid duties. [I]t is the company that pays for it" (Willing, 2014).

There were also more sophisticated expressions of the taxpayer critique. Many readers noted regarding traffic duty that construction companies simply increase their fees based on paid duty costs, which in the event of working for the city, puts the expense back on the taxpayer:

McCormack says that paid duty is at “no direct cost” to taxpayers ... So I guess the construction companies doing work on city roads, don’t pass on this cost to the taxpayers? They just pay, out of the goodness of their heart? (Powell, 2014)

Who do you think pays for the construction company doing the road work? The city. The construction company just adds the police fees into their work, so yes, there is a cost to the city. (Bell, 2014)

If you think the private sector doesn’t pass these higher police charges for security to the city in their bids, you must be new. (Peat, 2015)

This same point was raised in *Toronto Star* (Brazao, 2014) and *Ottawa Sun* (Willing, 2014) articles.

Readers voiced similar criticisms about taxpayer-funded resources for paid duty work. Readers argued that even when users paid the paid duty policing rates, police officers were still using publicly funded police resources and benefitting from publicly funded training and healthcare:

So who paid for their training, their uniform, their equipment and the vehicle if they are using one? Oh, silly me, it was the taxpayer. (Powell, 2014)

Who is paying for their “off duty” cruisers, motorcycles ... ? (Brazao, 2015)

They use their public position to get the private one. We paid for their training as tax payers where is our cut if I invest I expect a [return on investment]. (Peat, 2015)

Policy alternatives

Commenters would occasionally offer solutions to paid duty problems. One popular recommendation, echoing the taxpayer critique above, was to allow police officers to do paid duty without public resources:

They can do what they want on their personal time but leave the uniform, gun or whatever else the taxpayer pays for at home. (Brazao, 2015)

[F]ine they provide their services, but no way should they be allowed to do so in uniform supplied by tax payers. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

Some readers pointed to other countries, provinces, and cities that could be used as models to reform Toronto’s paid duty arrangements:

Ontario needs to look at the Alberta mode. They use community peace officers (equivalent to Ontario special constables) for traffic enforcement and other enforcement duties. (Willing, 2014)

So if it is so essential to have cops be flagmen at construction sites, how come hundreds of other jurisdictions including Vancouver seem to do just fine by hiring someone to do the job who isn't wearing a gun? (Powell, 2015)

There are plenty of models to use in other major cities in Canada and US where paid duty are not required. It's not like we'd be reinventing the wheel. It's being done today at much cheaper rates to the cities. (Peat, 2015)

Another popular solution was to move toward a more plural model of policing that uses different types of officers from the public and private sectors:

Create special constables. Pay them \$25.00 to do this work and cut back [p]olice paid duty. (Powell, 2014)

There are tasks particularly with traffic that could be addressed by others than fully trained and experienced police officers. ... In some cases we see small town municipal staff doing the same as volunteer firemen on sites. The same should apply in major cities. (Willing, 2014)

Staggering waste of resources. We should explore traffic wardens as well and let the police concentrate on criminal activity. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

Finally, many readers suggested that the assignments public police officers were doing through paid duty should be filled instead by private security companies:

This is the jurisdiction of private security, not our public police. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

Guarding construction sites is a job for private security. If [any] would-be thieves break in, security can hold them until police arrive. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015).

I'm fairly certain private security firms could be hired at that rate. (Powell, 2014)

Training and expertise

Comments about police training and expertise questioned the extent to which paid duties, which often involve tasks such as traffic control and crowd security, necessitate the unique training and expertise of a public police officer. Is the specialized training and expertise of the police really required for traffic control and special events security? The same line of questioning was raised in several of the news articles. Many readers argued that public police officers, with their high level of training and expertise, should be used to handle more complex matters such as violent crime:

We are told that one of the reasons why police receive such a high rate of pay is because of their highly specialized training. It doesn't make a lot of sense to have these specialists stand around manholes, construction sites and entertainment venues during off-hours. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

Makes no sense to have a fully trained OPS [Ottawa Police Service] constable doing this type of work, traffic control is NOT police work. Neither is construction work traffic control or anything else that does not require them to use the very expensive training that they go through. (Willing, 2014)

They should be out arresting crack dealers and their associates, not making big dollars doing small dollar jobs. (Brazao, 2015)

Those defending the current use of public police officers for paid duty jobs argued that paid duty work is more difficult and complex than many critics understand. Moreover, it is not merely the training and expertise of public police officers required but the legitimacy and symbolic authority that accompanies it:

Only police can do a proper job of directing traffic in an intersection. We have paid duty on construction sites daily and they are the only people that motorists give any sort of respect too [sic]. (Bell, 2014)

People OBEY police because they are well trained and they have authority. There are a lot of morons on the road talk[ing] on phones, texting you name it ... Police are well trained in case of emergency that a mall cop isn't. (Powell, 2014)

I have hired private security in the past for certain functions and the cost is definitely lower overall. But the guards have no authority and aren't sworn officers. If someone chooses to disregard them, they call the cops! (Peat, 2015)

Readers' comments on police training and expertise also sometimes highlighted a public police officer's right to carry firearms, which distinguished them from private security:

[I]f you have a police officer you know the surrounding public is more likely to be orderly because they carry a gun. (Powell, 2014)

[T]he government has been extremely restrictive about allowing private security guards to carry guns. The best way around it has always been to hire a police officer who is off duty at the time you need them. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

Corruption

In more critical readers' comments, paid duty policing, particularly in Toronto where it is mandatory for traffic control, was compared to corruption. Comments about the mandatory use of paid duty officers frequently labelled public police as organized criminals:

What the cops are doing amounts to extortion, organized crime. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

The head of the Police Union reminds me of being nothing more than a Godfather of a Crime Syndicate. (Powell, 2014)

Having the municipality tell an event or construction site it has to provide security or traffic direction is one thing, but forcing them to hire off-duty police officers for this is simple extortion. (Bell, 2014)

Another way readers raised concern about the corrupting nature of paid duty was to invoke slippery slope imagery. According to this reasoning, allowing police officers to work for private stakeholders for pay is the beginning of a much larger trend toward

the corruption of public police services and other public resources. In the comments section of the CBC article, for example, readers wrote:

“Paid Duty” scam ... Next we will have to hire one to mow the lawn. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

Rent-a-politician, rent-a-cop ... what's next? Rent-a-judge? (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

Finally, several readers highlighted uncertainties around the regulation of paid duty users. Could organized crime groups hire paid duty officers for security? How would a public police department know if they were providing paid duty to an illegitimate user?

Can drug dealers hire them? What about bikers? ... what about all those “legitimate” businesses that are owned and sometimes operated by organized crime, can they rent a witness—uh, cop, yeah that's what I meant to say ... (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

I remember in Calgary when bars owned by a certain biker gang were employing Calgary Police as guards. The same biker gang that basically rules the hard drug/prostitution market in this city with only token resistance from the police. (CBC, 2015)³

Market competition versus state monopoly

The theme of free market versus state monopoly emerged in debate about the source of the mandatory requirement for paid duty policing in Toronto. Many readers, some identifying as users of paid duty services, claimed it was the private insurance companies that set the requirement for paid duty officers rather than other forms of security. Others argued that it was simply the state protecting its monopoly on an otherwise free market service:

That's funny, my insurance company specifically told me that a security guard CANNOT do the job that requires paid duty officer. Not basically, definitely. Otherwise my insurance would be void. (CBC, 2015)

To do a construction project the contractor must be properly insured. The insurer dictates the conditions that the contractor must follow ... If it involves traffic flow on a roadway, the insurer may require that the site have a uniformed police officer present. That is the call of the insurer. Similarly if you rent a hall for a licensed event, a condition of the rental may be that you must have uniformed police present. (Peat, 2015)

Readers not supportive of a state monopoly on policing services argued for a more open market in which public and private providers compete for business.

They take job from security industry = they would call us scabs if we did it to them. (Powell, 2014)

Lots of people can and would like to compete for policing work ... this would mean better policing at “competitive” prices—not a 1000 pound

bully who has taken your wallet and is deciding what charge they'll leave for you. (Peat, 2015)

Unionism

When police unionism was discussed in readers' comments, it was mostly to blame police associations for high regular and paid duty wages, and for the continuation of mandatory paid duty policing policies in cities such as Toronto. Most of these comments directly responded to quotations in the new articles from Toronto Police Association's Mike McCormack who defended paid duty policing:

Why do unions protect issues that are patently wrong? Get real McCormack! Hope city councillors have the requisite courage to challenge and change the culture and system. (Powell, 2014)

Police unions are only looking to keep their members "morale up" with extra money for easy, no paper work assignments. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

Surprise surprise the union head wants to continue paying his members ridiculous amounts from the public purse. (Powell, 2014)

Reputation

Comments about reputation suggested paid duty could negatively impact public perception of police. Most of these comments responded to news articles that raised the same issue (in particular the CBC and *Toronto Star*):

McCormack is a fool if he doesn't think reputation doesn't matter. Anyone in Public Service MUST be SEEN to be WORKING at all times when visible and ON DUTY in the eyes of the pub[li]c they serve. If you're in the back end and only visible to your colleagues, bosses, other paid members of public service you might be able to relax the odd moment but in public it's a big no-no and does impact the image you're trying to create. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

These "duties" don't involve any policing whatsoever yet they are paid as if they are doing police work. ... This denigrates the reputation of the police and the practice must be stopped. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

More commonly, readers' comments about the reputational damage of using paid duty officers for things like traffic control were expressed anecdotally through people's observations, which were mostly negative:

I have NEVER seen an officer at a construction site do anything but stand around, talk to the construction crew, and look into the hole. (Brazao, 2015)

So let me get this straight. Cops sitting in their cars ... surfing the net and totally ignoring the fact that traffic needs to be directed is a good thing? (Bell, 2014)

McCormack's argument might be valid IF the paid duty officers actually did something (direct traffic) rather than stand around with their hands in their pocket. (Powell, 2014)

Job performance

The concern that paid duty assignments may overwork police officers, thereby inhibiting their regular duty performance was raised in several comments but never explicitly in the news articles. It was assumed officers needed time to recuperate off duty. By cutting into a police officer's down time, many readers postulated paid duty work was reducing fitness for regular duty:

I've got a problem with it: If an officer is working during his/her down time, how does that affect her/his level of alertness on the job? (Brazao, 2015)

Having officers working a lot of overtime hours on "paid duty" means that when the public need an alert, competent policeman they get a sleep deprived person who has spent his rest time as a rent-a-cop. This leads to traffic accidents, laziness and poor use of force judgements – overuse of tasers, batons and guns by police too tired and grumpy to think of a better way to handle a situation. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)⁴

Institutionalism

Are the public police fundamentally different from other professions and institutions? Underlying many comments about the disreputable nature of paid duty work and the associated loss of police fairness and impartiality (discussed below) is the notion that the *public* nature of the police renders them unique. The police are trusted to uphold the rule of law and this makes work conducted on behalf of private stakeholders especially problematic. Defenders of paid duty countered that the public nature should not restrict officers from working any more than other professions; it is an officer's right to work extra hours if desired:

So a carpenter cannot work on carpentry jobs after normal working hours either? What is the big difference? (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

Others can work part time or in additional settings, why can't police officers? It seems to me we are automatically assuming they can't do this work and be impartial. I think [t]hat is wrong. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

Give me a break. It's called "overtime." I did it working at McDonalds in my teens, and then again driving a forklift while in university. (Powell, 2014)

One reader likened policing to other professions and public services to underscore the ridiculousness of the high pay rates for paid duty in Toronto:

Imagine that the city regulations required you to hire paid-duty garbage men to clean your yard, and pay them 4X what a private contractor would charge. Imagine you were forced to hire a city accountant to do your taxes and pay 4X the normal professional rate. Imagine you were required to use a city day-care and pay 4X the fees. Why are we required to pay 4-5 times the cost of a private security guard to stand around and drink coffee? (Powell, 2015)

Fairness and impartiality

The issue of paid duty policing negatively affecting police impartiality arose in several

comment boards, but mostly in response to the CBC article that had a section titled “questions about impartiality”:

Police are there to serve and protect, if Company X is paying their way that is a relationship changer. I'd rather they be completely independent. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

What about the cop who does traffic duty for a car wash on Avenue Road and gives customers of that establishment preferential treatment? (Brazao, 2015)

At least one reader saw paid duty work as enabling police officers to retain their claim to impartiality by avoiding conflicts of interest because paid duty jobs are tracked and controlled more than other off-duty jobs police officers could work:

We do not want cops working on extra jobs because it may cause conflict of interest so O/T or paid duty is OK. (Peat, 2015)

Paid duty, according to this view, is deemed superior to letting police officers work any side job without official departmental oversight. Another reader compared public police and private guards by suggesting the former was much less likely to side with private interest when doing traffic control and other security type work due to this oversight:

A police officer is vastly less likely to side uncritically with a retail employer than a private guard; he won't do anything that might cost him his badge. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

Increased presence

Finally, some readers defended paid duty by observing that simply having a police officer on the streets during a paid duty assignment and ready to respond to incidents and emergencies was superior to the alternatives.

So What? ... In turn we get off duty cops, stationed on street corners, paid for by private dollars. Paid duty officers are still required by law to respond to crimes they may see or that are reported to them. (Peat, 2015)

Police are “working for the people” when doing paid duties, they are ensuring safety for the public and the workers for the company that hired them. They also have the responsibility to ensure rules are followed according to the work permits and can, and have, shut unsafe sites down. As far as leaving their weapons at the station, well, that's pretty ignorant. Because, if something ever happened out on the street to you, or your loved one, that unarmed paid duty officer wouldn't be much use to you, would he? (Powell, 2014)

The upside to having off duty police is that if something happens that requires a police presence (like assault or a vehicle crash) rather than something that can be handled just by a security guard. (Casey & Loriggio, 2015)

Popular texts, layers of interactivity, and comment pathways

Our findings make an empirical contribution to communications literature by showing

that readers' comments on paid duty in Canada predominantly frame the issue as officers' pay, both for off-duty and on-duty work. This is significant because other issues, such as officer fatigue, or collusion with local businesses and corruption, are arguably more important (see Punch, 2009). There are several possible reasons why readers' comments focused on pay rather than police impartiality and reputation. One explanation concerns the framing of the news articles. The articles we analyzed on paid duty policing were steeped in rhetoric about costs and pay, which we categorized as "economics." Framing of the news articles likely structured the debates, which unfolded in the readers' comments boards. Had the news articles raised the argument that paid duty negatively affects police officer rest and alertness on the job, it is possible a greater number of readers' comments would have mirrored that issue.⁵ In this sense, there is interactivity between the story and the online comments.

If framing the original story is significant for the content of the media comments, it raises questions about whether online comment sections for news stories can be counter-publics (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015), an idea that assumes such comments are generally critical and run contrary to the framing in the original news story. Indeed, the comments may simply show the persuasive influence of the news stories more broadly. Though we assigned officer pay and taxes to an "economics" theme, and some economic critiques of paid duty in the comments were relatively sophisticated, it is still remarkable how impoverished most commentators' notions of economics was by their limited focus on pay and taxes (see also Willmott, 2017). Thus, there was no consideration of why paid duty for public police became an issue in Canada's most affluent city, Toronto, where it has been in place for more than 50 years (Lippert & Walby, 2014), and how attention to it in news stories might simply be part and parcel of the relentless delegitimizing assault on the quality and value of public services in Canada that commenced in the 1980s—to the benefit of economic actors. The idea of counter-publics may lose some of its cogency as the public/private distinction is eroded by the emergence of information communication technologies and social media (Ford, 2011), which allow private thoughts and urges to be broadcast among various publics.

The above analysis also makes an empirical contribution to the limited criminological literature about paid duty policing. It does so by revealing the complexity of public opinions about paid duty in several Canadian cities that, while preoccupied with costs and pay, also raise troubling questions about issues including the rule of law, workers' rights (to unionize and be unrestricted from selling their labour), and the public/private divide that, at least discursively, largely defines liberal democratic rule in Canada.

By framing readers' comments as popular texts rather than counter-publics this article makes a conceptual contribution. Conceptualizing readers' comments as popular texts does not strip them of potential to disrupt hegemonic news representation. Popular texts can still unsettle the status quo. Rather, the point is that conceptualizing readers' comments in counter-public terms overlooks the extent to which many comments mimic a news article's dominant framing. The article's delimiting effect on the framing and content of readers' comments constitutes one form of interactivity between article and comment. Moreover, a large portion of comments were not coherent

opinions of paid duty, but short statements of agreement or disagreement that often defied traditional language norms. From comments such as “LOL” (laughter), “but did u really ...” (statement of disbelief), or “good one” (sarcasm), many readers’ comments in the boards befitted popular texts described by Fiske (1987). As new comments were introduced to the board, they were either ignored and disengaged, or replied to by various readers. Replies ranged from reasoned counter-opinions, to questions and statements of disbelief, to hateful slanders and personal attacks seeking to penetrate anonymity (e.g., “I bet you work a minimum wage job don’t you...”). Comments in this sense could often be clustered into longer, albeit ephemeral, pathways of statements and counterstatements that mirrored everyday conversation. These pathways of readers’ comments were marked by continuous change in subject, misunderstandings, and tangents with which other readers were keen to engage. The organization of comments into fragmented, ephemeral, and semi-autonomous pathways evinces another layer of interactivity between comments. The article explores these two layers of interactivity between article-comment and comment-comment. However, its claim about readers’ comments as producerly texts does not fully explain why people contribute to online forums. Nina Springer, Ines Engelmann, and Christian Pfaffinger (2015) claim people leave such comments in a cycle of gratifications sought and obtained. The interactivity between comments certainly exhibits a kind of terse contest of gratification and validation.

Finally, the limits of the study should be noted. First, these stories may look atypical if compared to news stories from other jurisdictions, such as the United States, where popular understandings of the appropriateness of state “monopolies” of public services (e.g., healthcare), the comparatively lower salaries of police officers, and even the sanctity of the rule of law in relation to government are factors known to differ from those in Canada. Future research should compare not only similarities and differences between different news sources, but also news sources in different countries. Second, given the focus on online comment sections for news stories, this article’s approach did not capture other popular texts, such as blogs or websites, which might also serve as future data sources ripe for communications research. Third, as news sources abandon anonymity or strengthen the moderator’s role, these changes may alter the production of such texts. Future research on online comment sections for news stories should continue to examine interactivity, but also the producerly dimension of these popular texts. Lastly, more research is needed to further validate or challenge the interactive relationship between the framing of the news article and readers’ comments documented here.

Notes

1. We do not distinguish these as *anonymous* online comments sections, since some readers chose to use what may be their real names (sometimes with pictures of themselves). Also, the content of readers’ comments could reveal much about readers’ identity and lives (what province or city they lived in, their place of employment, etc.), raising questions about the meaning of “anonymity” in this context. The online comment sections we analyzed were not anonymous by design; readers could reveal their identities if they chose to, although most did not. While anonymity is an important factor in examining online comments sections, it is not our primary concern in this article.

2. The study of public opinions as popular texts deals with the form and diversity of opinions in situated fora, and therefore does not represent “public opinion” in a traditional sense (e.g., of a nation).
3. An article by Bolan (2008) in the *Vancouver Sun* was about precisely this problem of paid duty police officers mingling with organized criminals. The focus of readers’ comments was more on Bolan’s alleged racism than the issue of police corruption.
4. Even though not explicitly raised in the news articles, in part showcasing the potential of readers’ comments to raise new themes of their own, we note that the theme did implicitly surface in the *Toronto Sun* article in which most of the job performance comments were found. This occurred in the article’s discussion of the Toronto Police Service constable that earned more than \$244,000 through regular and paid duty work. The article quoted the Toronto Police Association president saying: “the guy must have no life if he’s working that many hours” (Peat, 2015).
5. However, this is at least partially contradicted by the fact that even in those articles that highlighted themes unrelated to pay (e.g., impartiality in the CBC article), discussions about pay still dominated.

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