

NewsWatch Monitor Issue 1

Think tanks in the news

by Brent Stafford

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Many organizations in Canada seek to use the mainstream news media as vehicles to promote their viewpoints and ideologies. Since the 1970s (the Fraser Institute was founded in Vancouver in 1974 to attack the policies of the NDP government of Dave Barrett), right-wing think tanks, funded in large part by corporations and foundations with deep pockets, have been waging and winning what Antonio Gramsci called the "war of position," positioning their ideological stances within the mainstream culture. This study focused on the comparative access to the mainstream Canadian news media afforded to right- and left-wing think tanks or research institutes in Canada. It found that right-wing think tanks received a disproportionate amount of news coverage, more than three times as much as left-wing think tanks. The quality of coverage -- the degree to which the think tank's views were supported or subjected to criticism within news stories -- was similar, when right-wing (Fraser Institute) and left-wing (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives) think tanks were compared. But since there was so much more coverage of right-wing think tanks, balance was more of a myth than a reality.

The first part of the study compiled all references to the leading 15 think tanks -- seven left-wing, six right-wing and two middle-of-the-road -- for a six-month period in 1996, in 14 mainstream daily newspapers and CBC and CTV television news broadcasts. The political leaning of each think tank was assessed independently by several mainstream journalists. Right-wing think tanks received 68 per cent of all references, while left-wing think tanks received 19.5 per cent of all references. The right was led by the Conference Board of Canada (317 references), Fraser Institute (312 references), C.D. Howe Institute (270) and Business Council on National Issues (144). The leading left groups were Council of Canadians (121 references), Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (64), and Canadian Council on Social Development (57 references).

No news organization gave equal coverage to right- and left-wing think tanks, obviously, but some were more balanced than others. The Ottawa Citizen referenced right-wing groups in 54 per cent of its items, followed by Hamilton Spectator (62 per cent), and Toronto Star (64 per cent). Right wing think tanks received their most overwhelming referencing in the Toronto Sun (97 per cent of items), The Province (84), Calgary Herald (81) and Financial Post (80 per cent).

The Globe and Mail contained the most references to think tanks of all media in the survey (245 references), and was close to the average with 69 per cent of references to right-wing think tanks. The Toronto Star was second in total number of references (207), followed by the Vancouver Sun (176), Calgary Herald (130), Ottawa Citizen (128), Montreal Gazette (126) and Edmonton Journal (126). The fewest references to think tanks were provided by the television news programs, CBC National (11), CTV National News (22), and the Toronto Sun (38).

In a second stage of research, coverage of one right-wing institute (Fraser Institute) and one left-wing institute (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives) was analyzed for the type and quality of coverage they received in The Vancouver Sun and The Globe and Mail. There were five times

more articles citing the Fraser Institute than the CCPA, but the quality of coverage was similar, with one exception. Most Fraser Institute coverage was in the form of hard news or business stories, while most CCPA coverage was in opinion pieces and columns.

The study looked closely at sources cited in the sample, since these can reveal not only what story is being told, but whose story it is. Identifying who is being sourced and how often, and ascertaining if the source supports or criticizes the theme espoused by the think tank, can shed light on the type of coverage the think tank receives. This study found that the quality of coverage was similar for the two institutes.

Leading sources in Fraser Institute stories were professionals/academics, followed by politicians, government officials and left-wing sources such as the Canadian Auto Workers. Leading sources in CCPA stories were advocacy groups/activists, journalists, government sources and right-wing groups such as the B.C. Business Council. Since the sample sizes were small in both cases though, these findings should be considered indicative rather than conclusive.

Sources can generally be considered to be supportive or critical of the think tank's theme. If they are supportive, they are in general agreement with the theme or story presented. For both the Fraser Institute and CCPA, about 60 per cent of all sources in their stories were supportive. Sources can also be critical -- in general disagreement -- with the theme presented by the think tank. Thirty per cent of Fraser Institute story sources were critical, while 23 per cent of CCPA sources were critical.

Finally the study looked checked each article to determine if it cited any critical source at all or only supportive ones, and here too found a similar pattern. In 53 per cent of Fraser Institute articles only supportive sources were cited; while in 50 per cent of CCPA stories only supportive sources were cited.

In summary, CCPA and Fraser Institute both received about the same percentage of supportive sources (sources cited in stories that supported the position of the think tank); they both received about the same level of critical source referencing; and they were not subjected to criticism in about the same percentage of stories. Once again, these results seem balanced; however, it should not be forgotten these are percentages only -- there were five times more Fraser Institute stories than CCPA ones. And given the small size of the CCPA sample (10 stories), further work will need to be done to verify these findings.

How the Fraser Institute distorts its news-monitoring studies

by Kathleen Cross

27 March 1997

In July 1996, two months after a narrow provincial election victory by the BC New Democrats, a Fraser Institute National Media Archive study declared that television coverage during the election campaign had been more negative to the provincial Liberals than to the New Democrats. The study purported to show that the Liberals were criticized more frequently than other parties,

and that the NDP received more attention than the Liberals on economic issues.

It was a curious study because the actual statistics contained in the study (as opposed to the interpretation in Fraser Institute news releases and interviews) directly contradicted the claim that the media were biased against the Liberals. The study identified 12 per cent of all coverage by the three Vancouver television stations as being negative toward the Liberals, while only eight per cent of all coverage was negative toward the NDP. But what the Fraser Institute (FI) did not mention was that because the Liberals received so much more coverage in total than the NDP, the Liberals also received far more positive coverage (FI neglected to provide these figures in its study.) And regarding FI's claim that the NDP received more economic coverage, what FI missed was that this coverage was more negative than that afforded the Liberals.

Using this study, FI went on to claim that media coverage was hostile to the Liberals and that this demonstrated "underlying political allegiances" of journalists to certain parties (read NDP). By selectively reporting its findings and by ignoring some of its own calculations, the Fraser Institute concluded that there was a left-wing bias in the Vancouver television news media. This pattern of selectively reporting research results to fit a particular agenda or "spin" seems to be a persistent characteristic of the media-monitoring work done by the Fraser Institute's National Media Archive (NMA). A review of NMA's monthly newsletter *On Balance*, commissioned by NewsWatch Canada, concluded that while purporting to promote "objectivity" and expose the lack of balance in journalism, NMA itself manifests a consistent pattern of innuendo, decontextualized results and selective interpretation.

Seventeen issues of *On Balance* (OB), published between January 1995 and July 1996, were reviewed in the NewsWatch Canada study. A total of 20 of the 29 articles in these issues expressed concern about the left-wing bias of journalists and the effect this had on coverage of issues ranging from economics and politics to crime. Some findings of note are described here:

OB claimed that media overemphasis on negative economic news was one reason for low consumer confidence. When the unemployment rate went down, OB accused the CBC of negative reporting because the public broadcaster focused on the "28,000 young people who gave up looking" for jobs. Instead, said OB, the CBC should have featured increasing personal income, falling inflation, high corporate and bank profits, and growing GDP as examples of an improving economy. If the media had concentrated on the good news, it would have been enough to convince Canadians that Canada was indeed in good financial position, translating into increased consumer spending. What OB overlooked though were the realities of continuing high unemployment, and high levels of personal debt, and the consequences of these for the material conditions of Canadians' lives, and therefore their level of spending.

While OB expressed concern about the type of economic coverage, it made no comment on the increasing use of economic language to frame other issues. For example, during the 1996 BC election, the Vancouver Sun published a summary of the main issues being debated during the campaign (19 April 1996), framing health and education issues primarily in terms of their fiscal implications and only secondly in terms of their social implications. The Sun saw the "challenge" for health as "finding ways to bring spending down" without compromising the system. The education challenge was to "cut spending" without damaging quality.

OB argued in a number of articles that Conservative governments received more negative coverage than Liberal governments, and that NDP governments were covered least critically. It concluded there was "gross partisanship" in the media, which had "crossed the boundary from news reporting to news advocacy". However, OB reported only part of the story. For example, OB noted that Alberta's spending cuts under Ralph Klein received more negative coverage than Bob Rae's "ballooning deficit" in Ontario. But Alberta received twice as much coverage overall, indicating that it likely also received more positive coverage than Ontario's government. OB took issue with the media's use of the word "victims" (such as bleeding patients in emergency wards) to show the effects of budget cuts while the media showed no "victims" of Bob Rae's increasing deficit, except "business men and middle class tax protesters, hardly the images to invoke sympathy."

OB alleged repeatedly that public broadcasting was less balanced than private broadcasting. It argued in a number of articles that the CBC gave one-sided and overly negative coverage to economic issues, government budgets, globalization, and elections. However, OB employed a double standard when discussing the CBC. If the CBC demonstrated "more bias" than the private sector on a particular item, OB questioned the value of the public broadcaster. However, when CBC showed more balance than private broadcasters, OB neither indicated possible value in a public broadcaster, nor questioned the value of the private broadcaster. And although OB explicitly criticized a CBC story for its use of "innuendo, inconsistent media practices and ambush journalism," OB was relatively silent on the same tactics when employed by private sector media.

OB rarely considered conditions other than journalists' own alleged partisanship that might affect media coverage. There is an extensive body of literature spanning 50 years that has examined the effect of news values, news-gathering practices, advertising imperatives and news media ownership, on the content of news stories; however, these possibilities were not raised by the NMA. Even when OB criticized the media's attention to sensationalism, it made no comments on the effect that market logic and economic pressures may have in employing these attention-grabbing practices, or indeed how these kinds of stories made for "good copy."

To be sure, there are problems with content analysis, since it relies in part on subjective categories of statements and stories. Nonetheless, if applied consistently without ignoring some results while highlighting others, it can be a useful form of media analysis. Our study indicates that while OB claims to use content analysis in an objective manner, it applies content analysis in such a way as to render its conclusions suspect.

The bias found in the National Media Archive's work can be linked to the objectives of the Fraser Institute (FI) itself. The NMA appears to be constrained in its ability to offer objective media monitoring by FI's own mandate to influence the news. In a recently leaked internal planning document, "Toward a new millennium: A five year plan of the Fraser Institute," FI discussed its goal to increase media "penetration" of its material and spokespeople through various public relations exercises, including the provision of "special treatment" to those journalists who express interest in FI material. These objectives may not seem unusual for a lobby group (although they could be considered objectionable), but they clearly conflict with the "objective" analysis of media coverage NMA says it provides. Indeed, based on NewsWatch

Canada's review of On Balance, it is hard to distinguish NMA's goal of objective media analysis from the Fraser Institute's goal of influencing media coverage.

The work of the National Media Archive does have some merit. It provides public and academic access to the only archive of television news in western Canada, which is a valuable research resource. And the NMA's actual numbers are often reliable; indeed we have used them to critique the NMA's own conclusions. As well, some of the NMA's studies, especially in areas of crime reporting, are useful and insightful.

It is precisely because of its importance, though, that the work of the NMA needs to be subjected to critical scrutiny. Canadians need the kind of media monitoring that the National Media Archive is undertaking. We need to identify blindspots in the news and ask why some stories and points of view are covered and others are not. However, given the limitations in the National Media Archive's work uncovered by NewsWatch Canada, it is clear that NMA and the Fraser Institute need to be monitored as carefully as Canada's mainstream news media.

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The Globe and Mail has the 'Right Stuff'

Jackie Mosdell

25 March 1997

Mainstream Canadian news media give more and fuller coverage of the debt and deficit situation to right-wing perspectives than to left-wing perspectives. This is a common complaint heard on the left. But is it true? Have the news media over-emphasized cuts to social programs as being the only real way to deal with public debt and deficit, while neglecting the story of how the debt was accumulated and overlooking alternate ways to manage it?

A NewsWatch Canada study by SFU Communication student Jackie Mosdell found that, by and large, this belief was accurate. The Globe and Mail's economic coverage over a three-month period that included the release of the 1995 federal budget (December 1994 - February 1995) was investigated. All stories that contained the words 'debt' and/or 'deficit' were collected, with the search restricted to articles dealing with the federal budget situation (eliminating provincial budget stories). Only items appearing in the Globe's "A" section were selected, to eliminate business-oriented stories and bias. Mosdell ended up with 53 items in her sample. The majority - -- were news items; some were editorials and a few were columns.

To ascertain right- and left-wing perspectives on the debt/deficit and prescriptions for what should be done, Mosdell surveyed publications produced by right-wing think tanks like the Fraser Institute, C.D. Howe Institute and Canada West Foundation. Left-wing prescriptions for the debt and deficit were provided from publications of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and from books such as Linda McQuaig's Shooting the Hippo.

Perspectives on the debt and deficit provided by the federal Department of Finance and Minister of Finance Paul Martin made up the largest group in the sample. These were not included in the study.

Table 1 provides the prescriptions most commonly reported in the 53 items. The number adds up to more than 53 because some items contain more than one prescription.

Prescriptions	No. of mentions
Total right-wing prescriptions	105
Cut social welfare spending	39
Cut size of government	30
Reduce provincial transfers	28
Privatize services	13
Cut Canada Pension Plan payments	12
Cut unemployment insurance benefits	10
Total left-wing prescriptions	29
Reduce subsidies to corporations	14
Increase government spending	8
Increase corporation income tax	4
Lower interest rates	3

The numbers are clear. Right-wing prescriptions were mentioned three and a half times more frequently than left-wing ones. One prescription -- cutting social welfare spending -- was mentioned more often than all left-wing prescriptions combined. Cutting the size of government, and privatizing services were also popular prescriptions for dealing with the federal budget situation. Reducing subsidies to corporations was the most popular left-wing prescription, but it should be noted that purists on the right also recommend this action. If this is removed from the left-wing prescriptions, the remaining approaches barely register on the political scale.

Mosdell found some other interesting trends. Stories were coded for length (long, medium, short), type (news, editorial, column, other), and page number. Few differences were found between right and left for length and type, but location in the paper was significant. A total of 44 right-wing prescriptions (40 per cent of the total 105 right-wing prescriptions) were mentioned in page A1 stories, while a total of eight left-wing prescriptions (28 per cent) were mentioned in page A1 stories and of these were about reducing subsidies to business.

As for the sources quoted in the stories, there were not many, whether they dealt with right-wing or left-wing prescriptions. But there was one interesting finding. Thirty-five of the 53 stories contained no right- or left-wing sources. Fourteen right-wing sources were quoted in 12 stories and 9 left-wing sources were quoted in six stories. Reform Party sources made up nine of the 14 right-wing sources, while only one NDP source was quoted. The NDP was frozen out of budget discussions.

Mosdell's study provides some evidence of a right-wing bias in the Globe and Mail's coverage of the federal debt and deficit.