

An Inquiry into the Political Economy of Hockey Night in Canada: Critically Assessing Issues of Ownership, Advertising, and Gendered Audiences

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ABSTRACT

Background *This article employs a political economic analysis of the CBC's Hockey Night in Canada (HNIC) program. It critically investigates both the recent Rogers Communications takeover of the popular public broadcasting program and the history of HNIC's gendered audiences.*

Analysis *Utilizing a feminist version of Dallas Smythe's theory of the audience commodity, the author argues that the Rogers takeover represents the most recent manifestation of the complicity between patriarchy and capitalism that has persisted throughout the history of HNIC.*

Conclusion and implications *It is also argued that the general political economy of HNIC represents a site of analysis that has been largely ignored by communications scholars, and that the program's significance as a Canadian institution thus merits further critical inquiry.*

Keywords *Audiences; Public broadcasting; Advertising; Ownership; Dallas Smythe*

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte *Cet article réalise une analyse politico-économique de Hockey Night in Canada (« Soirée du hockey au Canada », CBC). Il effectue une évaluation critique du rachat par Rogers Communications de cette émission populaire sur la chaîne publique ainsi que celle de l'histoire des publics sexuels de l'émission.*

Analyse *L'auteur recourt à une adaptation féministe de la théorie sur la part d'audience telle que développée par Dallas Smythe afin de soutenir que le rachat de Hockey Night in Canada par Rogers représente l'instance la plus récente de la complicité entre patriarcat et capitalisme qui existe depuis le tout début de l'émission.*

Conclusion et implications *L'auteur soutient d'autre part que l'économie politique générale de Hockey Night in Canada représente un objet d'analyse largement ignoré par les chercheurs en communication et que l'émission mérite un examen approfondi du fait de son importance en tant qu'institution canadienne.*

Mots clés *Publics; Radiodiffusion publique; Publicité; Propriété; Dallas Smythe*

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Introduction

Hockey Night in Canada (HNIC) has historically been by far the most consistently popular public broadcasting program in Canada (Rowland, 2013; Scherer & Whitson, 2009). The goal of this article is to therefore open a critical inquiry into the political economy of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's HNIC. Although a significant body of scholarly literature has already examined such issues as the political economy of Canadian hockey (Cantelon, 2012; Hannigan, 2012; Stevens, 2012), CBC broadcasting policies and funding concerns (Scherer & Whitson, 2009; Starowicz, 2003), and the cultural politics of HNIC (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Whitson & Gruneau, 2012), these reports have typically sidelined any political economic elements of HNIC to the peripheries of analytic discussion. Indeed, while Scherer and Whitson (2009) provide a strong argument for hockey broadcasting as constituting a significant and unique institution of cultural citizenship in Canada, their analysis still only indirectly alludes to political economy aspects of the program, without going into great detail. As such, significant historical and critical perspectives relating to the current financial issues of the CBC's hockey broadcasting have not yet been systematically addressed—such as the recent HNIC takeover by Rogers Communications in 2014. Additionally, there currently exist no comprehensive economic analyses of the various gender inequalities prevalent throughout the history of Canadian hockey broadcasting. It is therefore crucial to comprehensively analyze the economic aspects of this program—such as ownership, allocation of resources, and production and consumption of gendered audiences—in order to facilitate a greater and more robust discussion regarding implications for public sports broadcasting policy, funding, and media activism. To this end, this article offers an analysis and critique of HNIC from a political economy perspective, specifically assessing the history and contemporary state of the CBC's most effective means of producing audience commodities.

Literature review

Of particular interest to this inquiry are the historical developments that have led to the CBC's difficulties in acquiring the broadcasting rights to National Hockey League (NHL) games featuring Canadian teams—despite the CBC's iconic HNIC program being effectively responsible for producing the audiences for those games (Scherer & Whitson, 2009; Shoalts, 2014). Within the field of communications, audiences are often considered to be one of the primary commodities of media industries (Garnham, 1990; Golding & Murdock, 1996; Smythe, 1977). According to Smythe's (1977) theory of audience commodities, audiences are effectively produced by media through the provisioning and promotion of content. Once produced, these audiences are then sold to advertisers who covet their attention and purchasing power. More specifically, the watching time of audiences is the commodity form that is produced and sold to advertisers and constitutes a sort of labour time (or watching time) that is functionally similar to that of other workers in capitalist economies (Jhally, 1990; Smythe, 1977). The watching time of audiences is therefore exploited by broadcasters for the surplus value that is produced through viewing advertisements.

The audience commodity is especially relevant in television broadcasting, such as HNIC, for this medium relies heavily on funding from advertising revenues—even

in the case of some public broadcasting bodies such as the CBC (Meehan, 2002; Starowicz, 2003). Although the political economy approach is an expansive subfield of communication studies, encompassing issues of commodification, media reform, and technological advancements, to name only a few areas of research, this particular analysis aims to open a general critical inquiry into *HNIC*. Therefore, while the issues of ownership and gendered audiences are the primary concerns of this investigation, they are by no means exhausting the critical analytic utility of a political economy perspective. Rather, this article aims to provide a theoretical and methodological framework within which to situate further studies into the political economy of *HNIC*.

Riordan (2002) has argued that the history of the political economy approach to communications research has been fraught with male-dominated viewpoints. Indeed, feminist media scholars have tended to gravitate more toward representation, ideology, and issues typically found in cultural studies. Riordan notes that this male-dominated viewpoint could be attributed to the fact that women still maintain a minority role in materialist academic fields, such as economics and policy studies. Although political economy has tended to focus on production and distribution (as well as ownership), Riordan argues that a feminist political economy ought to further develop a comprehensive analysis of consumption in the realm of media, with specific emphasis on the identities of consumer subjects (Riordan, 2002). As such, there exists an identified need to investigate the consumption aspects of popular media, as consumption is the necessary counterpart to production and labour in the capitalist system (especially from Smythe's perspective of work-time and buying-time). This perspective is in reaction to the often gendered history of political economy of communications research, in which production is often privileged over consumption. It is therefore important to investigate this often neglected perspective of political economy of communications. Hence, this article employs a feminist political economy approach to better understand not only the identity politics involved in *HNIC*, but also how those identities relate to the economic realities of Canadian public broadcasting. This perspective is crucial to going beyond the current issue of the Rogers takeover and understanding more fundamentally how *HNIC*, throughout its history, has enabled both gender inequality and market dominance in public sports broadcasting.

This article critically analyzes the economic history of audiences and advertising as they relate to *Hockey Night in Canada*, and specifically addresses the difficulties faced by the CBC in retaining the rights to the *HNIC* audience. It argues that public sports broadcasting in Canada as an institution of communications is increasingly being undermined by the private sector and has, as a result, perpetuated gender inequalities due to an over-reliance on advertising revenue for funding. The examination begins by engaging with the political economy approach to media generally and Smythe's theory of the audience commodity and its critics specifically, in relation to *HNIC*. From there, it employs Smythe's theory to construct a critical history of *HNIC*, including the recent takeover by Rogers Communications. The article then addresses issues of gender inequality in public broadcasting of Canadian hockey—with a focus on the history of gendering both content and audiences—and the role of the for-profit sector in perpetuating these inequalities.

Advertising and the audience commodity

In the 1960s and 1970s, Dallas W. Smythe argued for a materialist approach to studying communications by focusing on the economic bases of media. For Smythe, this approach was meant to complement and balance out what he saw as an excessive amount of ideological critique within mid-twentieth-century Marxist scholarship (Smythe, 1977, 1978). What Smythe called the “blindspot” of Western Marxist scholarship thus referred not only to a lack of Marxist inquiry into communications, but rather to an ignorance of the material qualities of media (Smythe, 1977). Rather than focusing solely on ideological critiques of representation or psychoanalytic interpretations of media, Smythe argued that it was crucial to also understand and critically analyze the historical developments and economic activities upon which Western communications systems and institutions were based (Smythe, 1984). Smythe therefore proposed a critical political economy approach to the study of communications. For Smythe, as well as other scholars that have since followed in the political economy tradition, the epistemological concerns of materialism and historical development were crucial to understanding the realities of social actors and institutions (Mirrlees, 2016; Mosco, 2009; Smythe, 1984).

Critical political economy typically positions itself in contrast to neoliberalism—the dominant global economic ideology since the late twentieth century, which emphasizes the minimization of government (regulation, social welfare, public goods and services, etc.) within free-market capitalist systems (Davies, 2016; Mirrlees, 2016). The political economy approach therefore situates itself within a realist ontology, which seeks to critically examine and explain real-world phenomena through a combination of theory and empirical evidence. To do so with regards to media industries, it was first necessary to question and investigate what economic purpose the communications industry served in the capitalist system. Smythe therefore sought to reverse the site of analysis from ideological interpretations of media content to the economic and material bases of capital accumulation within media industries.

In 1977, Smythe first proposed the theory of the audience as the primary commodity of capitalist communications industries. This theory resulted from the observation that media broadcasters do not typically accumulate capital from audiences directly, but rather from advertising revenue. As a result, the communications industry can be understood as creating and perpetuating capital by producing audiences as a commodity to be sold to advertisers (Meehan, 2002; Mosco, 2009; Smythe, 1977). In this sense, audiences are the commodity of capitalist media, albeit a particular form of commodity, in that their attention and purchasing power is produced and sold without their consent or conscious involvement. Smythe characterized this process as a form of labour exploitation: just as the labour of workers is exploited in the workplace by the owning class, so too are the attention and leisure time of audiences exploited by broadcasters.

In the workplace, workers sell their labour power to owners in exchange for wages. However, the attention and purchasing power of individuals during their non-working leisure time is sold without their knowledge or consent by broadcasters to advertisers in exchange for profit (Golding & Murdock, 1996; Meehan, 2002; Smythe, 1977). From

this perspective, the content of media is merely created as a “free lunch” to attract viewers and produce a captive audience that can be sold to advertisers (Smythe, 1977). While Smythe also contends that media content is responsible for cultivating ideologies in the familial context of home life and leisure time (see Smythe, 1978, for these clarifications), this process of the “consciousness industry” also bares equally important materialist components which, until Smythe’s theory, were largely ignored in Marxist literature.

Though some theorists—notably, Garnham and Murdock—were initially critical of some details in Smythe’s theory, most media scholars generally agree that the audience commodity is a useful lens through which to analyze the political economy of television broadcasting (Garnham, 1990; Golding & Murdock, 1996; Livant, 1979). Still, it is useful to revisit these criticisms in order to better understand and refine Smythe’s theory. For Garnham (1990), Smythe’s theory is problematic in that it fails to both account for other commodities that are exchanged and relate this concept to the fundamental Marxist components of class and class struggle. Indeed, by focusing on the audience as the commodity form of capitalist media systems, Smythe ignores the exchange of other products and services that are facilitated through advertising. Additionally, Smythe does not directly relate the audience commodity to the plight of class struggle—nor, for that matter, does his theory explicitly address the hybrid issues of gender or race within contemporary capitalism.

Another prominent figure engaged in the audience commodity debate was Murdock (1978), who raised a number of issues with Smythe’s initial theory. For Murdock, Smythe’s audience commodity was too general, and, although certainly useful to the analysis of advertising-dependent media such as most television broadcasts and newspapers, did not account for other media such as film, other than in instances of product placement (Meehan, 2002; Murdock, 1978). Additionally, Smythe’s theory did not take into consideration the role of the state in the materiality of communications industries, and thus largely ignored the political aspect of the political economy approach. Since these initial “blindspot debates” regarding Smythe’s theory, however, the audience commodity has generally been adopted by communications researchers, albeit in a reduced and more focused capacity that specifically addresses advertising-dependent media, and also takes into consideration the relationships between audiences and other commodities, class struggle, and issues of identity politics such as feminist and postcolonial perspectives.

The CBC, however, is not a purely public broadcaster in that it relies on a mix of both public and private funding in order to operate. Although Smythe (1978) notes that the production and exploitation of audience commodities appears wherever capitalist media systems exist, he also argues that the socialization or nationalization of media outlets can effectively protect against this phenomenon. However, mixed public media outlets, such as the CBC and its *HNIC* audience commodity, have received less theoretical attention. In capitalist media systems, the labour of broadcasters is manifested in the creation and provision of content as the “free lunch” to attract and thereby produce audiences as commodities. These commodities are then sold to advertisers in exchange for profit. In fully public media systems, public funds are allocated to

media broadcasters to provide content to the citizenry—without the commodification of audiences, as the audience is not subsequently sold to advertisers. The mixed public media system of the CBC, however, still requires that the broadcaster commodify and sell audiences in order to continue to operate, especially as its levels of public funding continue to diminish.¹

The Rogers takeover and subsequent profiting from the sale of the *HNIC* audience commodity to advertisers thus represents a form of exploitation of the CBC, comparable to how other industries exploit and profit from the labour of factory or restaurant workers. Rogers is now profiting from the CBC's production of an audience commodity. Just as workers in capitalist systems become personally alienated from the commodities and services that they produce for the benefit of owners (in that they do not retain any substantial relations between themselves and the results of their labour), the CBC has become similarly alienated (albeit, in an institutional way) from the *HNIC* audience commodity that it has produced and continued to reproduce since the program first began—now for the benefit of Rogers.

In the context of *HNIC*, the production of an audience commodity can be found throughout the program's history. It is important to note that discussions of *HNIC* cannot be divorced from discussions about the CBC, especially when taking a historical perspective. This is due to the fact that the CBC was both initially responsible for creating *HNIC* and responsible for perpetuating the program's reproduction (and that of its audience commodity) since the 1930s. Since its inception, the CBC's hockey broadcasting has been reliant on the corporate presence of—among others—General Motors, Imperial Oil, the Molson Brewing Company, and, more recently, Rogers Communications (McKinley, 2012; Scherer & Whitson, 2009; Shoalts, 2014).

Though a public broadcaster, the CBC has never been completely publicly funded. In fact, the CBC's public funding has been cut by both Liberal and Conservative federal governments throughout its history (Scherer & Whitson, 2009). Although the new Trudeau Liberal government did implement an increase of \$675 million in federal funding over a five-year period for the CBC in 2016 (Abma, 2016), the public broadcaster remains economically vulnerable due to decades of funding cuts and rising inflation. In order to fund its broadcasting, then, the CBC has needed to continue producing and reproducing profitable audience commodities to sell to advertisers, with *HNIC* audiences historically being the most profitable. Until the Rogers takeover, advertising revenue from hockey broadcasting on the CBC was estimated to be between one-third and one-half of all CBC advertising revenue each fiscal year (Rowland, 2013). However, lack of governmental funding and policy support regarding content rights has resulted in the CBC being alienated from its own commodity—a phenomenon that has only increased since the adoption of neoliberal policies and ideology during the late twentieth (and early twenty-first) century. The lack of governmental support has meant that the CBC has increasingly been reliant on ad revenue, and this has become a serious issue for the CBC following the loss of the NHL contract. As a result, the CBC's annual ad revenue decreased from approximately \$375 million in 2012 to approximately \$330 million in the first year of the new Rogers contract with the NHL (CBC, 2013, 2015).

Richeri (2004) has argued that public broadcasting is essential for administering education, information, and entertainment to the public citizenry. Public broadcasting is therefore fundamental to democracy, in that it provides these essential services without (or at least, with as little as possible) corporate influences from the private sphere. However, public broadcasting is also crucial in its ability to deliver a platform for free speech to the national citizenry—something that is fundamentally undermined in *HNIC*'s privileging the viewership of middle-class men (Richeri, 2004). The increasing implementation of neoliberal policies in public sports broadcasting in Canada has therefore resulted in a significantly compromised public sphere of communications. This process has resulted in a conflicted state of the *HNIC* audience commodity, which needs to be addressed given its relation to the realities of public broadcasting in Canada.

History of *HNIC*: Ownership, audiences, and advertising

Canadian hockey broadcasting originated in the radio programs of the 1920s and 1930s, with hosts such as the iconic Foster Hewitt announcing the play-by-play games to hundreds of thousands of Canadians. These broadcasts exclusively covered NHL games, since the NHL had established itself as the most prestigious North American league by the 1920s (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Scherer & Whitson, 2009). In 1929, MacLaren Advertising purchased the radio broadcasting rights for all Toronto Maple Leafs games and immediately began selling sponsorship opportunities to various private companies. Beginning in 1931, approximately 1 million Canadians tuned in weekly to The General Motors Hockey Broadcast radio show with its host Foster Hewitt, until the American GM president withdrew the company's sponsorship in 1936 (McKinley, 2012; Scherer & Whitson, 2009). At the start of the 1936–37 season, Imperial Oil replaced GM as the primary sponsor of Canadian hockey broadcasting, during which time the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) was also created as a public broadcaster and granted the rights to hockey broadcasting (which, from then on, became officially known as *Hockey Night in Canada*) (Scherer & Whitson, 2009). By the end of the 1930s, the CBC was delivering this content to an audience of approximately 2 million Canadian viewers every weekend (Whitson & Gruneau, 2012). Although the CBC took over broadcasting rights for NHL games, MacLaren Advertising remained partnered with the public broadcaster, continuing to sell sponsorship opportunities to private companies and creating profit through advertising revenue for both MacLaren and the CBC.

In 1952, only a few weeks after television broadcasting came to Canada, Foster Hewitt hosted the first televised *Hockey Night in Canada* game between the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Boston Bruins, with Danny Gallivan hosting NHL games in Montréal (Deschamps, 2013; Lupien, 2017; Scherer & Whitson, 2009). By the early 1960s, the audience for the televised Saturday night *HNIC* broadcasts had grown to approximately 5.5 million Canadian viewers (Whitson & Gruneau, 2012). With viewership increasing in the 1950s, the audiences that *HNIC* was producing became a staple commodity for the CBC—and one of the broadcaster's essential sources of revenue. In an attempt to capitalize on this audience, the Molson Brewing Company purchased the Montréal Canadiens in 1956 and also became a co-sponsor of the *HNIC* programming. By 1976, after a 40-year partnership, Imperial Oil ended its sponsorship of *HNIC*

(Scherer & Whitson, 2009; Young, 1990). Although Molson had been a co-sponsor of *HNIC* since its purchase of the Montréal Canadiens in 1956, the company struck a deal with CBC in 1988 that effectively ended MacLaren Advertising's role in the institution's hockey broadcasting. The program was subsequently renamed Molson *Hockey Night in Canada* on CBC (McKinley, 2012; Scherer & Whitson, 2009). However, this rebranding was not well received by Canadians, and in 1995 the CBC enacted a clause that gave the broadcaster ownership of the *HNIC* program (which, until that point, it had never officially owned). With declining viewership during the 1990s, Molson sold the Canadiens and ended its sponsorship of *HNIC* in 2001, this left the program with a variety of smaller sponsors in a state of relatively decentralized power.

However, the beginning of the twenty-first century saw a sudden and dramatic change in the CBC's ability to retain its control over *HNIC*. In 2006, the private broadcasting partnership between CTV and TSN (CTV-TSN) began competing with the CBC for bids on the rights to *HNIC*. While the CBC ultimately retained the rights to its program by 2008, in a new six-year deal reportedly worth \$600 million, this victory was short-lived (Scherer & Whitson, 2009). By the end of the CBC's most recent contract in 2014, competing bids from the private sector resurfaced, this time including a successful Rogers Communications bid of \$5.2 billion (Cwynar, 2017; Shoalts, 2014). This new ownership of *HNIC* media content was also accompanied by Rogers taking over the show's production offices in the CBC building as well as a portion of its production staff. Although the CBC is still allowed to broadcast the Rogers-produced Toronto Maple Leafs or Montréal Canadiens games on Saturdays and Sundays, the only revenue the public broadcaster now receives from *HNIC* is what it accrues from renting its office space to Rogers (CBC, 2015; Shoalts, 2014). This means that, although the *HNIC* audiences had been originally produced by the CBC since the late 1930s, all advertising revenue acquired from selling that audience commodity would now go directly to Rogers.² As a result of the significant reduction in revenue, in addition to its most recent funding cuts by the federal government, the CBC was forced to lay off dozens of long-term employees (Shoalts, 2014, 2016). The Rogers takeover of *HNIC* thus represents a severe undermining of public broadcasting in Canada, as well as the manifestation of volatile neoliberal market forces within the broadcasting sector.

As discussed, even though the CBC is a public broadcaster, it has historically relied on advertising revenue due to its minimal levels of state funding (unlike some other national public broadcasters, such as the BBC in the U.K.). In a 2016 report comparing funding for public broadcasters, Canada was found to invest 64 percent less in public broadcasting institutions than the average funding provided by other states in the analysis (CBC, 2016). Additionally, CBC | Radio-Canada was found to rely upon commercial revenue for 37 percent of its total funding in 2016, with 20 percent of revenue coming from advertising (CBC, 2016). When taking inflation into account, government funding for the CBC has decreased by 36 percent in the past two and a half decades—from \$1.08 billion in 1991 to \$1.04 billion in 2015 (CBC, 2016). This lack of substantial financial support for public broadcasting in Canada (which has been exacerbated since the adoption of neoliberal ideologies and policies beginning in the 1980s) has been perpetuated throughout the second half of the twentieth century by both Liberal and Conservative

governments, both of which have regularly cut CBC funding, even during times of economic prosperity (Rowland, 2013). In addition to cutting funding, some political figures (usually Conservative), such as Brad Trost and Maxime Bernier, have publicly attacked the practice of publicly funded broadcasting, and have even at times suggested that the CBC ought to be privatized (Murray, 2001; O'Malley, 2017). Overall, the combination of both decreasing ad revenue (especially following the loss of *HNIC*, as noted above) and funding cuts has positioned the CBC in a state of financial volatility.

Although the CBC has always been heavily reliant upon advertising revenue, the recent actions by the private sector have begun to seriously jeopardize its future relationship with *HNIC* as well as the financial support it accrues from hockey broadcasting. The Rogers takeover of *HNIC* in 2014 thus represents a significantly greater threat to the existence and integrity of the CBC than any other corporate involvement throughout the institution's history. Though private corporations have always been involved in *HNIC*, the recent actions by Rogers risk altogether alienating the CBC from its primary audience commodity, which the public broadcaster has been responsible for attracting and retaining for nearly a century. Without the revenue generated from selling this audience commodity to advertisers, in conjunction with its dismal levels of governmental funding, the CBC faces a potential risk of economic deterioration and collapse. This scenario would further undermine the notion of democratic communications in Canada, given that publicly available communications (including information, education, and entertainment) would become more difficult to obtain free of charge. While the loss of NHL broadcasting rights does not necessarily mean that the CBC will cease to exist, this certainly appears to be a significant aspect of the CBC's current existential crisis, and only contributes to the challenges posed by digitization and calls to dismantle the public broadcaster.

When the Québec-based *La Soirée du hockey* (the French-language sister program of *HNIC*) was similarly taken over in 2003 by the private company Réseau des sports (RDS), the takeover sparked a national discourse regarding the nature of hockey broadcasting in Canada (Scherer & Whitson, 2009). This discourse was primarily concerned with whether hockey broadcasting constituted a significant aspect of national cultural citizenship and, if so, whether its takeover by the for-profit sector was against the public interest. Scherer and Whitson (2009) have argued that, much like certain cricket and soccer games in the U.K., hockey broadcasting has indeed developed into such a cultural citizenship status, and that it is therefore in the public's best interest to protect the free-to-air rights of the CBC's *HNIC*. While hockey broadcasting in Canada as a form of cultural citizenship is itself an interesting debate (see Adams, 2012, for an alternative perspective to that of Scherer & Whitson, 2009), it is argued here that the foundations of this debate are troubled by the coexisting forces of both capitalism and patriarchy within Canadian public broadcasting. In order to engage meaningfully with this debate, it is important to first recognize that existing hockey broadcasting in Canada is not (and has not historically been) apolitical—it has been tied to the capitalist exploitation of gendered audiences since its inception. It is therefore crucial to not only address the ownership concerns of *HNIC*, but also provide a thorough feminist political economy analysis of the CBC's history of hockey broadcasting.

Feminist perspectives on the political economy of HNIC

Until the 1960s, the audience commodity had been essentially synonymous with overall viewership of programming. However, during the early 1960s, networks began to persuade advertisers that not all audiences were equal, and that what mattered most economically was the “prime time” audience of middle-class, male viewers aged 18 to 35 (Golding & Murdock, 1996; Meehan, 2002). The logic of this valuation was based on the idea that middle-class males between the ages of 18 and 35 were the most likely demographic to purchase the products and services being advertised, given that they comprised the largest demographic of disposable income earners to whom investment purchases such as cars, insurance, homes, et cetera could be sold (Starowicz, 2003). This prime time audience demographic therefore became a more highly valued commodity, as their viewership of programs was weighed more heavily than, for example, low-income earners or older viewers when being sold to advertisers (Meehan, 2002; Starowicz, 2003). Television viewership and ratings are inherently undemocratic in capitalist societies, given that the attention of one audience member can be valued differently than another based on personal qualities such as income, age, ethnicity, or gender. A genuinely democratic model of broadcast production, especially in Canadian public broadcasting, would therefore need to develop a balance between providing content for a diverse population and equating one viewer with one vote in favour of any given program.

However, the second wave of feminism during the 1970s resulted in a greater number of women joining the paid, middle-class workforce. While still fewer women than men were working in middle-class jobs (and even those women who were employed were earning considerably less than their male counterparts), the gendered socio-economic turn of the 1970s meant that middle-class women aged 18 to 35 suddenly represented a significant subdemographic of disposable income earners (Meehan, 2002). As such, this new female demographic constituted a potential niche audience commodity that could be produced and sold to advertisers. The key to efficiently manufacturing this new audience, however, was for broadcasters to introduce female-friendly subcontent into the predominantly male-oriented programming, without alienating the already existing prime time male audience (Meehan, 2002). This historical moment in the development of the audience commodity coincides with the introduction of both *HNIC*'s first female sportscaster, Helen Hutchinson, in the mid-1970s, and the popular segment “Coach's Corner” in 1980 (Elcombe, 2010). This niche female audience commodity also helps to explain why “Coach's Corner” has persisted as a segment of *HNIC*, despite the often controversial rhetoric of its most famous commentator, Don Cherry.

During the mid-1970s, as mentioned, Helen Hutchinson became the first female *HNIC* sportscaster (Houpt, 2013; McKinley, 2012). However, due to other broadcasting commitments, Hutchinson's role lasted only one year, and it would be another two decades before another regular female host would appear on *HNIC* (McKinley, 2012). While Hutchinson's presence might have advanced women's representation in *HNIC* (albeit, in a limited way), her role in the production of the audience commodity was not revolutionary. Rather than attracting more female viewers and thereby creating a

greater and more diverse audience, Hutchinson's role was still one of providing highly technical coverage of men's games (and thus, merely reproducing the content also being delivered by her male counterparts). This makes sense in light of the second wave of feminism occurring during the time of Hutchinson's *HNIC* coverage: although sportscasting was an essentially male-dominated, middle-class career that women were beginning to enter during the 1960s and 1970s, Hutchinson's *HNIC* stint still occurred several years before broadcasters and advertisers began to seriously consider the niche female prime time audience as a potentially profitable commodity to cultivate. Additionally, Hutchinson's presence on *HNIC* for only one year is unlikely to have amassed any significant number of long-term female audiences.

In contrast to Hutchinson's short tenure, Don Cherry has been reproducing the *HNIC* audience commodity for almost 40 years. Despite his trademark style of controversial commentary that is, at times, even sexist in nature (see Elcombe, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2013), Cherry's role on "Coach's Corner" helped attract more viewers to *HNIC*, including a greater number of female viewers (Scherer & Whitson, 2009; Young, 1990). During the 1980s, his "Coach's Corner" segment sometimes produced greater audiences than the actual games being broadcasted (Scherer & Whitson, 2009; Young, 1990). Although Cherry provides technical commentary on the games, his charismatic persona, flamboyant suits, and plain speaking also made him a more accessible personality than many previous *HNIC* hosts (Deschamps, 2013; Elcombe, 2010). Cherry's rant style of commentary tends to also address controversial topics (both hockey-related and non-)—such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the role of fighting in hockey, and xenophobia regarding European players—which often ignite discussion among viewers (Elcombe, 2010). The "Coach's Corner" segment was further refined in 1987, when Ron MacLean replaced Dave Hodge as Cherry's politically moderate co-host (Elcombe, 2010; Scherer & Whitson, 2009).

The economic result of the "Coach's Corner" programming during the 1980s was that, by appealing to a wider array of viewers, Don Cherry served to also attract a greater number of the growing niche prime-time audience of 18- to 35-year-old working middle-class women. Although Cherry's domineering machismo certainly reflects the male domination of hockey broadcasting, "Coach's Corner" nevertheless allowed for the CBC to produce a more valuable audience commodity to sell to advertisers, as their viewership now included a greater number of the prime-time demographics (both male and female). Even Cherry's divisive politics and often inflammatory rhetoric have not resulted in either the CBC or Rogers firing him, arguably due to his role in attracting viewers and thereby maintaining the (re)production of the vital *HNIC* audience commodity (Brioux, 2016; Elcombe, 2010; Scherer & Whitson, 2009). Though Cherry's initial hiring might not have been a conscious attempt by the CBC to attract more female viewers, Cherry's continued presence has nonetheless resulted in a more profitable audience commodity for the public broadcaster.³ The introduction of "Coach's Corner" in the early 1980s therefore represents something of a happy accident in which the CBC managed to attract more prime time female viewers via more widely accessible content, while not alienating its already established male prime-time audience with more coverage of women's hockey, or else with non-hockey content. While Cherry's

cult of personality certainly contributed to his national media fame, these gendered economic issues are equally important in understanding the perpetual reproduction of “Coach’s Corner” by both the CBC and Rogers.

Canadian interest in women’s hockey has also been increasing throughout the twentieth century, yet has not managed to garner significant interest from broadcasters relative to men’s hockey (Stevens, 2012). This is largely due to the fact that, although growing, interest in women’s hockey and women’s interest in hockey are still not as widespread as the male equivalents, largely due to late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century gender stereotypes (Adams, 2012; Howell, 2001; Stevens, 2012), and the early partnership between *HNIC* and the NHL (an exclusively male hockey league) (Scherer & Whitson, 2009). Though hockey culture was heavily male-dominated during the late 1800s, an increasing number of Canadian women began participating in this culture and joining hockey leagues during the first few decades of the twentieth century (Howell, 2001; Stevens, 2012). The early partnership between *HNIC* and the NHL is not altogether surprising, given that the NHL was more geopolitically diverse than the local and regional women’s hockey leagues that existed at the time (Stevens, 2012). Still, other than a slight lull during the 1940s and 1950s, during which time *HNIC* began its televised broadcasting of NHL games, the culture of Canadian women’s hockey has generally increased throughout the past century. In 1988 there existed approximately 7,000 registered female hockey players in Canada, yet by 2003 this number had increased to over 60,000 (Stevens, 2012). However, with fewer economically viable opportunities existing, female players who wish to play professionally typically vie for either a position on the national⁴ or Olympic teams (Gillespie, 2014). As neither of these teams compete as frequently as NHL teams, women’s hockey is often left at the margins of sports broadcasting and media coverage.

This phenomenon echoes many of Meehan’s (2002) concerns regarding the (sometimes contradictory) relationship between patriarchy and capitalism. The historical development of *HNIC* thus outlines the coexisting economic and patriarchal reasons for a continued disinterest in broadcasting women’s hockey. During the 1930s, when *HNIC* began its radio broadcasts, the prime time audience (working middle-class, aged 18 to 35) consisted of mostly men, explaining why the *HNIC* and NHL broadcasting partnership focused exclusively on men’s hockey. Although this male-dominated audience was itself socially fabricated by rigid gender stereotypes during hockey’s rise to prominence in the late 1800s and early 1900s, this mostly male audience nonetheless resulted in at least a generation of Canadian men who had grown up with the sport representing a part of their national cultural identity by the time *HNIC* began broadcasting (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Howell, 2001). The production of this prime time male audience was then augmented during the 1950s with the televised broadcasts of NHL games. While the second wave of feminism occurring during the 1960s and 1970s meant that more women were entering working-class jobs, this period also coincided with an NHL expansion that established teams throughout Western Canada, such as the Vancouver Canucks, Calgary Flames, and Winnipeg Jets (Scherer & Whitson, 2009). Thus, by the time broadcasters and advertisers realized that there was a growing potential to produce a new niche audience commodity of middle-class women aged 18

to 35 in the early 1980s, the pre-existing male prime-time audience for *HNIC* had already been reproduced for over 50 years. The CBC therefore opted to input more female-friendly subcontent into the already male-dominated *HNIC* via the above-mentioned establishment of “Coach’s Corner,” rather than potentially alienating any of the program’s prime time male viewers. The broadcasting history of *HNIC* and “Coach’s Corner” can therefore be understood as a perfect storm of pre-existing systemic gender inequalities (i.e., so few working, middle-class women during the late 1800s and early 1900s) and expansive capitalist interests integrating into public broadcasting (i.e., the CBC’s minimal funding and reliance on advertising revenue, in addition to its partnership with the NHL).

The increasing popularity of women’s hockey in Canada throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—although often a site of cultural, economic, and policy-related conflict—has arguably been a more organic development than the history of national interest in men’s hockey (Stevens, 2012; Whitson & Gruneau, 2012). Yet, due to advertising interest in reproducing the status quo, public broadcasting in Canada has maintained an androcentric economy of men’s hockey. This is problematic for various reasons. As Jhally (1989) notes, sports media represent an arena (often literally) in which various social groups battle for dominant cultural narratives. This competition is also true from an economic standpoint, in that capitalist sports media also serve as sites in which various economic forces compete for resources and the accumulation of capital. Offering only (or even predominantly) male-dominated sports entertainment in public broadcasting is inherently undemocratic, as it privileges one demographic above all others and continues to reproduce systemic gender inequalities in the pursuit of profit. If indeed, as Richeri (2004) has argued, public broadcasting has a democratic role in providing information, entertainment, and freedom of speech to the general citizenry, then *HNIC*’s history is one that has consistently privileged the voice of male sports entertainment and the viewership of male citizens. Still, the current state of *HNIC*—even under the control of Rogers—makes sense given that audiences in the private and mixed public models are different than those in the fully public model. In the fully public model, audiences have democratic power (one viewer equals one vote). In the private and mixed public models, audiences are not equal, given that advertisers attribute greater value to key “prime-time” demographics with disposable income, particularly 18- to 35-year-old men (Starowicz, 2003). Although the CBC remains a formally public broadcaster, its history of, and increasing reliance on, advertising revenue makes it a highly conflicted public institution—situated somewhere in-between the public and private model, though much closer to the latter (i.e., a mixed public model). It is extremely unlikely that Rogers, as a private enterprise, will supplant the pursuit of profit in order to address any of these undemocratic and gendered elements of *HNIC*.

Given its role in the public sphere, the CBC should be offering hockey broadcasting that reflects national demographic interests in the sport, rather than providing the safer, female-friendly (yet not male-alienating) subtexts of such segments as “Coach’s Corner.” In light of this criticism, the growing popularity of the Canadian Women’s Hockey League (CWHL) certainly merits a consideration for public broadcasting, es-

pecially given that broadcasting audiences for the current HNIC NHL games have been dwindling since the late 1990s (Gillespie, 2014; Scherer & Whitson, 2009). Indeed, introducing broadcast coverage of the relatively new yet quickly expanding CWHL on HNIC would serve as a cost-effective way of reinvigorating the national interest in televised hockey, similar to what occurred during the 1970s with the expansion of NHL teams throughout Canada. As Rogers continues its attempt to capitalize on the already produced audience commodity for HNIC, the CBC is now in a position in which it could begin broadcasting a radically different format of televised hockey—one that is more concerned with producing quality content for a diverse citizenry than with producing the most profitable audience commodities for advertisers. More importantly, public broadcasting support of the CWHL could mean that women's hockey broadcasting in Canada might not begin its history with as heavy a reliance on advertising and the for-profit sector as did NHL broadcasting.

The comment threads of popular national online newspaper articles (such as those found on *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail* websites) regarding feminist approaches to sports broadcasting reform are typically marked with various reactionary arguments (e.g., Gillespie, 2014). One oft-touted argument is that, because sports media is about viewing the highest level of athletic competition, and because men are, supposedly, more physically capable than women, it only makes sense that men's hockey broadcasting should be more popular than women's hockey. Ignoring the mistaken notion that men are inherently more physically capable than women, this argument is also logically fallacious for cultural and economic reasons. Specifically, while (objectively speaking) the Toronto Maple Leafs have been one of the least competitive teams in the NHL for almost half a century, they have nonetheless remained one of the most popular and profitable teams due to their history and marketing strategies (Richellieu & Pons, 2006). While even a highly competitive CWHL team might never match the popularity of the Toronto Maple Leafs, due to the long history and entrenched brand recognition of the latter, it is absurd to assume that teams such as the Toronto Furies or Calgary Inferno could never achieve substantial popularity merely by virtue of their having female players. Sports fandom is an inherently emotional phenomenon, and fans seldom (if ever) base their support for and emotional investment in a team solely on a rational calculation of that team's performance history or chances of future victory.

Many of these issues and their potential remedies, however, are further complicated by the significant lack of governmental funding and support for the CBC and public sports broadcasting in Canada, as noted above. What is therefore needed is not only a reassessment of gender biases in Canadian hockey broadcasting, but indeed a more fundamental reassessment of the systems of Canadian public media that have historically shown and continue to demonstrate a nexus of patriarchal and capitalist control. A significantly greater level of governmental support is needed in order to save public hockey broadcasting in Canada.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has argued that *Hockey Night in Canada* is rich with problematic issues for political economists of communication to investigate and critically analyze. Of those potential issues, this article has engaged extensively with two as prime research exam-

ples—the recent Rogers takeover and the history of gendered audience commodities in Canadian hockey broadcasting. The history of *HNIC* has been troubled by a combination of the CBC's reliance upon advertising revenue and its decreasing public funding. As these issues have often perpetuated one another, the CBC now risks altogether losing any relationship with its most popular content, during a time when it (like many public broadcasters) faces an existential crisis. Indeed, this existential crisis is significant given that it also comes during a time when digitization and the move to digital streaming pose challenges to more traditional forms of sports broadcasting. Unless the CBC radically reshapes its sports broadcasting or state policy action is implemented soon, both the CBC and publicly accessible hockey broadcasting in Canada risk becoming relics of national media history. However, adopting coverage of women's hockey presents a potential means by which the CBC might retain at least some of its relevancy as a public sports broadcaster, especially if this adoption is coupled with early investments in digital streaming. Although there will likely always be a core audience devoted to NHL hockey, broadcasting women's hockey could allow the CBC to simultaneously retain some of its existing audience that cannot or do not wish to have to purchase sports broadcasting content from Rogers, while also fostering a more inclusive audience that is more reflective of Canada's hockey fan demographics. This would allow for the continued existence of public sports broadcasting in Canada, though with a more democratic structure given the greater levels of inclusivity.

It is also worth drawing attention to some other areas of *HNIC* that future political economy perspectives would help to better understand. For instance, while the current analysis provided a critical political economy perspective on the gendered audience commodity in relation to *HNIC*, future criticism could also benefit from looking into issues of race and ethnicity in public hockey broadcasting in Canada. Although, as noted above, there certainly exist gendered issues of *HNIC* audiences, various racial and ethnic minority groups (such as Indigenous persons and recent immigrants) are also often kept in the margins of advertisers' considerations (Biltreyst & Meers, 2011; Gandy, 2004; Starowicz, 2003). There remain a number of minority groups whose role in the *HNIC* audience commodity requires further critical investigation, especially given Canada's multicultural citizenry.

The issue of *HNIC* audiences is further complicated by recent advances in technology—specifically, the increasing digitization and online streaming of hockey broadcasting in Canada. Economic and regulatory aspects of online hockey broadcasting thus require further analysis, as this method of production and consumption of sports entertainment is still relatively new. Again, both digitalized and racialized audiences represent only two other issues of concern for political economists interested in *HNIC*, and a plethora of other issues merit scholarly attention.

This initial inquiry into the political economy of *Hockey Night in Canada* has not only revealed a lack of critical and explicit economic examination of the program, but has also demonstrated the value in investigating this particular site of Canadian media. Specifically, we can now better understand the shortcomings of a for-profit model imbedded in public sports broadcasting⁵—at least in relation to both the ownership and control of *HNIC*, as well as the production and consumption of gendered audiences

and their relationship to capitalist expansion. Still, there remain a number of other issues that future research will need to address, especially given the current political and economic uncertainties facing *HNIC*, the CBC, and Canadian public broadcasting.

Notes

1. For example, from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, CBC total funding generated from commercial revenue increased from one-fifth to almost one-third of its overall budget (Ferguson & Roberts, 2005). Additionally, during the first five years of the Harper Conservative government, CBC advertising revenue increased by approximately \$50 million while government funding decreased more than \$350 million (CBC, 2007, 2011).
2. By 2016, citing poor ratings for its newly redesigned *HNIC* content, Rogers also began laying off many of its own employees (Shoalts, 2016).
3. Although there is little quantitative data regarding female versus male viewership distinctions for “Coach’s Corner,” the increased female viewership has been qualified and corroborated by some researchers through discourses and interviews with CBC programming executives (e.g., see Young, 1990).
4. The Canadian Women’s Hockey League was founded in 2007.
5. See, for example, Lupien (2017), Cwynar (2017), and Scherer and Sam (2012) for discussions regarding the contemporary state of public versus private sports broadcasting.

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