MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

**THE FRASER INSTITUTE, THE MEDIA, AND POLICY DISCOURSE IN
CANADA**

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For more than a decade, the Vancouver-based Fraser Institute's National Media Archive (NMA) was Canada's only publicly available source for a regular content analysis of the two Canadian national television news broadcasters: CBC and CTV. The findings of its studies were published in a monthly newsletter, *On Balance*. Though the Fraser has since discontinued this as a separate publication and placed media analysis in the pages of its feature journal, *Fraser Forum*, it is still making efforts to promote its free-market view of Canadian broadcasting. The focus of the Fraser in recent years has largely been the inadequacies of public health care while extolling the virtues of a more privatized system, and belittling the public school system while promoting the merits of a school voucher system; however, critiquing Canadian media and broadcasting policy are still viewed as a worthwhile enterprise. An entire issue of *Fraser Forum* was devoted to the subject of Canadian media as recently as October 2003.

How does an ideologically-based institution structure a media monitoring program in Canada and what can it hope to achieve? This paper will examine the efforts of the Fraser Institute by explaining the background and objectives of this organization and its media monitoring campaign; the strong connection to conservative American research organizations; how the different political structure between Canada and the U.S. hinders the Fraser's efforts at home; ways in which the Fraser exploits avenues for media exposure; and why many in the academic community found flaws in the Fraser's media monitoring technique.

Despite its best efforts, there is little evidence to suggest the Fraser has made an impact influencing the development of broadcast policy in Canada. In the policy-making process, the Fraser has shown talent for gaining media exposure and generating discussion among those who are generally ideologically sympathetic but has not shown tangible results in directly influencing the makers of public policy. It is at this level of “agenda-setting” among the general public where a group such as the Fraser Institute can hope to make an imprint in policy development. In his study of the issue of agenda-setting in Canada, Stuart Soroka writes, “public agenda-setting work demonstrates that increased issue salience for the media leads to increased issue salience for the public.”¹ If the Fraser keeps emphasizing an issue long enough and gains media coverage in the process, it can hope to influence the public, and thus indirectly gain the ears of policy-makers. This is where the Fraser has had a degree of success, receiving mention in worldwide media 2053 times in 1995 alone.² Since its inception in 1974, the Fraser has been an effective promoter of its right-wing policies and has utilized a variety of avenues to pitch these ideas to governments and individual citizens.

Critics from the other side of the ideological fence argue the Institute is a clear example of Gramscian hegemonic control of public discourse.³ Under this Marxist interpretation,

¹ Stuart N Soroka. *Issue Attributes and Agenda-Setting by Media, the Public, and Policymakers in Canada*. International Journal of Public Opinion Research. Vol 14(3) Autumn, 2002. p. 265.

² Clive Thompson. *Fraser Attacks: a leaked document reveals the right-wing Fraser Institute's five-year plan for media domination*. This Magazine. May-June 1997. Vol 30 p 18.

³ Ben Swankey. The Fraser Institute: A Socialist Analysis of the Corporate Drive to the Right. Vancouver: the Centre for Socialist Education, 1984. p. 5

the major corporations who fund the work of the Fraser have found an ideal vehicle for their interests, whose work threatens to fundamentally alter the direction of government policy in Canada. According to these critics, the voice of the Fraser is believed to be so widespread and pervasive the average citizen does not recognize this process of ideological assimilation. The Fraser Institute has been credited with “playing an explicitly vanguard role in constructing neoliberal hegemony.”⁴ It is the position of this paper that such a perspective overstates the impact of the Fraser Institute and grossly simplifies the complicated process of creating public policy in Canada, particularly in the realm of broadcasting.

Undoubtedly, the Fraser would welcome the kind of control over government and policy its most serious detractors envision. Where the Fraser has enjoyed a degree of success is in gaining media exposure for its conservative agenda; however translating that exposure into direct influence on policy is not a direct path. Without question, there has been a shift to the right in many areas of Canadian society and the Fraser is now seen as far more centrist than during its infancy in the 1970s, when its research was often dismissed as the lunatic fringe of Canadian politics. A strong argument can be made that the political centre has shifted, not the Fraser Institute. While on the surface, the Fraser would appear a prime example of affecting the false consciousness foreseen by Marx, the evidence reveals the Fraser as one of many voices competing in the policy arena, whose work often has difficulty finding an audience at the higher levels of policy development.

⁴ William Carroll and Murray Shaw. *Consolidating a Neoliberal Policy Bloc in Canada, 1976-1996. Canadian Public Policy*. Vol.27 (2) 2001. p. 202.

Particularly in the area of broadcast policy, it is necessary to employ a pluralist approach to understand the implications of the Fraser's efforts. There are many groups and individual citizens who attempt to guide the government through various changes to Canada's broadcasting regulations. While undeniably well-connected and with access to various significant media channels, the Fraser must join the myriad of interests who hope to be heard in the development of broadcast policy.

The issue of Fraser Forum in October of 2003 clearly outlined the Fraser position regarding the current state of Canada's media: the media are portrayed as anti-free trade (*Television News on the Tenth Year Anniversary of NAFTA*); pro-government (*The Incentives Facing Public Broadcasters*); anti-voucher schools (*The Debate Over School Choice: Where, Oh Where, is the CBC?*); and ambivalent to the Fraser's 'Economic Freedom Index' (*The Media and Economic Freedom*).⁵ Though its mantra of the "free market" is commonly seen as the sole solution, the Fraser promotes a variety of issues. They seem to appreciate what G. Bruce Doern and Richard Phidd wrote in Canadian Public Policy: Ideas, Structure and Process: "public policy is almost never made one policy field at a time."⁶ By casting a wide net, the Fraser has a better opportunity to catch public attention for their overall theme of uninhibited free enterprise.

⁵ Fraser Forum, October 2003

⁶ G. Bruce Doern and Richard W. Phidd. Canadian Public Policy: Ideas, Structure, Process (2nd edition). Toronto: Nelson, 1992. p. 88.

As will be shown in this paper, the Fraser Institute has made efforts at the more formal levels of the policy process including briefings before task forces and standing committees, but continues to focus its efforts on getting its message to the public via various media outlets. The Fraser has made much out of its citations in various media both nationally and in the global media such as the Economist (who have celebrated the Fraser's Tax Freedom Day); however, there is not an immediate connection between media exposure and policy influence. Keeping close tabs on media exposure is not unique to the Fraser Institute. In her study of British and American think tanks, Capturing the Political Imagination, Diane Stone writes, "most think tanks spend considerable resources on compiling indicators of influence. Number of media citations is a common form."⁷ Such indicators are useful in selling the Fraser when trying to solicit funds from potential donors. At the higher levels of the policy process, including Cabinet, the Privy Council and the Prime Minister's Office, there is evidence to suggest 'think tanks' such as the Fraser do not directly contribute to the policy process.⁸

In recent years, one might get the impression the Fraser has realized broadcast policy is a crowded room and has scaled down its media monitoring division accordingly. The periodical *On Balance* has ceased publication and media does not appear among the thirteen areas of research on the Fraser Institute's web page. The work of the National Media Archive (the media monitoring wing of the Fraser Institute) came under academic attack in a 1992 issue of the *Canadian Journal of Communication*, where noted Canadian

⁷ Diane Stone. Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process. London: Frank Cass and Co., 1996. p. 107.

⁸ Donald E. Abelson. Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes. Kingston: McGill-Queen's U.P., 2002. p. 121.

Communication scholars such as Marc Raboy and Liora Salter questioned the Fraser's position of neutrality in its research. The methodology used by the National Media Archive was also scrutinized in an article in the same journal entitled *News Balance Rhetoric: the Fraser Institute's Political Appropriation of Content Analysis*. There appeared to be little academic support in Canada for the work of the National Media Archive.

Lydia Miljan, former head of the National Media Archive and now a professor at the University of Windsor, continues to fight the good conservative fight, publishing a book in 2003 with Stephen Harper advisor Barry Cooper entitled Hidden Agendas: How Journalists Influence the News. While remaining true to the core Fraser belief of business being under attack from a liberal cabal, the book is published by the University of British Columbia Press, not the Fraser Institute. The Fraser has hosted readings of the book and undoubtedly welcomes its conclusions, but there is no formal connection between the Fraser and this study.

Hidden Agendas is yet another example of how the entire media monitoring program of the Fraser was consistently modeled on the work of conservative organizations in the United States; in particular, by a man who has made a career of pointing out the supposed liberal biases of the mainstream media: Robert Lichter. It was his work (along with his wife Linda and Stanley Rothman), The Media Elite, that has served as the obvious inspiration for Miljan and Cooper's Donner Prize nominated study. As will be demonstrated, there is very little original scholarship involved in the media analysis of

the Fraser Institute. While often well-researched and not without some potential value, the work of the National Media Archive is clearly an application of tried and true methods from American media watchdog groups.

The waning interest of the Fraser Institute in its media monitoring campaign can likely be attributed to three key factors: insufficient media exposure for its work, a lack of academic support for its research methods, and the structure of the Canadian political system. This study will explore the nature and methodology behind the Fraser's work, as well as why the Canadian system does not lend itself as easily to influence from independent policy organizations.

BACKGROUND OF THE FRASER INSTITUTE

As a charitable organization, the Fraser is not allowed to actively “engage in any political activity”; however it does not hide ideological preference.⁹ In a memorable phrase, Evert Lindquist refers to conservative policy institutes such as the Fraser as “ideological cheerleaders.”¹⁰ The Fraser critiques any government program that might place any restrictions upon business. The slogan of the Fraser is “competitive market solutions for public policy problems” and describes its mission as follows:

⁹ Fraser Institute. Challenging Perceptions : Twenty-five Years of Influential Ideas. Vancouver: Fraser Institute, 1999. p. 6.

¹⁰ Evert A. Lindquist. *Think Tanks or Clubs? Assessing the influence and roles of Canadian policy institutes*. Canadian Public Administration. Vol. 36(4) 1993. p. 573.

As an independent public policy organization, The Fraser Institute focuses on the role competitive markets play in providing for the economic and social well-being of all Canadians.¹¹

The Fraser Institute was formed in 1974 in response to what the business community saw as a lack of academic support for open-market policies. The purpose of the Fraser and its ideological allies in the U.S., Europe, Australia and New Zealand was to call into question the prevailing Keynesian economic policies that had prevailed in most of the Western world since World War Two. The first of these openly conservative organizations was the American Enterprise Institute. It was founded in the U.S. in 1943 but for decades remained largely on the fringes of policy debate in America. In the post-war economic boom, there was little audience for criticizing the dominant economic policies. The majority of the first wave of independent policy research groups was just that: *research* groups, and not involved with the same level of political advocacy as one sees with institutes such as the Fraser. The goal of early organizations such as the Brookings Institute and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace was to free academics from the rigours of teaching so they might concentrate on researching policy options for the United States. Such a move was seen as advantageous in a country that did not have the benefits of a permanent civil service. Among these early policy organizations, very few specialized in any one field or followed strict ideological parameters.

¹¹ www.fraserinstitute.ca

These policy research organizations have been involved at the higher levels of policy development in the United States for decades. Since Jimmy Carter in the 1970s, only George Bush Sr. did not consult an independent research policy organization, or 'think tank', to help structure his presidential platform.¹² His son, George W. Bush, mindful of his father's single-term status, did not repeat this oversight and sought the input of Ronald Reagan's former advisors, the Hoover Institution, when formulating his run for the White House. Some of the top officials in Washington move into their positions directly from various policy institutes and return after their time in public life is over. Current top Bush advisor Condoleezza Rice and Vice-President Richard Cheney were both fellows of the Hoover Institution before stepping into two of the most influential positions in the country.

Like many of the Fraser's current policies, the concept of the research institute itself was brought into Canada from south of the border. The first independent policy institute in Canada was established in 1954 when the American Conference Board set up an office in Montreal. The Conference Board of Canada is a clear example of the early style, or "old guard" research institute: its work is by and large respected and often cited by media and politicians alike because it is seen as a politically neutral entity. According to Murray Shaw and William Carroll, "More than any other group, the Conference Board is a think-tank, plain and simple."¹³ The Conference Board of

¹² Abelson. p. 140.

¹³ Carroll and Shaw. p. 197.

Canada remains by far the largest policy research institute in Canada, employing over two hundred full-time researchers and with an annual budget of over \$20 million.¹⁴

While many early institutes offered the research if requested by government, they were not as actively involved in courting policy makers. The second wave of policy institutes was much more focused upon the marketing and promotion of their ideas. The Fraser belongs to what Diane Stone calls the new “partisan policy” institutes.¹⁵ These new institutes were financially beholden to the corporations who funded them and specifically designed “to counter the criticisms of the progressive liberal intelligentsia – the so-called ‘New Class’”.¹⁶ Despite the development of these new institutes, most Western governments preferred to listen to policy advice from respected economists like John Kenneth Galbraith. Groups such as the Fraser, formed in 1974, remained on the sidelines of the policy debate in Canada until later in the decade.

The Fraser’s founders saw laissez-faire capitalism as under attack in Canada in the early 1970s. British Columbia had elected its first New Democratic government in 1972, and in his Christmas message of 1974, Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau raised the ire of conservatives by stating that the marketplace “was not a reliable economic institution and would increasingly have to be replaced by government action to sustain the economic well-being of Canadians.”¹⁷ The business community felt besieged from two sides. It was at this time that T. Patrick Boyle of forestry giant MacMillan Bloedel,

¹⁴ Abelson. p. 43.

¹⁵ Stone, Diane. *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process*. p. 18.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 29

¹⁷ Fraser Institute, The. Challenging Perceptions. p. 5

sought the assistance of Michael Walker, an economist who had worked at the Department of Finance and the Bank of Canada, to create a research institution “unlike any other in Canada.”¹⁸ The Fraser Institute (named after the river) quickly began publishing and distributing its own books concerning rent control (1975), wage and price controls (1975) and taxation (1976). It readily carved out a neo-liberal (defined as “a political orientation originating in the 1960s, blending liberal political views with an emphasis on economic growth”)¹⁹ niche for itself in matters of Canadian public policy.

The feud between the Fraser and Ottawa continued in 1976 after the government released a report entitled “The Way Ahead”, a plan that called for further government guidance to ensure a secure economy. This approach infuriated members of the Fraser, who retaliated with a book of their own entitled “Which Way Ahead?” that strongly criticized the economic policies of the Trudeau government. The Fraser Institute still claims today that its report “was quite influential in shaping the public’s careful consideration and rejection of this anachronistic vision of the government.”²⁰ They do not offer evidence to support this claim.

The policy door began to open during the energy shortage and recession of the late 1970s/early 1980s, when governments began to re-examine their economic policy and this provided “increasingly receptive audiences for the Fraser Institute” in Canada.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 6

¹⁹ www.m-w.com/dictionary

²⁰ Fraser Institute. *Challenging Perceptions* p.6

²¹ Evert A. Lindquist. *Three Decades of Canadian Think Tanks: evolving institutions, conditions and strategies. Think Tank Traditions: Policy Research and the Politics of Ideas.* Ed. Dianne Stone and Andrew Denham. Manchester: Manchester U.P., 2004. p.271.

In particular, the Fraser's home province of British Columbia became much more hospitable to its ideas with the election of a new Conservative government in the early 1980s. Many political observers were shocked to hear B.C. Premier William Bennett had directly consulted members of the Fraser before tabling the provincial budget of 1983. This marked a political coming-of-age for the Institute and was largely the product of years of published research, changing economic times, and very powerful board members. By this point, the Fraser Institute Board of Trustees included representatives of many of the top companies in Canada, including Molson's, Eaton's, Abitibi-Price, I.B.M., the Toronto-Dominion Bank, Labatt's, Imperial Oil, Domtar, Cadillac Fairview and many others. After beginning with initial seed money of \$74,000 in 1974, the Fraser Institute by 1983 had an annual operating budget of over \$825,000.²² The B.C. government of William Bennett gave the Fraser its first direct access to those with the power to implement policy.

The Fraser has to tread carefully when getting closely associated with any one government or party. As Lindquist puts it, for a think tank to be seen as providing services for a sitting government is "dancing with the devil."²³ On purely economic terms, the Fraser must be neutral in order to maintain its charitable status; on the matter of credibility, it is important for the Fraser not to appear beholden to any particular party or government.

²² Carroll and Shaw. p. 201.

²³ Lindquist. *Three Decades of Canadian Think Tanks*. p. 277.

As stated above, widely read international media such as The Economist have carried Fraser Institute initiatives such as their ranking of countries in terms of “economic freedom” and the calculation of “Tax Freedom Day”. The latter refers to the day of the calendar year when one has worked enough to pay the year’s taxes. Given the level of media coverage this concept has received, it has proven an effective tool for generating discussion on the level of taxation in the country. “Tax Freedom Day” takes an issue as complicated as taxation levels and simplifies it to a concept all can understand. The Fraser offers the following unsubstantiated claim in its thirtieth anniversary book, Challenging Perceptions: “Today almost every adult Canadian knows Tax Freedom Day.”²⁴ While the validity of that statement is debatable, it clearly demonstrates how the Fraser strives to set the parameters of debate around government policy in Canada. This is where the Gramscian critics of the Institute believe a body such as the Fraser can cause fundamental shifts in the national dialogue. Much of what the Fraser publishes is “geared more towards lay readers”²⁵ and a Marxist approach envisions the public internalizing and accepting Fraser dogma. While the long-term impact of such public exposure is debatable, coverage of gimmicks such as Tax Freedom day is a major success for the Fraser as it attempts to influence general discourse on matters of public policy; that is, to set the agenda for public debate.

A clear example of this appeal to the general population came during the recession of the early 1980s when the Fraser found itself searching for new funding sources and adopted a product from Australia: a board game called Poleconomy. The game, like the classic

²⁴ Fraser Institute. Challenging Perceptions, p. 13.

²⁵ Lindquist. *Think Tanks or Clubs?* p. 560

Monopoly, places the player in a cut-throat world of free market economics. According to the Fraser's own publication, "the object of Poleconomy was to teach players some of the fundamentals of economics and the ways in which the economy and the government interact."²⁶ The game proved valuable on two fronts: as a fund-raising device, players could buy and sell real Canadian companies who paid to have their names placed on the board; and as a tool to disseminate the basic concept of laissez-faire economics espoused by the Institute. The players of the game would not be the usual academics and 'policy wonks' who attended Fraser-sponsored conferences. Brad Wall, leader of the right-wing Saskatchewan Party, which narrowly lost the 2004 provincial election, cites the game as one of the favourites of his youth.²⁷ Like the Fraser Institute at its birth in British Columbia over 25 years ago, Wall is challenging a strong NDP provincial government in the West and is a champion of the neo-liberal philosophy that forms the basis of Poleconomy.

Ideological trinkets like board games and Adam Smith neckties (a favourite gift item at the Fraser) were one avenue for getting the Fraser's message to the general public, but for a wider audience the Fraser had to gain wide access the mainstream Canadian media. With Conrad Black and his Hollinger newspaper chain an enthusiastic supporter of the Fraser, there were many newsrooms across Canada willing to listen to what the Fraser Institute had to say.²⁸

²⁶ The Fraser Institute. Challenging Perceptions p.24

²⁷ Graeme Smith. *Saskatchewan Party Going to Wall for Softer Image*. The Globe and Mail. March 15, 2004. A7

²⁸ Fraser Institute. Challenging Perceptions. p. 39.

MEDIA MONITORING

The initial foray of the Fraser into Canadian broadcast policy occurred in August of 1985 and set the tone for what was to become a favourite issue for the Institute: the extravagant costs of the nation's public broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. In 1981, the Department of Communications hired Stanley Liebowitz to conduct a study of the costs of operation of the CBC and its affiliates vs. the private broadcasters in Canada. The Department was hesitant to publish the report, so Liebowitz sent his study to the Fraser Institute. The conclusions of this report told the Fraser exactly what it wanted to hear:

In a nutshell, the CBC-owned stations had costs which were much higher than those of private CBC affiliate stations or those of stations affiliated with other networks. The CBC also appear to be doing an inferior job selling their advertising messages.²⁹

Liebowitz was scathing in his indictment of the expenses of the CBC. The Fraser showed none of the reluctance of the federal government and rushed to publish the material after Liebowitz sent them a copy. Liebowitz made recommendations that were an ideal fit for a young upstart policy institute intent on removing government from Canadian society. The first conclusion called for the CBC to "remove inefficiency" by "accounting and

²⁹ Stanley Liebowitz. On the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Costs of Operation. Vancouver: Fraser Institute, 1985. p. 2

administrative reforms” and “profit incentives for managers.”³⁰ The second recommendation also meshed well with the overall directive of the Fraser: “to privatize the CBC-owned and operated stations.”³¹ The Liebowitz report provided a perfect launch to the Fraser’s entrance into the broadcast policy debate and established an early theme of gross inefficiencies and waste in public broadcasting. The Fraser was able to assume a rebellious stance and declare the work “the report that the government did not want published.”³² This also provided a key element of media monitoring the Fraser had learned from its American populist teachers: to take the position of the underdog fighting for truth against the giant of the ‘liberal establishment’.

A second early indicator of what would form the Fraser’s position on matters of culture was revealed in Steven Globerman’s 1987 book, Culture, Governments and Markets: Public Policy and the Culture Industries, published by the Institute. It should come as little surprise that the study concluded that cultural protectionism was a policy born of fear-mongering by Canadian nationalists. While being careful not to come across as unsupportive of Canadian culture, Globerman concludes “one does not have to accept the proposition that increased government support and protection of culture is, on balance, socially beneficial.”³³ In the time of fierce debate in the country concerning the effects of trade agreements on culture, Globerman fired the following provocative shot: “Canadian interest groups have failed to make a coherent or legitimate case for keeping the culture

³⁰ Ibid. p. 66

³¹ Ibid.

³² Fraser Institute. Challenging Perceptions. p. 33

³³ Steven Globerman. Culture, Governments and Markets: Public Policy and the Culture Industries. Vancouver: Fraser Institute, 1987. p. 41

industries off the free-trade bargaining table.”³⁴ The Globerman and Liebowitz studies helped prepare the foundation for what was to become the Fraser’s policy on the culture and broadcasting industries.

In 1987 the Fraser Institute launched its media monitoring campaign, the National Media Archive for Public Policy (later shortened to the National Media Archive). The co-ordinator of the project was a young University of Calgary M.A. graduate, Lydia Miljan. The first issue of the archive’s journal, provocatively titled *On Balance*, was published in 1988 and contained articles critical of the media’s coverage of the free trade debates. The conclusions of *On Balance* were drawn from the NMA’s unique archive of CBC and CTV telecasts as well a selection of the major newspapers in the country. *On Balance* boldly declared its purpose was “to provide a complete assessment of *media fidelity* (italics added) in coverage of an issue.”³⁵ The NMA used the method of content analysis to draw its conclusions. This technique would later prove controversial when held up to academic scrutiny.

One unstated goal of the National Media Archive of the Fraser Institute is to produce what Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman referred to as “flak” in their book Manufacturing Consent. This may be defined as feedback to news producers in hopes of influencing future news content decisions. The NMA reviews the major Canadian media according to what the Fraser Institute believes to be “fair and accurate” coverage. The findings are released to the public and the results are often reported by ideologically

³⁴ Ibid. p. 43

³⁵ National Media Archive. *On Balance*. Vol. 1 (1). Oct. 1988. p.1

sympathetic news media (the National Post and now defunct Alberta Report regularly carried NMA and other Fraser Institute studies.) In overall media citations in Canada from 1985 to 1999, the Fraser Institute ranked second out of all Canadian think tanks with 4, 683.³⁶ This was second only to the much larger Conference Board of Canada. The impact of “flak” is not to change the story or coverage being critiqued, but to let the newsmakers know they are being watched and perhaps influence future decisions.

In this way, the NMA saw a degree of success. Faces around the NMA must have been smiling when Toronto Sun columnist Douglas Fischer wrote, “Already *On Balance* has media people even more self-regarding, self-conscious and comparative than normal.”³⁷ This is exactly the intended consequence of ‘flak’ – to make the media second-guess itself.

The National Media Archive provided a unique service that was offered to researchers, regardless of their political affiliation. For a fee, the NMA would sell complete transcripts of any national news broadcast or public affairs programming of CBC and CTV. It also claimed to be “the only archive of its type in North America that has the technology to electronically search this television news database.”³⁸ Clearly, there is merit to having such a resource available to those who study social sciences; however, the questionable methodology and conclusions of the NMA’s research overshadowed much of the possible value of the NMA’s database. Most of the direction on how this data was to be used and manipulated drew inspiration from the work being done, to

³⁶ Abelson. p. 98.

³⁷ Fraser Institute. Challenging Perceptions. p. 42.

³⁸ *On Balance*. Vol. 9(5) p.8

considerable public attention, by right-wing media monitoring groups in the United States.

THE AMERICAN TEMPLATE

The idea of a conservative media resource centre is largely modeled on successful U.S. conservative media watchdog groups such as Accuracy in Media (AIM) and the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA). The work of CMPA founder Robert Lichter had an enormous impact on the establishment of the Fraser's monitoring campaign and his influence remains obvious in NMA director Lydia Miljan's recent book, Hidden Agendas. The Fraser Institute's media monitoring campaign was a direct reflection of the work done by Robert Lichter and his associates in America.

Groups such as AIM and the CMPA managed to make the phrase "liberal media" so common as to be used as a joke on *the Simpsons* (Homer's radical leftist mother sends messages via the newspaper with the help of her friends in the 'liberal media') and offer souvenirs in an on-line gift shop selling coffee mugs and bumper stickers declaring "I don't trust the liberal media."³⁹ Conservative American media watchdog groups sponsor studies, host conventions and publish materials designed to convince Americans that the mainstream media are decidedly left-leaning and out of step with the views of the majority of the American public. The result of this approach by the conservatives in America is made clear with the following statistic: "In January 1988, 12% of randomly sampled adults claimed news media exhibit a liberal bias in news coverage. By

³⁹ www.cmpa.com

September 1996, 43% of randomly sampled adults claimed news media have a liberal bias in news coverage”.⁴⁰

Conservative media watchdog organizations grew to prominence during the Reagan years in America and have helped spawn a general mistrust in media that has become an industry unto itself. Conservative media analyst Brent Bozell stated in a speech to the pro-Republican Heritage Foundation, “Ronald Reagan was Rambo: the liberal media’s worst nightmare.”⁴¹ Networks such as Fox News, popular radio personalities like Rush Limbaugh, and best-selling books by Anne Coulter and Bernard Goldberg have created an ideological battleground in American media. On the left, liberals are also digging in. Michael Moore’s books and films have grown in popularity, the new radio network Air America strives to present a liberal counterpoint to the entrenched conservative voices on American radio, and Al Gore is reportedly involved in developing a ‘liberal’ television network to serve as a countervailing voice to the conservative and popular Fox News channel.⁴²

There is evidence of the Fraser Institute trying to import this American-style of politically-polarized programming into Canada. A new project of the Fraser Institute clearly demonstrates how the Fraser is not only influenced by, but obviously emulates the work of Lichter and the American media monitoring groups. In recent years the Fraser

⁴⁰ David Domke, Mark Watts, Dhavan Shah and David Fan, “The Politics of Conservative Elites and the ‘Liberal Media’ Argument”, *Journal of Communication* (Autumn 1999) p. 36

⁴¹ Brent Bozell. “Why conservatives should be optimistic about the media.” The Heritage Foundation. Heritage Lecture #380. Jan. 21, 1992.

⁴² Jim Rutenberg. “Gore Reportedly Has Set Sights On Creation of a Cable Network”, *The New York Times*. June 19, 2003, p. 23.

has offered a “service” to journalists to assist them in acquiring statistical information. This new program, known as ‘canstats’ (Canadian Statistical Assessment Service) is an obvious challenge to ‘StatsCan’- the government-run statistical source. With the end of *On Balance*, Canstats is the Fraser Institute’s newest effort to exert influence on the Canadian media. This ‘free’ offering by the Fraser might prove difficult for some reporters to resist. Evert Lindquist writes, “Media reporters, whether they agree or disagree with the point of view of particular institutes, find them convenient sources of commentary, particularly when stories must contain contending perspectives on an issue.”⁴³ It is this convenience that the Fraser hopes will attract journalists in need of research.

Like so many Fraser projects, the ‘canstats’ initiative is not an original concept, but one borrowed from an ideologically comparable think-tank in the United States. The website of canstats lists Robert Lichter among the board of advisors and does note that the service is modelled after “stats” in America. Canstats is not merely modelled after, but is a direct reflection of its American cousin. The conservative Center for Media and Public Affairs launched the Statistical Assessment Service (www.stats.org) in 1995. The president of Stats is Robert Lichter, who, along with his wife Linda, has been writing and organizing against what they perceive as a liberal media bias since the early days of the Reagan presidency. Along with Stanley Rothman, the Lichters wrote the seminal study *The Media Elites: America’s New Powerbrokers*. This work received widespread support in conservative circles. Terry Donlan, former head of the National Conservative Foundation, cited the Rothman-Lichters data to justify a million dollar advertising

⁴³ Lindquist. *Think tanks or clubs?* p. 552.

campaign to alert the public to the dangers of media bias.⁴⁴ According to Brent Bozell, the argument there was no proof of a liberal bias in media “collapsed in 1982 when Drs. Robert and Linda Lichter and Stanley Rothman published ‘Media and Business Elites’” (the article later to appear in book form as The Media Elites).⁴⁵ This paper will later discuss the similarities between Media Elites and Lydia Miljan’s and Barry Cooper’s recent book, Hidden Agendas.

Robert Lichter is now a media analyst for the Fox News network in the United States. The influence he has on the Fraser’s media monitoring campaign, in particular ‘canstats’ cannot be overstated. Lichter is more than an advisor to this project; he has provided the template upon which it is built. The importation of this statistical service is an obvious example of the connection between the Fraser Institute and American policy research/advocacy groups.

This is a highly controversial development as the obvious aim is to make the Fraser a primary source of public information. In the guise of providing a service to journalists, the Fraser is seeking a bold new path in determining the nature of public discourse. One such example of this would be the Fraser Institute’s assertion that the level of income as determined by Statistics Canada as ‘the poverty level’, is far too high. Statscan sets the number as roughly \$15, 500 for a single adult; whereas Canstats believes true poverty

⁴⁴ Herbert J Gans, “Are U.S. Journalists Dangerously Liberal?” Columbia Journalism Review. (New York: November/December, 1985.) p. 30

⁴⁵ Bozell. “Why Conservatives Should Be Optimistic About the Media.”

exists only for those earning less than \$7, 500 a year.⁴⁶ If the media chose to use ‘canstats’ as opposed to ‘StatsCan’ for their figure, there would appear to be far fewer poor people in the country and therefore less need for expensive public services.

Thus far, the Canadian mainstream media have not warmed to the use of ‘canstats’. Using the research database Factiva, a two-year search from July 2002 only turned up two references in any major Canadian newspaper. Both of these stories appeared in the *National Post* and each was written by Neil Seeman – the director of ‘canstats’.⁴⁷

The Fraser strives to emulate the political clout of its American friends. Like its U.S. counterparts, the Fraser Institute is well funded, with donations from corporate and private supporters and counts some of the country’s leading conservative politicians among its supporters (new members include Reform Party founder Preston Manning and former Ontario Premier Mike Harris). Unlike its American ideological cousins, and despite the rare exception such as the Bennett government in British Columbia, the voice of the Fraser does not appear to have direct access to the ears of those in power. In his study of think tanks in Canada, *Do Think Tanks Matter?*, Donald Abelson writes, “Canadian think tanks have the same influence objectives as their American counterparts, but do not have the same access to policy makers and so must use different avenues.”⁴⁸

CANADIAN VS AMERICAN POLITICAL STRUCTURE

⁴⁶ Thompson. *Fraser Attacks*, p. 19.

⁴⁷ Neil Secman. *Are we all Islamophobes? Not Really*. *National Post*, Sept 14, 2002;
Neil Secman *Choking on Bad Data*. *National Post*, August 23, 2002

⁴⁸ Abelson. *Do Think Tanks Matter?* p. 75.

There are clear structural differences in the political culture of the respective countries that account for much of this disparity between American and Canadian think tank influence. At the highest levels of the policy process, the Fraser's American colleagues have advantageous paths unavailable for Canadian policy research organizations. The Canadian party structure is much more united than the U.S. system, where elected members are given more flexibility and therefore open to outside suggestion. Policy institutes offer their studies as a 'service' to individual members of Congress. Individual Members of Parliament in Canada generally vote with their party and, as such, are less likely to seek outside sources for advice. This was especially true during the era of Jean Chretien, when backbench MPs had to toe the party line or risk the fate of John Nunziata, who was removed from caucus after voting against a Liberal motion in Parliament.

The U.S. President has hundreds of positions to be filled when he is elected and often turns to members of the policy institutes whose advice he sought early in the campaign. George W. Bush's national security advisor Condoleezza Rice and former Secretary of State for President Ronald Reagan, George Schultz, both came directly from the Hoover Institute into top jobs in Washington. This is a clear and direct path from the policy institute to the highest levels of political decision-making. The Prime Minister of Canada has a more permanent civil service (the Privy Council Office) at his disposal and over one hundred members of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), so there is little incentive to seek outside research.⁴⁹ While a Prime Minister does surround himself with personnel with whom he/she is familiar, senior bureaucrats in Canada form a valuable source of political experience for an incoming Prime Minister.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 62-63.

Another reason for Canadian think tanks to stay at arm's length from direct involvement in the party process is that they risk losing their charitable status in Canada. It is one of the mysteries of the Canadian tax system that the Fraser Institute can claim charitable status, thus all donations are tax deductible, while an organization such as Greenpeace is viewed as a political organization and so is not a recognized charity.⁵⁰ In a roundabout way, by issuing tax receipts to donors, the Fraser is a beneficiary of the government spending it so regularly criticizes. Even though the Fraser has been most ideologically aligned with the Reform/Alliance/Conservatives (according to Dobbin, "during the 1993-97 Parliament...twenty-two of the fifty-one Reform MPs drew on Institute material for their speeches")⁵¹, it makes an effort to keep some public distance.

On occasion, the Fraser will bite the hand that has fed them. This is significant in that it allows the Fraser to publicly declare its stated purpose of "advancing education" and avoiding the 'cheerleader' label proposed by Lindquist.⁵² In 1979 the Fraser published a report calling for an end to subsidies in the telecommunications industry. Northern Telecom promptly withdrew its funding from the Fraser and urged others to do the same, resulting in a near ten percent loss of donations.⁵³ It was also the Fraser Institute that broke the story of the impending Ontario deficit, created by the staunchly conservative

⁵⁰ Bill Tieleman. *It's Time the Fraser Institute stopped taking taxpayers' charity: right-wing think tank uses charitable donations to fight worthy causes.* Financial Post. Aug. 31, 1999. p. C7

⁵¹ Murray Dobbin. *The Myth of the Good Corporate Citizen: Democracy Under the Rule of Big Business.* Toronto: Stoddard, 1998. p. 194.

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ Jeff Keller. Does Michael Walker have the right stuff? The head of the Fraser Institute says economics isn't political. And if you believe that one... Equity Magazine. Nov. 1995. Vol 13(9). p. 29.

Mike Harris/Ernie Eves government. This played a factor in the Tories losing the 2003 Ontario election to the Liberals.

Structural impediments from the top levels of the policy process have not stopped the Fraser from making an effort to directly influence policy, but instances of obvious success are limited. In one clear example, Fraser research fellow Neil Seeman spoke in 2003 before the Canadian Senate hearing into the state of Canada's media. He urged the government to allow for further merging of media ownership, arguing "issues like media concentration and cross-ownership issues are red herrings. Although they are popular discussion topics in certain elite media circles around the country, they are not what people, in my view, gripe about when they complain about the Canadian media."⁵⁴ This view echoed the voices of conservatives in America who successfully lobbied the FCC to allow further consolidation of media in 2003, only to see this decision challenged in Congress.⁵⁵

Though the recommendations of the Senate Committee are pending, the report of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage entitled Our Cultural Sovereignty: The Second Century of Canadian Broadcasting, released in June, 2003 clearly recommended "the CRTC be directed to postpone all decisions concerning the awarding of new broadcast licences in cases where cross-media ownership is involved."⁵⁶ This obviously runs contrary to the wishes of the Fraser Institute. The report also called for "stable

⁵⁴ Canstats and the Fraser Institute. *Canstats Goes to the Senate*. Canstats Bulletin. May 29, 2003.

⁵⁵ Stephen Lataton., *A Media Rule by the F.C.C. is in Trouble in the House*. New York Times. July 23, 2003. p. C1

⁵⁶ Lincoln, Clifford. Chair. Our Cultural Sovereignty: The Second Century of Canadian Broadcasting. Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage. June 2003. Recommendation 11.4a. p. 631

multi-year funding” (Recommendation 6.1) for the CBC, rejecting the Fraser’s sustained criticisms of the national public broadcaster. The Canadian government’s official response to the study has been vague, calling for “further consideration” of the cross-media ownership issue and to “immediately launch an analysis” into the issue of foreign ownership.⁵⁷ Such glaring rejections at the higher levels of the policy process reinforce the belief that the Fraser’s best tactic is to appeal directly to the public.

COURTING THE MEDIA

A behind-the-scenes glimpse into the planning for the Fraser Institute was provided in 1997, when a confidential report outlining an aggressive expansion plan for promoting Fraser initiatives went missing from Fraser Institute president Michael Walker and ended up in the hands of Edmonton Journal columnist, Linda Goyette. The 28-page brief, in Walker’s words, “wasn’t meant for public consumption”.⁵⁸ The paper demonstrates how the Fraser curries media favour, while at the same time appearing to be ambivalent regarding coverage, or better yet, give the facade that the media has come to them.

Among the contents of the five-year plan:

- Shortened versions of the Fraser’s major papers (Fraser Folios) were to be faxed to 450 talk radio shows across the country in hopes of directing the course of discussion. Once again the impetus came from the United States

⁵⁷ Department of Canadian Heritage. *The Government of Canada’s Response to the Report of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, Our Cultural Sovereignty: The Second Century of Canadian Broadcasting*. 2003.

⁵⁸ Thompson. *Fraser Attacks*. p.20

where radio talk shows had been a conservative bastion for years, with hosts ranging from Ted Nugent to G. Gordon Liddy. Audience numbers were potentially enormous, and colourful conservative pundits like hockey broadcaster Don Cherry had shown there could be an audience for conservative views in Canada. By providing the hosts with ready-made material, the Fraser could directly set the agenda for the show, and therefore around the workplace or home where the audience was listening.

- Increase subscribers to *Fraser Forum* from 1, 333 to 20, 000, thereby establishing the publication as more acceptably mainstream. The goal was to make the leap from a “special interest” periodical and place *Fraser Forum* on the magazine rack right beside *Macleans* and *Chatelaine*.
- Develop a database of journalists who respond to Fraser material. One expects this would be to provide them with even more material to help disseminate the results of Fraser studies.
- Exploit the fact that many news editors are overworked and offer them a regular syndicated column on health care issues written by the Fraser Institute. This project would include maintaining a list of patients who have waited longer than is acceptable for health care and release names to the general press of patients who are willing to go public with their story.

The obvious effect of this would be to advance the Fraser agenda of health care privatization in the minds of the general public.

- Convince Statistics Canada to publish the Fraser's measurement of poverty as the national poverty line. Though the mission statement of the Fraser publicly states to have the well-being of *all* Canadians in mind, this initiative certainly appears an attack on the most needy in society. To be effective, this would involve a prolonged campaign to convince Canadians that the poor really were not that poor.⁵⁹

This leaked document offers a rare glimpse into the planning behind the agenda-setting process. It is a back-door approach to the policy process but it can prove effective. Sometimes governments adjust to policies not officially part of, and even contrary to, the stated intentions of a sitting government. Doern and Phidd use the example of the environmental movement of the late 1980s to demonstrate how a government can change in mid-stream if the right amount of public pressure is applied. Concerning the environmental-protection policies of the Mulroney government, they write, "(t)his had not been a planned Conservative priority in the 1984-88 agenda, in part because it went against the grain of deregulation and other pro-market choices. But by 1988, the government was swept along, as were many other Western governments, by public demand that environmental issues be dealt with."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *ibid.* p. 21

⁶⁰ Doern and Phidd. Canadian Public Policy. P. 149.

Though coming from the other side of the ideological fence, the Fraser Institute hoped to achieve influence in the policy process under the Liberal government of Jean Chretien in the 1990s through generating public discourse, as the environmental movement of the late 1980s had done. If Mulroney could introduce environmental protection policy, then the Fraser saw hope that Chretien would listen to calls for private health care, provided the voices were loud and sustained. Poll after poll suggests that the majority of Canadians are not in agreement with the Fraser on this issue, yet subtly promoting private health care still remains a major focus of their research work.

A further look into the workings of the Fraser Institute was provided by Murray Dobbin in his book, Myth of the Good Corporate Citizen: Democracy Under the Rule of Big Business. Excerpts of the book were reprinted in the periodical Briarpatch, under the title, *Myth of the Corporate Citizen: the Fraser Institute is changing the ideological fabric of Canada*. Although somewhat dated, Dobbin's book is a revealing look at those whose tax-deductible contributions keep the Fraser afloat. Among the key points in this article:

- In 1989, over half of the top one hundred companies in Canada had contributed to the Fraser Institute.
- Foreign donations to the Fraser rose from \$223,000 in 1994 to \$342,000 in 1995. Business-oriented charitable foundations provide 57% of the funding

and corporations contribute 31%. Only 11% of funding comes from individuals.

- Despite a relatively small membership of 2, 000, the Fraser was able to raise \$2.7 million in 1997.

Dobbin chronicles a statement made by former Fraser chairperson, R.J. Addington, that makes the agenda of the Fraser very clear: “The institute’s ambition ...is nothing short of changing the nature of public discourse about the role of government in society.”⁶¹ The underlying ideology of this new discourse was reflected in comments by Fraser president Michael Walker when he spoke to the Standing Committee on Finance about how the Fraser was “investigating ways in which the self-destructive economic forces unleashed by democratic political choice might be restrained.”⁶² For the Fraser Institute, the democratic process is viewed as a hurdle to be overcome.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Though there is material available critiquing the public persona of the Fraser Institute, there are relatively few writers who have critically appraised the media research

⁶¹ Murray Dobbin, *Myth of the Good Corporate Citizen: the Fraser Institute is changing the ideological fabric of Canada*. Briarpatch. July-August 1998, vol. 27 no. 6 p.15.

⁶² *ibid.*

methodology of the Fraser Institute. This lack of analysis is surprising given the amount of money and energy the Fraser has used to monitor the Canadian media.

Kathleen Cross, a doctoral student at Simon Fraser University, wrote an article for Newswatch Canada in 1997, later published in *Canadian Forum*, entitled “Off Balance” that analyzed the research of the Fraser’s National Media Archive. Though not a direct view into the policy process, this article is relevant as it clearly demonstrates how the Fraser is selective in its criticism and carefully constructs the arguments presented to the public as essential truths. Cross challenges the validity of the methodology used in the research from the Fraser. NewsWatch Canada reviewed seventeen issues of *On Balance* between January 1995 and July 1996 and discovered a “consistent pattern of innuendo, decontextualized results and selective interpretation.”⁶³ Some of the key findings of this study:

- 20 of the 29 articles in the examined issues of *On Balance* expressed concern about the left-wing bias of journalists and the effect this had on coverage.
- *On Balance* argued that Conservative governments received more negative coverage than Liberal governments in mainstream Canadian media and NDP governments were covered least critically. Cross argues that *On Balance* did not mention that a Conservative government like Ralph Klein also received more positive coverage than Ontario NDP leader Bob Rae.

⁶³ Cross, Kathleen. *Off Balance: How the Fraser Institute slants its news-monitoring studies*. Canadian Forum. October 1997. p. 10.

On Balance alleged that public broadcasting was less balanced than private broadcasting. Cross accuses *On Balance* of “employing a double standard” in this case by refusing to recognize when the public broadcaster showed more balance than the private broadcasters.⁶⁴ (To be fair, a more recent study by the Fraser Institute was equally if not more critical of the privately-owned CTV in their coverage of the Tenth Anniversary of NAFTA, as compared to the publicly-owned CBC.)⁶⁵

The most thorough critique of the Fraser’s research methods occurred in a 1992 issue of the *Canadian Journal of Communication*. The lead article by Robert Hackett, William Gilsdorf and Philip Savage takes exception to the use of content analysis as an accurate indicator of journalistic bias. They turn the tables on the NMA and argue “*OB* makes claims for the straightforward objectivity of content analysis which cannot in principle be sustained; that is because the technique is dependent upon the construction of categories, which is necessarily an interpretive process.”⁶⁶

On Balance and the entire area of content analysis are structured upon the creation of categories; for example, establishing criteria for what constitutes a positive or negative comment in the free trade debates or Meech Lake Accord discussions. By setting your category parameters accordingly, one may create the necessary conditions for whatever bias the researcher hopes to find. What words are positive, which are negative? Does the

⁶⁴ *ibid* p. 11

⁶⁵ Lydia Miljan. *Television News on the Tenth Anniversary of NAFTA*. *Fraser Forum*. Oct 2003. p. 14.

⁶⁶ Robert Hackett, William Gilsdorf and Philip Savage. *News Balance Rhetoric: The Fraser Institute’s Political Appropriation of Content Analysis*. *Canadian Journal of Communication*. Vol. 17 (1992) p. 16

researcher allow for nuances on language or contextualization? The Cross article clearly demonstrates clear omissions on the part of the NMA research. This methodological shortcoming is not restricted to conservative pundits. The same style of research is utilized by Chomsky and Herman in their leftist media critique, Manufacturing Consent. Content analysis can strive for neutral categorization (i.e. how many women were interviewed on a given newscast), but there is clearly reason for debate regarding the neutrality of the work of the National media Archive.

Just as the social conservatives in the United States have co-opted a very specific and limited interpretation of 'family values', the conservative media have been quick to claim the word 'balance' as their own. Fox News in the U.S. uses the expression "a fair and balanced view" as the catch-phrase for their programming. But is it? What determines balance is never clear. The parameters of much of the NMA's content analysis imply all stories should provide a 50/50 split between opposing views.

The process is rarely that simple. For example, in a time of war when the official source of news (the government) is obviously providing only one side of the issue, is it not the job of the media to offer the citizen oppositional viewpoints? Does this imply a bias on the part of the news media or is the media offering a proper range of information? *On Balance* was scathing in its critique of the CBC reporting during the Persian Gulf War in 1991. It offered the startling statistic that George Bush was eight times more likely to be criticized on the CBC than was Saddam Hussein.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Fraser Institute. Challenging Perceptions. P. 74.

The criteria for what constitutes favourable or unfavourable coverage clearly skewed the results of the *On Balance* study. The following quote from Peter Mansbridge was cited in the study as an example of positive coverage of Saddam Hussein: “Many of them (Palestinians) by some accounts, support Saddam Hussein.”⁶⁸ Another example of the seeming CBC support for Saddam was noted in the study when reporter Paul Workman stated on the Journal, “Saddam Hussein remains a hugely popular Arab hero.”⁶⁹ As the streets of Baghdad remain at times violently pro-Saddam and anti-American in 2004, this CBC reporting can be seen in hindsight as an accurate assessment, not biased news. There are many other reports categorized as ‘pro-Saddam’ by the NMA that others may interpret as good journalism. According to the conclusions of the National Media Archive, the CBC had become ‘Radio Baghdad’ and clearly anti-American. On closer reading, those quotes accurately reflected the reality in the Arab world.

The first edition of *On Balance* boldly proclaimed “it is possible to perform completely objective analysis of the positions represented in the sense that any group of randomly selected researchers would come to the same conclusions if exposed to the statements that had been analyzed.”⁷⁰ The previous paragraph clearly exposes the questionable validity of that statement.

Reporters had little or no access to Saddam Hussein and the White House was strictly controlling all information on the Persian Gulf War’s developments. Was the media correct to question the information it was being fed by Washington press secretaries or

⁶⁸ *On Balance*. Vol 4 (4) April 1991. p.2

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p.3

⁷⁰ *On Balance*. Vol 1(1) p.1

was the CBC taking an anti-U.S. position? Was this one-sidedness (if it indeed existed) a directive of the CBC or the product of individual reporters going about the business of news-gathering? There are no easy answers to any of these questions but one would not get that impression from the pages of *On Balance*. In the same issue of the *Canadian Journal of Communication* as the Hackett study, Marc Raboy makes the fundamental issue perfectly clear: "debates over questions like balance are inevitably ideological."⁷¹ Such nuances were lost in the pages of *On Balance*.

Hackett, Gilsdorf and Savage find little of value in the research of the NMA published in *On Balance*. They conclude:

OB research is methodologically and conceptually questionable. It adopts a positivist and non-reflective view of content analysis; it uncritically accepts a rather limited (and limiting) notion of "balance"; it does not take into account the complexities of producing news and its meanings; and it is prone to oversimplification, and a lack of theorization and contextualization. *OB*'s stated aim of objectively analyzing the fidelity of news coverage is in contradiction with the very conditions under which it is produced. It is funded by an advocacy group whose very purpose is to promote laissez-faire economics, and by presumably like-minded (and affluent) subscribers to the \$95 per year newsletter.⁷²

⁷¹ Marc Raboy. Balance is in the Eye of the Beholder. *Canadian Journal of Communication*. Vol. 17 (1992) p. 118.

⁷² Hackett et al., p. 33.

One of the major reasons for the lack of influence of Fraser research at the top levels of the policy process is that to outside observers, the Fraser Institute is obviously ‘on the payroll’ of corporate interest. In their study of the rise of neoliberalism in Canada, Dismantling a Nation: the Transition to Corporate Rule in Canada, Stephen McBride and John Shields refer to the work of the Fraser as “the corporate sector speaking through its own peak organization.”⁷³ Such financial indebtedness is seen as inevitably slanting results and many question the degree of objectivity in the Fraser’s research. The strict free market parameters guiding the Institute render many of their findings predictable.

This limitation provides ample fodder for the Fraser’s critics, including Globe and Mail columnist John Doyle who glibly dismissed a Fraser critique of his work replying “You’re nothing in this country until you’ve been attacked by the Fraser Institute.”⁷⁴ Responding to a Fraser allegation, Doyle’s column espoused a need for more Canadian drama on television, Doyle confirmed the accusation and referred to the Fraser members as “blustering right-wingers” and that to be attacked by them is “a badge of honour.”⁷⁵ Clearly the opinions of the Fraser on matters pertaining to broadcasting carried little weight in the Arts and Review section of Canada’s national newspaper.

THE BROADCAST POLICY PROCESS

⁷³ Stepehn McBride and John Shields. Dismantling a Nation: the Transition to Corporate Rule in Canada. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1997. p. 50.

⁷⁴ John Doyle. “The Fraser Institute is shaking its jowls at me.” The Globe and Mail. March 30, 2004, R2

⁷⁵ Ibid.

In the particular forum of broadcast policy development in Canada, yet again there are structural and logistical hurdles for the Fraser achieving access and influence at the higher process levels of policy formulation and implementation. One of the obstacles faced by the Fraser is that very democratic process Michael Walker complained about in the Dobbin article. In his essay *Influencing Public Policy on Canadian Broadcasting*, Marc Raboy writes, “every major change to the Canadian broadcasting system has been preceded by a public forum.”⁷⁶ This tradition of public consultation dates back to early radio broadcast regulations. Such an open forum is not the usual operating technique of the Fraser. While the Fraser hosts many open conferences on various issues, much of the real planning takes place out of public view as was seen with the leaked document for media exposure. The consultation stage is a crowded place where it is difficult for the Fraser’s voice to be heard above the din. There is no free pass given to organizations representing an established, wealthy clientele. In the same essay, Raboy writes, “Public consultations are a critical element of the process in which any actor who wishes to influence the process must participate.”⁷⁷ This process places the Fraser in the difficult position of realizing it must take part, while knowing theirs will be one voice among the chorus. As the leaked policy document revealed, much of the planning for the Fraser takes place behind closed doors.

For the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage’s Report, Our Cultural Sovereignty (the first major review of Canada’s broadcasting system since the Broadcasting Act of 1991), the Committee spent two years listening to submissions from across the country,

⁷⁶ Marc Raboy. *Influencing Public Policy on Canadian Broadcasting*. Canadian Public Administration. Vol. 38(3). p. 413

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

accepting everyone from representatives of the Canadian Football League to the Vancouver chapter of the Raging Grannies. The Committee also studied over 200 briefs and submissions.⁷⁸

This important first stage of the formal broadcast policy process may be simply 'too public' for the Fraser to have its desired influence. In another essay entitled *The Role of Public Consultation in Shaping the Canadian Broadcasting System*, Raboy observed: "The transparency and extent of public debate regarding broadcasting policy making in Canada is unique in the world."⁷⁹ Perhaps similar policy institutes in other countries have more of a direct involvement than in the more open Canadian system where individuals are given a voice alongside corporations.

Those in positions of power in broadcast policy do not actively pursue the Fraser Institute. A 1997 Ottawa study on the external research policy community showed only the federal Department of Finance and Industry Canada reported consulting with the Fraser Institute for any issues of policy.⁸⁰ With no direct voice to the Department of Canadian Heritage (the federal department responsible for broadcast policy since the demise of the Department of Communications in 1992) and only one voice among the crowd at the parliamentary committee stage, it is highly unlikely that the Fraser directly contributes to national broadcast policy in Canada.

⁷⁸ *Our Cultural Sovereignty*, p.3

⁷⁹ Marc Raboy. *The Role of Public Consultation in Shaping the Canadian Broadcasting System*. Canadian Journal of Political Science. Vol. 28 (3), Sept. 1995. p. 455.

⁸⁰ Abelson, p.108.

It may well be that the Fraser is not very interested in broadcast policy at all. The last two years have seen one issue of Fraser Forum per year dedicated to media issues. In neither of these issues does the Fraser offer suggestions for the potential direction of a national broadcast policy in this country. Such uncharacteristic restraint would appear to coincide with Lindquist's point when he wrote, "While most institutes aim to influence policy debates and to move issues they care about onto the political agenda, they typically have little interest in, or capacity to delve into, the details associated with program design, and care even less about its implementation. After all, to design and manage policy is to be held responsible for its success."⁸¹ It is far easier for the Fraser to fire critical volleys from the sidelines.

THE FRASER INSTITUTE'S MEDIA MONITORING TODAY

In recent years there has been little new from the Fraser's media monitoring research area. One could argue there never was much at the NMA that was truly inventive in the first place, merely northern interpretations of proven American favourites. The recent book written by National Media Archive director Lydia Miljan and University of Calgary professor Barry Cooper yet again owes a great deal of gratitude, if not complete indebtedness, to the work of Robert Lichter in the U.S.. Hidden Agendas: How Journalists Influence the News bears more than a passing resemblance to the Lichters and Rothman's 1980s book The Media Elite: America's New Powerbrokers. The authors

⁸¹ Lindquist. *Think Tanks or Clubs?* P. 572

recognize this connection, stating the Lichters/Rothman study was “a trail-breaking effort and highly suggestive for the present project.”⁸² Was it merely suggestive, or like the canstats program, did the American media scholars provide the basis for the study?

Like the use of content analysis to detect media bias, there may be no definitive answer to this question.

The Lichters/Rothman study concluded with the blanket statement, “Today’s leading journalists are politically liberal and alienated from traditional norms and institutions.”⁸³ Miljan and Cooper avoid such a blatant liberal/conservative dichotomy by claiming Canadian journalists “share both in the demographics and the attitudes typical of ...postmaterialists.”⁸⁴ The authors wisely stay clear of the political polarization common to much of the early American studies by co-opting the relatively recent theory of postmaterialism. According to postmaterialism, wealthier western societies’ policy concerns have evolved from the traditional Marxist/capitalist split to a new paradigm in which issues of human rights, feminism, environmentalism, and other concerns have taken priority. Classical Marxism is seen as inadequate to explain many contemporary movements of collective action.⁸⁵

⁸² Lydia Miljan and Barry Cooper. Hidden Agendas: How Journalists Influence the News. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003. p. 45.

⁸³ Robert Lichter, Linda Lichter and Stanley Rothman. The Media Elite: America’s New Powerbrokers. np, Maryland: Adler and Adler, 1986. p. 294.

⁸⁴ Miljan and Cooper. p. 59.

⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 57.

Miljan and Cooper constructed a survey to mine their data from over 270 journalists. Their survey is definitely more Canadian in focus than the survey used for the Lichters/Rothman study. They cover some similar areas such as attitudes to abortion and homosexuality but the Canadian survey stays away from some of the more outrageous questions of their American predecessors such as whether or not the journalist believes government should attempt to regulate sexual practices.⁸⁶ Instead, Hidden Agendas deals with specific Canadian issues, such as Quebec separation and the role of the Supreme Court.

Though this book is not directly affiliated with the Fraser Institute, Miljan and Cooper do refer to studies done by the NMA in this book. They write of the connection of the NMA to the American work: "Similar to what Lichter and his associates (1986) found in their study of U.S. media, Canadian journalists have tended to support left-of-centre positions."⁸⁷ As this paper has shown, Miljan has a long history of scholarship similar to Lichter and his associates. Praise for this study on the back cover comes from the same sources who have always been receptive to the Fraser's research: the National Post, the Financial Post and Robert Lichter himself.

This Donner-prize nominated study may have altered some of the semantics involved but the underlying message remains true to the Lichters/Rothman original: the conservative voice is rarely heard in mainstream media. Whether one chooses the term 'post-modernist' or 'liberal', the essence of Miljan and Cooper's work remains remarkably true

⁸⁶ Lichter, Lichter and Rothman. p. 304.

⁸⁷ Miljan and Cooper. p. 42.

to their American counterparts. The following line from Hidden Agendas captures the spirit of both books and would not be out of place in either study: “journalists as a group...definitely are not social conservatives.”⁸⁸

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to find praise for the media research of the Fraser Institute outside of other conservative organizations. Canadian communication scholar Marc Raboy believes the goal of the Fraser Institute’s National Media Archive is to “ultimately, influence media policy.”⁸⁹ In that sense there appears to be little visible victory for what is approaching twenty years of work. There have been some changes in the Canadian system the Fraser would undoubtedly approve such as the slashing of funds to the CBC in the early 1990s and the unfettered increase of media cross-ownership in the country. These seem more the product of the economic times than the result of specific pressure from the Fraser. The most recent study at the federal committee level called for stable CBC funding and a halt to further cross-ownership.

The Fraser continues to do what it does best: make certain the media know it is watching, and exploit every avenue to get its message of the dangers of government regulation out to the Canadian public. The future of media research at the Fraser seems uncertain at this point. The National Media Archive web page is now part of the Institute

⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 81

⁸⁹ Marc Raboy. *Balance Is In the Eye of the Beholder*. p. 118.

called “Old Fraser” and *On Balance* has ceased publication and is inaccessible on the Internet. The ‘canstats’ project is receiving little support from the journalists it is supposed to be assisting and seems to only acquire press coverage when its director writes a column. In the process of researching this paper, the person who was key to the inception of the National Media Archive, Lydia Miljan, now listed as one of three people ‘behind canstats’, did not respond to questions concerning the fate of media research at the Fraser Institute. The Fraser website claims Miljan is now working with an organization called The International Media Monitoring Organization, though very little information is available on this group.

The Fraser will likely never know the political clout of its American counterparts but obviously enough is being accomplished to keep its financial supporters satisfied. The work of the Fraser suits the purposes of its specific conservative support network and audience. It is left free to criticize without having to worry about getting its hands dirty in the actual process of policy formulation and implementation.

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