

**JUNK NEWS:  
Can Public Broadcasters Buck the  
Tabloid Tendencies of Market-  
Driven Journalism?  
A Canadian Experience**

**by**

**William John Fox**

**Discussion Paper D-26  
August 1997**

The Joan Shorenstein Center  
**PRESS • POLITICS**



**•PUBLIC POLICY•**

Harvard University  
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# INTRODUCTION

William Fox brings a rich, and distinguished, background to the issue of the press and public policy. As a Canadian journalist, he worked as Ottawa and Washington Bureau Chief for the *Toronto Star*, Canada's largest newspaper and then as a public official, he served as press spokesman and communications director for Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney from 1984 to 1987. During those years in government, tempered by two decades as a newspaper reporter, he observed at first hand the political—and journalistic—struggle he is about to describe.

Canada, unlike the United States (but like most of the rest of the world), developed its radio and television broadcasting system basically outside the intensely commercial world—and commercial, competitive values—that has always characterized U.S. broadcasting.

Modeling their system to a great degree on the BBC, Canadians long took great pride not only in the CBC's "public service" tradition, but its insulation from the often painfully crass and entertainment-oriented neighbor to the south.

The insulation, of course, was never complete: Canada allowed competing private broadcasting, and perhaps more importantly, ninety percent of Canadians live within a hundred miles of the U.S. border, allowing them to easily watch their fill of Beverly Hills 90210, Oprah, Cops, Jeopardy, or Family Ties. Nonetheless, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation—especially in its news division—strived to sustain a level of excellence, and immunity from Nielsen-driven sensationalism, that always distinguished it from U.S. networks. It was a tradition Canadians themselves respected, overwhelmingly choosing their own public news broadcasts over local private and U.S. competitors.

In the 1980s, the CBC came under unusually strong new pressures to alter the distinctive features of its news coverage. A wave of "pro-market," "deregulating" forces was sweeping through much of the non-Communist world, most visibly first in the England of Margaret Thatcher and then in the America of Ronald Reagan, but often elsewhere with equal (if sometimes less visible) force, transforming a host of industries from broadcasting and telecommunications to housing, finance, transportation, and utilities. Across Europe, Latin America and

Southeast Asia, public broadcasters found them negotiating a new world of "public-private" competition, in which newly-licensed private broadcasters, cable, and satellite operators fought for audiences that had grown up with never more than a handful of public stations as their fare.

Hailed by its proponents as an unalloyed triumph for "democratizing media," the new competition began to reshape not just public choices in entertainment, but news as well. America's "OJ Addiction"—its penchant for "if-it-bleeds,-it-leads" news choices—suddenly placed new pressures on public broadcasters in Canada, as well as Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and dozens of other countries, to match or defend themselves against this American-style tsunami, as one critic put it, of "blood, blonds, weather, and chatter."

In Canada's case, the new commercializing pressure on the CBC coincided with yet another protracted round of national debate over the meaning of Canadian nationhood itself. In the 1980s, Quebec was again restive, and seeking some sort of greater separation from the country's English-speaking majority. To Americans, whose own debate about national unity caused the bloodiest war in our history, Canada's debate was thankfully pacific but at times no less earnestly and passionately engaged, especially on the part of the Quebecois.

First Pierre Trudeau's, then Brian Mulroney's government sought constitutional means to resolve this anguished dispute.

A patriation package fashioned at closed door sessions in 1987 known as the Meech Lake agreement, floundered in 1990. A second effort, known as the Charlottetown Accord, was rejected in a national referendum in 1992.

Enter the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and the painful and challenging dilemma of a long "public service" journalism's tradition amidst a new world of competitive, market-driven forces. Under pressure (including from the Mulroney government, Bill Fox's employer) to be both more economically "efficient" and more "market responsive" to its audience, how was the nation's premier TV news department to cover the constitutional challenge represented by Meech Lake and Charlottetown?

Surely, the sovereignty and unity of a nation represents more at stake than a Los Angeles murder trial, however infamous: but unlike the past, when its mission was clear (indeed legislatively-prescribed), what now should guide CBC coverage of these critical gatherings?

Fox argues that, in a sense, the CBC failed its historical and charter mandate by succumbing to “commercial” pressures. He details the national network’s coverage of both events, and contrasts serious public policy reporting opportunities with the “horse-race” coverage actually produced. If the criticisms sound familiar to Fox’s southern neighbors, they are—especially now in a U.S. TV culture that seems addicted to the values of “infotainment” over news.

For Canadian viewers—and their crown-jewel public broadcaster—the issues are newer, and in a sense, more troubling because they speak to a difficulty that proponents of “marketing” all but ignored in their deregulating zeal. It is a crisis alive still, four years later, not only in Canada but dozens of other countries where public broadcasting traditions had sustained a commitment to excellence in news reporting, a system that had been insulated from the darker effects of a purely commercial model. What the outcome of this new era will be is uncertain—what is certain is that Fox has added both important data, and deeply-drawn reflections based on his veteran journalistic and political service, to a growing, and crucial debate about a proud legacy of journalism caught between civic and mass commercial ends.

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# JUNK NEWS: CAN BROADCASTERS BUCK THE TABLOID TENDENCIES OF MARKET-DRIVEN JOURNALISM?—A CANADIAN EXPERIENCE

by William John Fox

## *Introduction*

The media is a primary site of political discourse in any liberal democracy. Journalism provides much of the vernacular for the public policy dialogue between electors and the elected.<sup>1</sup> Media scholars, however, agree the journalists' narrative is not a free choice but a choice guided by institutions, routines and conventions; what Herbert J. Gans describes as the "paraideology" of journalism.<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, this narrative choice flows from a distinct professional culture; a culture that in the mainstream media evolved within a dominant economic paradigm—the assembly of large audiences for interests with paid messages to convey. First conceived by the 19th century newspaper and magazine industry, this re-definition of a "citizen" or "reading" audience as "consumer" was embraced enthusiastically by the emerging electronic media of the early 20th century. The pressure of commercialism, therefore, is an integral component of the commodity Americans called "news".

The world's first commercial broadcasting station—XWA, later CFCF—was launched in Montreal, Canada in 1919. As the technology advanced, and private stations proliferated, however, broadcasting in Canada became a heated political and social issue as policy makers came to appreciate the potential of emerging broadcast technologies as instruments of mass communication.

The nation's private broadcasters pressed their case for a U.S.-style commercial radio system based on a free-market ideology. Others, fearful control of the new medium by the private sector's Philistines would lead inevitably to U.S. domination of the country's airwaves, pressed for an alternative that would mitigate the impact of commercialism on Canada's "public sphere" by advancing the concept of a "public broadcaster."

Inspired by the British Broadcasting Corporation as "a cultural, moral and educative force for the improvement of knowledge,

taste and manners,"<sup>3</sup> activists such as Graham Spry and Alan Plaunt<sup>4</sup>, helped define a Canadian model.

The BBC's mandate included a specific acknowledgement of broadcasting's role in "the formation of an informed and reasoned public opinion as an essential part of the political process in a democratic society."<sup>5</sup> The BBC's first director, John Reith, later Lord Reith, believed the best way to create good journalism was to ensure the broadcaster's independence from the vagaries of the marketplace.

Both tenets were enthusiastically embraced by Canadian supporters of public broadcasting. As Spry observed, "it is a choice between commercial interests and the people's interests and it is a choice between the state and the United States."<sup>6</sup>

A Royal Commission chaired by Sir John Aird concluded in 1927 that the only viable means to forestall American domination of Canadian airwaves was the creation of a national broadcasting system based on some form of public ownership. By the mid-1930s, after one false start, Parliament created the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. But in a quintessentially Canadian compromise, the Conservative government of the day also decided there was a role for private broadcasters in the Canadian media mix. The result was a broadcast hybrid of the British public service and American commercial models. This bifurcation might have worked had CBC been afforded total immunity from market pressure. The public broadcaster is sustained by an annual appropriation approved by Parliament that by the late 1980s was approaching \$1 billion (Cdn.) a year.<sup>7</sup> With the election of a Conservative government in 1984, solving Canada's debt/deficit problem emerged as a public policy priority, a priority shared by the current Liberal government. In successive budgets, the federal government cut expenditures for all departments, agencies and crown corporations. As a direct consequence of these cuts, the public broadcaster was forced to seek a more commercial footing. In fact, by January, 1997 the CBC—for the first time in history—was forced to run paid advertisements in its nightly newscast.

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The reportorial challenges that arise within a public broadcaster when commercial considerations clash with the concept of journalism as a public service is the focus of this paper. The paper itself will test the following hypothesis: can a public broadcaster in an era of budget cuts buck the tabloid tendencies of market-driven journalism and deliver on its public service mandate? As case studies, this paper will analyze the CBC television network's coverage of two complex public policy initiatives—the Meech Lake Accord of 1990 and the Charlottetown Round of 1993.

Spearheaded by prime minister Brian Mulroney, Meech Lake and Charlottetown were major attempts at Canadian constitutional reform and dominated the policy agenda of Canada's political elite at a time when the electorate was preoccupied with a deep and enduring economic recession.

In public policy terms, Canadian political elites have long considered constitutional reform a pre-condition for the continued existence of the Canadian federation. Yet for political journalists, the clause-by-clause reporting of proposed changes to the constitutional amending formula or the various options for Senate Reform that both Meech Lake and Charlottetown produced challenged today's increasingly consumer-sensitive definition of what constitutes "news."

For illustrative purposes, this paper will focus on the CBC's English-language coverage during peak news periods for each initiative—a First Minister's Conference (June 3-10, 1990) for Meech Lake, and for the Charlottetown Accord the referendum campaign in September and October, 1992.

## **II. Television News: News that Matters**

The impact of media coverage on public attitudes and opinions has been the subject of press speculation and academic analysis for years.

Since the 1970s, the third stream of research inspired by the work of Walter Lippman emerged, staking out what the University of Calgary's David Taras calls "a middle position between the magic bullet theory and the selective attention schools associated with Lazarsfeld and others".<sup>8</sup> The central proposition of this third stream is that issues that receive prominent attention on the national news become the problems viewers regard as most important, Taras states.<sup>9</sup>

Television news, according to Todd Gitlin, is structured according to precise "frames"

which Gitlin says help reporters organize news stories in a manner that allows the audience to consider media messages in some context. The "Cold War" frame applied to media coverage of U.S. foreign policy, post-1945, is a case in point.

Robert Entman argues that framing essentially involves selection and salience. By defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments and even suggesting remedies, Entman also argues, frames have important implications for political communication. "Journalists may follow the rules of objective reporting and yet convey a dominant framing of the news text that prevents most audience members from making a balanced assessment of the situation."<sup>10</sup>

Extending a concept first articulated by Bernard Cohen in *The Press and Foreign Policy*, Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder posit that media coverage matters, not because the media tells news consumers what to think, but more precisely, because the media tell people what to think about.<sup>11</sup>

While there are obvious limits to television's power, Iyengar establishes conclusively that television news about politics and public policy can have a significant impact on public opinion because of these "agenda-setting" and "priming" and "band wagon effect" properties. Problems that receive prominent attention on the national news thus become the problems viewers regard as the nation's most pressing and serious.

University of Calgary professor Barry Cooper says the evidence supporting Iyengar's research on U.S. subjects was so strong "that the conclusion may be taken as an unqualified fact. There is no reason to think that different results would be obtained by Canadian subjects."<sup>12</sup>

Iyengar's studies further suggest the placing of a news story in a newscast had a direct impact on viewer attitudes. Viewers not only recognize the ordering of items on a national newscast as an editorial judgment but tend to endorse that judgment.

In recent years, as television newscasts became hyper-sensitive to the vagaries of the marketplace, news producers moved to a new model in their decision-making process. Instead of exercising the traditional mandate of ranking news items in order of importance, television journalists began ranking them in order of interest. Viewers, in turn, assume these items of interest are by definition the most pressing political and social problems we face.

### **III. The People's Network**

Public broadcasters were created, in part, to curb the market-driven tendencies so visible in American broadcasting.

Canada's policymakers have long subscribed to the view that broadcasting is more than just a business, that it had the potential to nurture and nourish national unity and Canadian culture. "Its potentialities are too great, its influence and significance too vast, to be left to the petty purposes of selling cakes of soap," concluded Spry.<sup>13</sup>

To that public end, the CBC receives a significant annual appropriation—almost \$1 billion (Cdn.)—from Canadian taxpayers to help finance its operations. For the fiscal year 1994-95, the CBC's budget was \$1.556 billion; total revenues were \$1.365 billion, of which the government's operating grant totalled \$951.3 million or 71% (the remaining 29% revenues came from "self-generating" activity including advertising).

An analysis of CBC budgets over the previous decade reveals two important trends. First, although the network's government grant grew by 22% over those ten years, the Consumer Price Index in Canada rose 40% during the same period. The subsidy from taxpayers, therefore, did not keep pace with inflation. Second, in percentage terms, the 1994-95 appropriations accounted for 70% of the public broadcaster's total revenues. A decade earlier, 82% of the CBC's revenues came from the taxpayers.<sup>14</sup>

As this balance between government grant and "self-generating activity" shifted, the CBC was forced to be more market sensitive. The CBC, therefore, was not entirely immune to the pressures of audience assembly. Its news and current affairs programs are expected to attract audiences comparable to those of the privately-owned English-language competition, CTV, and yet the CBC is expected to do so with journalism that is consistent with the mandate and high standards set out in federal legislation known as the Broadcast Act (and detailed in the network's 1982 manual *Journalistic Policy*).<sup>15</sup>

At the time of the Meech Lake initiative, the Broadcast Act specifically entrusted the CBC with "contributing to the development of national unity."<sup>16</sup> This clause is particularly significant in the context of any perceived threat to the Canadian federation's continued existence.

Few stories challenge the CBC more than stories related to national unity. With distinct cultures, legal systems, and political traditions, the country's political alliance of English-speak-

ing and French-speaking "founding peoples" has long been an uneasy one, and readily lends itself to the "drama, conflict, denouement" narrative form of television news.

### **IV. The Meech Lake Accord**

The Meech Lake constitutional round is a case in point. Constitutional reform is something of a cottage industry in Canada and has been carried out in fits and starts for more than a century. Whereas Americans won their independence on a field of battle, Canadians negotiated theirs in back rooms from Westminster to Ottawa at a pace that gives new meaning to the term "incrementalism".

The Meech Lake round had its genesis in the 1980 Quebec referendum campaign. The province's government, led by Parti Québécois premier René Lévesque, was seeking a mandate to begin negotiations for Quebec's withdrawal from the Canadian federation. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, campaigning for the pro-federalist forces, promised Quebecers a renewed federalism that would better meet their aspirations if they voted "No" in the referendum. Quebecers did just that. The PQ initiative was defeated in a 60/40 split of votes cast.

After two years of protracted negotiation with the provincial governments—including Lévesque's recalcitrant Péquistes—Trudeau fashioned a "patriation" package in 1982 that was acceptable to English Canada but was rejected by all parties in Quebec's National Assembly. In a rare show of solidarity, Quebec's "independentistes" and federalists alike decided Quebec would not participate in any future constitutional negotiations until the province's grievances had been addressed. It was left to Trudeau's political adversary Brian Mulroney to deal with the consequences of Quebec's bipartisan refusal to endorse Trudeau's 1982 patriation plan.

In the 1984 federal election campaign, Mulroney's policy platform was built on "four pillars" that included a promise of "national reconciliation." Mulroney pledged that a Conservative government would dedicate itself to returning Quebec to the constitutional fold.

The agreement hammered out at a series of closed door sessions at Meech Lake—a federal government retreat just outside of Ottawa in June, 1987—was the Conservative Prime Minister's attempt to deliver on his 1984 campaign promise to end Quebec's constitutional isolation.

The rare consensus of Canada's government leaders that emerged from these 1987 meetings was widely acclaimed by media observers and quickly embraced by the leaders of all federal opposition parties. But a further step remained. The constitutional amending procedures set out in Trudeau's 1982 pact stipulated that the partners of the Canadian confederation had three years from the date of signing of a final draft to ratify the change. If no such signing occurred by June, 1990, the draft would be voided, and work would start all over again.

Even before the final draft text was crafted, Trudeau himself struck a discordant note. In twinned op-ed pieces carried in the *Toronto Star* and the Montreal daily *La Presse*, the former prime minister argued the proposal, with its clause recognizing Quebec as a "distinct society," effectively created a federal system that conferred rights on one province and its citizens that were not conferred on another.

While it may seem self-evident that a province that has a separate language, separate legal system and a unique culture is by definition "distinct" from the others, Trudeau's characterization of Quebec's special status as "value-added" caused considerable consternation in English Canada.

For CBC reporters, the Meech Lake story was from the beginning a story about politics and exercise of same; details of the reform package were of secondary import. As CBC-TV's Ottawa bureau chief Elly Alboim would write later, "we, as political journalists, were watching a naked exercise in power and were attracted to the reportage of the exercise in power more than we were attracted to covering some of the substance of the accord."<sup>17</sup>

Fast forward to June 1990. Ratification had hit a series of snags. Changes in government in three provinces caused legislatures originally supportive to reverse position. The machinations of Canada's first ministers to that point had failed to resolve differences. The clock on the Meech Lake pact was running out. By June 23, 1990, the accord, like Cinderella's coach, would turn into a pumpkin if it was not approved by the federal parliament and all ten provincial legislatures.

The nation's first ministers were summoned to Ottawa on June 3rd for a final negotiating session. The negotiations, carried out behind closed doors, lasted a full week in a highly-charged atmosphere reporters likened to that found in 11th hour labor negotiations.

The June 3rd conference—the culminating

and decisive moment for the Meech Lake process—was a major media event and the CBC's preparations were extensive. Peter Mansbridge, anchor of the CBC's flagship news show "The National" was sent from the network's Toronto studios to host coverage on location in Ottawa. Under Alboim's direction, 25 reporters were assigned to the talks. A CBC computer held a special Meech Lake file so that all information amassed was shared with all CBC reporters on the story. Any information that went on the air was triple-checked, an extra step beyond the standard requirement of two sources. A second marching order stipulated nothing could be said on air that had not been confirmed by at least one pro-Meech and one anti-Meech delegation.

Despite these elaborate precautions, the CBC was accused of showing a pro-Meech bias in its coverage following the week-long marathon bargaining sessions.

Liberal MP John Harvard, a former CBC employee, fired off an angry letter to the network brass accusing the CBC of being only too happy to contribute to what he described as the "atmosphere of fear" that surrounded the Meech Lake negotiations, and claiming the CBC "fell victim to the (federal) government's strategy of creating a crisis." *Western Report*, a weekly newsmagazine, claimed the CBC conducted itself "as if it were a mouthpiece of the Prime Minister's Office." *Western Report's* accusation is particularly ironic, given the state of relations between the Prime Minister and the CBC's Ottawa Bureau at the time. Years later, Izzy Asper, president of the Winnipeg-based Canwest Global television system was still using criticism of the CBC coverage of Meech Lake to justify his bid for a new national network.<sup>18</sup>

Were these angry denunciations of the CBC's professionalism the usual attacks of the disgruntled, or did the complaints have some foundation? And did the CBC's coverage succumb to market pressures and offer an editorial product that was long on conflict and short on content at the expense of its public service mandate?

**Meech Lake: A Case Study:** Media scholars agree that reporters and the public see politics and politicians through different panels of the prism each calls truth. For journalists, the dominant "schema" or cognitive structure is that politics is a strategic game "played by individual politicians for personal advancement, gain or power."<sup>19</sup> Paul Weaver argues "the game takes place against a back drop of governmental insti-



tutions, public problems, policy debates and the like, but these are noteworthy only insofar as they affect or are used by, players in pursuit of the game's rewards."<sup>20</sup> The rewards, invariably, flow from holding office.

The public, in contrast, view politics primarily as an exercise in choosing leaders and solving the electorate's problems.<sup>21</sup> Voters, according to V.O. Key, are moved "by concern about central and relevant questions of public policy, of government performance, and of executive personality."<sup>22</sup> Tom Patterson notes the "game" and "governing" schemas are linked in the minds of reporters and the voters "but the game schema dominates the journalist's response to new information far more than the voter's response. The governing schema is, by contrast, a larger part of the voter's response than the journalist's."<sup>23</sup>

A private broadcaster, sensitive to market pressures, might reasonably be expected to opt for a dominant "game" schema for its political coverage. As Patterson observes, "the first fact of journalistic life is that a reporter must have a story to tell."<sup>24</sup> In this era of channel surfing, policy problems lack the novelty a reporter seeks. But are the expectations the same for a public broadcaster with a public service mandate? Should the CBC's Meech Lake coverage reflect the "game" schema preferred by reporters or the "governance" schema preferred by the public the network reporters are to serve?

A National Media Archive study of the CBC's coverage the week of the pivotal First Minister's Conference June 4 to 10, 1990 was used as a baseline for this paper. (A division of the Fraser Institute, a right-of-centre British-Columbia-based think tank, the NMA is virtually the only private concern that regularly publishes content analysis studies of Canada's television networks.) The analysis included news reports for "The National," the newscast that leads the CBC's hour-long news and current affairs program, as well as the current affairs segment on "The Journal."<sup>25</sup> The programs ran sequentially in the prime time 10 to 11 p.m. slot.

The NMA study suggested CBC television did opt for a dominant "game" schema rather than a "governance" schema for its Meech Lake coverage. Further, the study concludes the network used a "crisis/crisis overcome" frame to tell the story of the week-long negotiating session.

In the context of Iyengar's theories of the media's agenda-setting properties, the study found that fully three-quarters of the CBC's

nightly newscast during that critical June 3rd week was devoted to the Meech Lake saga. Of 69 stories aired on the "National" in that seven-day period, all but 17 (or thus 75%) dealt with the constitutional negotiations. By contrast, CTV, Canada's private English-language network, afforded the Meech talks 42% of its total coverage on the CTV National News.

The NMA study concluded 73% of the CBC stories on Meech emphasized discord or disagreement between first ministers. And less than four percent of the coverage could be considered strictly "issue" coverage or coverage devoted to "governance" problems with the specifics of the reform package itself. Significantly, the NMA study revealed that none of the CBC stories presented a collapse in the talks as a potential positive outcome.

The NMA's over-arching conclusions are consistent with a detailed content analysis of CBC coverage completed for this paper. This writer's analysis did not conform to strict social science standards, but rather reflects a somewhat subjective examination drawing on 29 years of experience working each point of the press, politics, public policy triangle. The analysis focused on a single question: did the "game" schema or the "governance" schema dominate the CBC's coverage? The purpose was to examine whether public broadcasters can resist today's market-driven tendencies towards trivialization and tabloidization in their news coverage. The findings are decisive.

For "The National," the "bills" or teasers at the top of the newscast highlighted Meech Lake stories every night of the week studied. With the exception of the June 8th newscast—when the entire program was given over to a single anchor-led, "live" report of a possible breakthrough in the talks—no newscast featured fewer than four Meech reports. On one night, nine Meech-related items were aired.

Without exception, the Meech-related reports led each newscast during the study week. The overwhelming majority of stories followed a dominant "game" schema, focusing on conflict, strategy and the likelihood of resolution in time to meet the deadline for ratification. Further, those few stories (only four in the course of the week) that could arguably be categorized as "governance" or "issues" stories tended to examine the specifics of the reform package in the context of the issue's potential to make or break the deal rather than the issue's implication for the way Canadians go about the business of governing themselves.

The CBC's news accounts in equally overwhelming proportions reflected a "crisis" construct. Specific developments for each news cycle were identified as flashpoints, consistent with Iyengar's concept of an episodic frame. Political leaders were then linked in treatment-responsibility fashion relative to their ability to alleviate the problem or not. The CBC news reports almost without exception included a "search for a solution" component. In fact, in 25% of the coverage the "search for a solution" provided the news hook for the report; but again, the solution being sought was a political one.

Consistent with Leon Sigal's findings in his seminal study, official sources—particularly politicians—were the focus of much of the CBC's coverage.<sup>26</sup> Fully three-quarters of the reports included clips from the political principals only, or "politicians plus." Only two news items featured "third parties" exclusively, two others were built around "streeters"—on the street interviews with citizens selected at random by the reporter in the field. Each newscast included at least one "analysis" round-table discussion, featuring CBC correspondents David Halton and Wendy Mesley and, on occasion, *Globe and Mail* columnist Jeffery Simpson. However, the "analysis" focused on the politics of the contentious issues, consistent with a "game" schema.

The current affairs program *The "Journal"* reveals a similar coverage pattern to *"The National"*. *"The Journal's"* programming, it should be noted, involved a mix of one-on-one interviews with host Barbara Frum, prepared pieces, and round table discussions with experts. The Meech Lake talks dominated the program and invariably the discussion followed a "game" or strategy schema. Specifics of the reform package were discussed as line items in the context of their potential to make or break the deal.

*"The Journal's"* items focused on the threat to Canadian unity posed by an impasse or breakdown in the talks; discussions and analysis evolved around the search for political solutions. Politicians were the main source of the *"Journal's"* coverage, although third parties were included in *"Journal"* items more often than was the case on *"The National"*. Only one item followed television's "streeter" format.

Applying Iyengar and Kinder's theories of agenda-setting and priming, the network's decision to devote three-quarters of its news coverage to the talks clearly established the unity issue as the dominant political issue in the country.

Further analysis reveals an institutional predisposition to believe the collapse of the reform initiative might fuel the rise of separatist sentiment in Quebec. News reports made frequent use of terms such as "crisis" or "high drama" describing the negotiations in the context of "11 men at the 11th hour" and referring to the accord as "hanging on a wing and a prayer."<sup>27</sup> Subsequent news stories reporting a slight drop in the value of the Canadian dollar on international money markets and a consequential modest rise in interest rates added to the aura of impending doom. There were references to the "Machiavellian" strategies of federal advisers. The closed-door nature of the talks added to this crisis atmosphere; network news reports featured footage of grave-looking advisers scurrying in an out of meetings barred to the media and the public alike.

After the fact, CBC executives insisted the network had not received a single complaint from any of the conference participants alleging a factual error or any misrepresentation of anything that had been said or done. They cited an Angus Reid public opinion poll published the week after the June negotiating session reported 64% of the 1,241 respondents nationwide considered the CBC's coverage balanced, compared to 53% of respondents who considered their local newspaper's coverage balanced. Yet critics persisted in their complaint: the CBC reporting created the impression that the network believed it had a duty to save the country and that the way to save the country was to pressure any political leader who stood in the way of ratification.

The CBC coverage, with its dominant "game" schema and its "crisis" news frame reduced Canada's future to a question of political will. And with the "treatment-responsibility" construct identified in Iyengar's research, the CBC created the unmistakable impression that the fate of the nation was in the hands of the federal prime minister and the 10 provincial premiers—11 white males in suits huddled behind closed doors. (The passivity of Canadians in such circumstances may seem as passing strange to Americans who fought a bloody civil war to re-affirm the principle that national unity is non-negotiable. In fact, the Meech Lake negotiations were conducted according to the rules, a by-product of a uniquely Canadian system of governance known as executive federalism.)

A public broadcaster more sensitive to its public service mandate would have eschewed

the “game” schema for a “governance” schema. Instead of focusing on the political drama and crisis atmosphere of the negotiations, the public broadcaster might have focused on the specifics of the package—from Senate reform to the division of powers between the federal and provincial governments—better to explain the potential impact proposed changes would have on our system of government.

But the CBC’s use of the “game” schema for Meech Lake coverage long predated the June, 1990 negotiating session. While Canadian public opinion on the reform package shifted dramatically over time one fact remained constant—Canadians had little or no knowledge of the specifics of the deal. When the Meech Lake pact was first announced in the spring of 1987, 7 of 10 respondents to a Gallup Poll declared their support for it. Then the dramatic intervention by former prime minister Pierre Trudeau turned the tide of public opinion. With scorn and condescension, Trudeau likened Mulroney to the sorcerer’s apprentice who unwittingly unleashed forces he could not control. Trudeau’s “special status” attack resonated in English Canada, resulting in a sharp erosion in support for Meech Lake among the public; in contrast to the supportive positions of the country’s political, business, labor and academic elites.

The sharp division between the public and their elected leaders posed a particular problem for the CBC. As Alboim explained, “For the first time in history, you had the broad mass of the people completely at odds with their leadership on a public policy issue. Nine (out of 11) of the leaders were taking a position that the vast majority of English Canadians could not accept.” Alboim’s observation raises a fundamental question: did the views of Canadians about the reform package as expressed in media polls reflect public opinion or public emotion? And was the way the media covered the Meech Lake story the determinant?

Consistent with Sigal’s findings, the public did not have the same access to the network as official sources who were overwhelmingly in favor of Meech. The CBC attempted to strike a balance by giving disproportionate coverage to Meech’s “official” hold-outs, Newfoundland premier Clyde Wells and Manitoba premier Gary Filmon.

Tony Burman, a CBC news executive, insists the network’s stopwatch supports his claim there was a balance between pro and anti-Meech coverage. And he rejects any suggestion that the media created the crisis atmosphere

that permeated Meech week. “In the media generally, we’re all drawn toward compressed, dramatic story-telling. But if the suggestion is that Meech Lake was hyped by the media I think that was not true. When you have both sides pointing to the Meech Lake debate as a crisis for the country, it is inevitable for that kind of intensity and urgency to be reflected in the coverage.”<sup>28</sup>

Burman’s defense of CBC coverage is sound, in context of the code of professionalism’s tenet of keeping individual bias out of a story. But the NMA analysis is equally sound. The explanation for these seemingly irreconcilable differences lies in Gans’s “paraideology” of news and Iyengar’s theories of media frames.

In his study of the American media, Gans concluded that among the enduring values to be found in news stories was a belief in social order and national leadership. While media outlets highlight disorder—from floods to forest fires, criminal conduct to unconventional lifestyles—order restoration is an important component of the narrative.

News, Gans says, is supportive of institutions, “In short, when all other things are equal, news pays most attention to and upholds the actions of elite individuals and elite institutions.”<sup>29</sup>

The CBC English-language network’s coverage most emphatically reflects Gans’s conclusions. Influenced by its historic mandate of promoting national unity, the English network’s coverage advanced the preservation of the federation or “unity” as the dominant “frame”. All news subjects were covered in terms of whether their words or actions advanced or hindered the effort to keep Canada together. Radio Canada, the French-language public broadcaster, is not included in this study. However, the continued existence of the Canadian federation is not a *sine qua non* for French-language journalists. Unity is not the dominant media frame for Radio Canada; a fact that results in significantly different editorial product.

CBC’s Meech Lake coverage reflected certain characteristics of market-driven journalism, notably commercial television’s “deviance/deviance overcome” narrative form. Consistent with the notion of “altruistic democracy” the CBC’s coverage positioned Canada’s institutions—specifically the federation itself—as worth preserving, the obvious shortcomings of incumbent office holders notwithstanding. The preponderance of Meech Lake coverage established national unity as the overwhelming

political priority for the country. The dominant “game” schema and focus on the latest “wobble” development established a textbook example of Iyengar’s episodic-treatment responsibility frame that suggested to viewers the political problem could be solved, or not, by the 11 first ministers. The narrative implied the future of the country was at least in play, but that Canada would survive if reason prevailed.

The CBC’s Meech Lake coverage met all of journalism’s professional code requirements of “objectivity” and “fairness” but consistent with Iyengar’s conclusions, it was most emphatically not neutral. The CBC’s coverage was consistent with the exclusionary character of news. With its top-down reporting approach focused on the nation’s political elites, the CBC coverage further validated Sigal’s findings and was couched in language that reinforced the “insider” status of anchors, reporters and the people they were covering. Ordinary Canadians were given minimal voice.

CBC news executives believe they fulfilled the public broadcaster’s mandate by assigning significant resources to a complex public policy issue in the interests of national unity. Yet a bottom line conclusion that the network succumbed to certain market pressures in its coverage is supported by the content analysis which quantifies the overwhelming dominance of the “game” over the “governance” schema. The CBC did give an important public policy issue pride of place in the network’s news line-up. But as Alboim acknowledges, “our narrative form requires drama, conflict, denouement.” The network’s Meech Lake coverage suggests these market-driven components shaped editorial decisions to a significant degree.

The strategy, in audience assembly terms, was certainly successful. Former CBC news executive Trina McQueen reported that on the last day of the First Minister’s Conference, close to four million Canadians saw at least part of the CBC’s coverage—an extraordinary number given the fact that Canada’s total population in 1990 stood at 28 million, seven million of whom consider French their first language.

**The Charlottetown Accord:** Undaunted by the failure of Meech Lake in 1990, the nation’s political elites fashioned yet another reform initiative in the summer of 1992. And in an attempt to legitimize their efforts, the nation’s political leaders decided to submit the reform package to a nation-wide plebiscite to be held October 26, 1992, only the third such vote in Canada’s 127-year history.

Still sensitive to the criticism of its Meech Lake coverage, the CBC was determined this time to satisfy its various publics that the network was committed to a more inclusive coverage. The network prepared a special news report, aired on CBC’s “Sunday Edition” October 4, 1992, outlining for viewers the extent of the CBC’s efforts to ensure impartiality in its coverage.

When the smoke of Charlottetown cleared, a NMA study concluded the CBC had, in the main, succeeded, finding:

- The CBC avoided a dominant “crisis” frame for its campaign coverage.
- Dissenters to the Charlottetown pact were not treated as enemies of Canada in news coverage.
- While the “Yes” campaign received twice the coverage of the “No” campaign, reporting of the “Yes” side was more negative.

The Archive’s assertion however that the main focus of the CBC’s Charlottetown coverage was the substance of the accord fails to tell the whole story. The NMA identifies discussion of the specifics of the Charlottetown pact as the dominant “news hook” for the campaign, generating 25% of the news stories. The CBC did explore specifics of the reform package in some detail, primarily in a series of news specials and in televised debates on the current affairs program “The Journal”.

The debate format, however, arguably fits a “game” schema construct rather than a “governance” schema. Debates are essentially confrontational. Audiences and observers alike look for winners and losers. The format highlights emotion as much as enlightenment. In the context of Iyengar’s findings on “bandwagon effect”, the point/counterpoint egalitarian format creates a notion of equality of support for the two sides that can be at variance with the relative support for each position at the time the debate occurs.

A more significant finding, in the context of Iyengar’s theories of the media’s agenda-setting, is that CBC did not automatically assign pride of place in its nightly news lineup to the referendum story, as was the case with Meech Lake. Only one-third of the 247 news stories aired on regularly scheduled newscasts during the referendum campaign focused on the Charlottetown accord, compared to the three-quarters figure during Meech Lake 1990 negoti-

ating session. In addition, many referendum items were short “campaign notebook” style, announcer-read reports. Referendum campaign reports were also woven through the newscast, instead of being clustered at the top as was the case with Meech Lake.

CBC reported more statements citing reasons to vote against the accord than statements citing reasons to vote yes. Further, news reports giving a reason to vote yes most often cited the fear of Quebec separating.

Campaign strategies did rank second as a news hook for CBC coverage; with most of this horse-race coverage centering on the fact that the “no” side had momentum.

The NMA’s assertion that the focus of the CBC’s Charlottetown coverage was the substance of the accord itself lends credence to the notion that Canada’s public broadcaster moved from Meech Lake dominant “game” schema to a “governance” schema. Certainly, the CBC took a more populist approach. In sharp contrast to the Meech Lake story, CBC’s Charlottetown coverage included a significant “bottom up” component, with more “streeters”, third party participation, town-hall-style meetings and community-focused reporting. The CBC’s coverage was a serious, and largely successful, attempt to reflect Gans’s “multiperspectival” approach to news. It is questionable, as we will see later in this paper, whether this populist bent in the CBC coverage succeeded in addressing the issues on governance.

It is significant that in both cases—Meech Lake and Charlottetown—a consensus of the nation’s political elite did not carry the day. Both reform packages were less than perfect, as the first ministers who negotiated them readily concede. Yet both packages were deemed acceptable to federal, provincial, territorial and First Nation leaders of all partisan persuasions. How then did this disconnect between the elected and the electors occur on such a fundamental and important public policy initiative? And did the media coverage in general, and the CBC’s coverage in particular, compromise public discourse about the issue?

## V. Observations

Reflecting on his study of CBC television, Cooper concludes that “in the modern media world, there is no information. It has been replaced by news.”<sup>30</sup> Cooper’s implication is that the commodity we call news is a more complex product than a simple compilation of facts.

Recent literature decries the emergence of “infotainment”, a product its creators argue is democratic and its critics dismiss as trivial if not absurd. Market-driven journalism is offered up as the sound-bite explanation for “junk news”—the editorial equivalent of fast food. The villains of the piece are easily and readily identified: unscrupulous politicians and their manipulative image-makers, celebrity journalists hoping to extend Andy Warhol’s 15 minutes, a new generation of media managers with pocket calculators for social consciences, and an increasingly illiterate public with the collective attention span of fleas, armed with remote control devices the better to terrorize program managers.

Defenders of market-sensitive news, wrap themselves in the flag of majoritarianism, insisting market-driven journalism is the most democratic of news forms, responsive to a majority, or at least a plurality, of viewers. These defenders say they are not in the business of the journalistic equivalent of medicine, dispensing information that is good for people whether they want it or not. They further argue that market-sensitive news attracts the interest of those who would be otherwise uninformed. However the flaw in the free market argument (identified by former *New Yorker* editor William Shawn and others) is that if you only give readers or viewers what they think they’ll want it is difficult, if not impossible, to give them something they didn’t know about—something new. You simply stagnate. Further, as former Shorenstein Center visiting professor Judith Lichtenberg argues, “it is disingenuous for the press to claim it simply gives the people the information they want when their desire for it is partly a function of press coverage.”<sup>31</sup>

Democracy, in the end, demands more of the media than majoritarianism. Constitution framers in both the United States and Canada formally and structurally addressed the need to limit majority rule. Further, as Ben Bagdikian argues, the Age of Enlightenment acknowledged that the democratic consent of the governed is meaningless unless the consent is informed.<sup>32</sup>

The market-driven argument may mask a deeper truth however. The current sorry state of the nexus of press, politics, and public policy can be attributed to the excess and errors of modern journalism’s golden era—that period from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s when mainstream journalism was relatively free of market pressures.

The problems of today’s political journalism are not simply and narrowly the problems

of the marketplace. Journalism's code of professionalism, with its middle class values, and its dominant male voice, is as elitist as it is exclusionary. Noam Chomsky may overstate the case, but today's mainstream media does advance a preferred social, political and economic order. The "new journalism," from the Tequila-fueled "gonzo" insights of Hunter S. Thompson to the subjective, life-experience journalism of the *Boston Globe's* Patricia Smith, may be unacceptable to media traditionalists precisely because it questions the established order.

Local television news was never a part of journalism's professional culture. In the early 1960s, local TV reporters were dismissed as teeth and hair and loud sports jackets, more disc jockey than journalist. Left to its own devices, local TV news was allowed to invent itself and did so effectively, at least in market terms. In the end, local TV culture infected the networks, and the networks in turn infected print.

There are variations on the theme in terms of explaining what is wrong with television news as an information format. Most flow from television's properties as a two-headed monster. Daniel Hallin summarized the inherent conflict succinctly: "Television news is both journalism and show business, a key political institution as well as a seller of detergent and breakfast cereal."<sup>33</sup>

Kiku Adatto has charted the silencing of candidates' voices in political discourse through the ever-shrinking sound bite. But again, the problem is broader than the media's predisposition to reduce everything to snappy one-liners and shorter sound bites. Brevity, in and of itself, needs not signal a lack of substance. The socio-judicial structure of democracies with a Judeo-Christian tradition flow from Ten Commandments that in total do not amount to 100 words of text. And Descartes' assertion, "I think, therefore I am," is no less profound for its brevity.

Neil Postman has identified the real problem with truncated political discourse: the sound-bites and one-liners of today's journalism are offered up for consumption without any context, either historical or ideological. Television's information culture treats public utterances as raw material. Within television's paradigm, we no longer have news coverage, we have news assembly. The end product is analogous to Potemkin's village—a completely artificial dialogue, surreal and largely unconnected to truth.

The news media, in the main, have become the chroniclers of Boorstin's world of pseudo-events and image. And in our post-mod-

ern cynicism, as Gitlin has observed, we debunk image and imagemakers, yet in the end, accept them as the only reality we have left.

"Junk news" is undeniably appealing to the palate, but McManus poses an important question when he asks whether it is sufficiently nutritious in information terms to sustain healthy self-government?<sup>34</sup>

Traditionally, news is afforded importance and place in any democratic society. Swedish researcher Jorgen Westerstahl believed news must be factual and impartial if it is to provide a foundation for independent and rational decision-making.<sup>35</sup> Tuchman believed "the quality of public debate necessarily depends on the information available."<sup>36</sup> Entman argues the importance of the news media to an informed citizenry is growing as the influence of political parties wanes.<sup>37</sup>

News is a powerful instrument of social control because news defines the reality on which people act. Lippman first raised the concept of people making political decisions based on the pictures in their heads. Subsequently, cognitive psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman documented the inevitability of short-cuts in human decision-making.

But what if Postman is correct? What if television's information paradigm is altering the meaning of "being informed" by, in Postman's words, "creating a species of information that might properly be called misinformation. Ignorance is always correctable, but what do we do if we take ignorance to be knowledge."<sup>38</sup> Policy problems may lack the novelty a reporter thinks he or she needs, but as Kathleen Hall Jamieson observed, "The public and the body politic are ill-served if discourse is driven by drama and not data."<sup>39</sup>

In the artificial world of news assembly, journalists can respect the over-arching tenets of objectivity and fairness, apply the professional rules of their craft, accurately record a candidate's utterances and produce a balanced account of a news event that reflects neither the truth, nor reality.

The entertainment narrative of television does, as Postman suggests, create public emotion rather than public opinion. Iyengar says the further removed individuals are from politics, the more they are influenced by television's agenda-setting properties. Further, television is watched disproportionately by poorer and less educated citizens.

These findings may be particularly significant in the context of the CBC's Meech Lake

coverage. When the reform initiative was defeated, six in ten Canadians were strongly opposed to the pact. And yet a CBC/Globe and Mail poll discovered 62% of the survey's respondents said they knew "little or nothing" about the details of the Meech Lake accord despite months of saturation coverage. Marion Just and her colleagues established in *Common Knowledge* that the problem is not inherent to the medium, but rather in our use of the medium.

Political leaders with complex public policy options to advance rely on the news assembly culture to promulgate their view at some peril to themselves, their political formation, and their policy option. Tomorrow's leaders will have to apply the same sophisticated thinking to their communications strategies as they brought to the development of the policy itself. Photo-ops and snappy one-liners cannot by themselves advance public understanding of, or support for, sound public policy. Like Nero, political leaders prepared to indulge in the pyrotechnics of sound-bite public discourse face a certain, unhappy political future.

Media scholars who see the press as a public utility and not just a business have advanced ideas to improve the sorry state of today's political journalism.

Advocates of public journalism, including NYU professor Jay Rosen, propose a new journalism that seeks to engage citizens in public life while re-connecting journalists to the community they serve. Newspaper publisher Buzz Merritt further suggests it is time reporters understood that journalism's self-interest—both intellectual and economic—is inextricably linked to the well-being of public life. Merritt's rather novel argument is that a journalist's credibility should not flow from some contrived detachment, but rather from a new alignment forged by a shared commitment with citizens to improve their lot. Journalism, in and of itself, cannot create and sustain healthy public life, Merritt says, but it can be the gravity that keeps society from flying apart.

Public journalism may be too much of a reach for media properties traded as part of a larger corporate holding on the New York Stock Exchange, at least in the short term. But it would seem to be a natural fit for public broadcasters such as the CBC.

A public broadcasting system is of limited value if the state expects it to operate according to the profit-seeking dictates of the marketplace. Nor is there significant value to a public broadcaster's news and current affairs programming if

the journalism slavishly follows Gans's "paraideology" of North American reporting with its exclusionary, elitist ways.

Public broadcasting could serve a wider purpose if it moved to covering deliberation rather than debate, with its focus at the earlier stages of Daniel Yanklovich's seven stages of public opinion formation.

Postman believes that in this age of show business journalism, we are "amusing ourselves to death."<sup>40</sup> Today's market-driven journalism lends credence to that view. Public broadcasters that embrace public journalism can resist the tabloid tendencies of today's market-driven newscasts, but only if they are free of the market pressures.

Governments in most western democracies, including Canada, have deemed the airwaves to be a resource owned by the people. Governments, including Canada's, owe it to the people to invest in that resource.

CBC news anchor Peter Mansbridge summarized the conundrum succinctly in a May, 1994 speech at the University of Manitoba. Mansbridge concedes there is a place for tabloid TV, just as there is a place at neighborhood newsstands for the *National Enquirer*, "But that place should not be in public broadcasting," Mansbridge added, "We exist to do something different from the private sector, not to try and mimic it."

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