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ESC: English Studies in Canada, Volume 33, Issue 3, September 2007, pp.
20-23 (Article)

Published by Association of Canadian College and University Teachers
of English

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.0.0068>



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The Balanced Boredom Campaign

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IN THE FALL OF 2007 I WAS WOEFULLY UNPREPARED for the deluge of media calls I was due to receive—requests for interviews from journalists seeking commentary on the role of the internet in the Ontario provincial election. Having spent most of my academic life in the United States, I had found it highly unusual for media to call academics, especially to those of us working from a humanities or critical/cultural perspective. Nonetheless, there I was, Blackberry pressed to ear for much of the month of September, serving as an educator of sorts to a range of journalists from a number of media outlets—national, provincial, television, radio, print, and internet based. As a media studies scholar, the experience served as a fantastic crash course in contemporary journalism. The month was both exhilarating and exhausting, though ultimately a welcome change from the confines of typical university life. Thus when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) news invited me to work exclusively for the National and their many other news platforms in a similar capacity for the fall 2008 federal election campaign, I jumped at the opportunity—our collaborative research on new mediated politics (conducted with a number of my graduates students) would go on to receive substantial national attention.

I was also keen on the CBC's request for exclusive use of our research and priority for commentary during the election as I figured it might cut down on the endless calls and long interviews I'd conducted with freelance reporters during the previous provincial election. I was right. Once I began the partnership with CBC news, far fewer news outlets, particularly private news outlets, called to seek out my commentary, even though the election by many accounts was dominated by a string of web-based scandals and events. While some reporters figured that I was too busy collaborating with CBC, others were surprisingly upfront about their political antipathy toward anything, or anyone, associated with Canada's public broadcaster. For instance, I was abruptly disinvited from participating on a radio call-in show once the host caught wind of my collaborative project with CBC news. "We'd never have anyone on who works with the CBC," I was told point blank. That such partisanship (and it was politically motivated, to be sure) exists in Canada's broadcasting system, and in particular newsrooms across the country, is hardly news itself. It was, however, the brash expression of such partisanship that struck me, particularly in retrospect, as the campaign wore on and our project received more attention from conservative voices across the country.

But it was not the typical claims of liberal bias that conservative supporters started communicating to me about during the campaign with respect to our collaborative "Ormiston Online" project (named for the CBC reporter assigned to cover the internet during the campaign).¹ Rather, conservatives were furious at the project's success. Conservatives readily complained that our web- and television-based coverage of the internet campaign was too innovative, cutting edge, ahead of the curve, and novel. I would have blushed if not for the fact that these were offered as damning critiques!

Advocates of public broadcasting in Canada have often missed the point of this personal tale—conservatives are no longer content with pointing out budgetary inefficiencies at Mother Corp., in part because opinion polls continue to strongly support the CBC and other publicly mandated and (in part) funded institutions. Rather, I discovered during the election that many conservatives were in fact critical of public institutions emulating and adopting market logics. A number of conservatives, for example, suggested that "Ormiston Online" was trying to corner the market through the promotion of its "brand" on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The argument is, of course, a deeply cynical one. If public broadcasting produces

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1 www.cbc.ca/news/canadavotes/campaign2/ormiston.

To presume
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unique, innovative, and compelling programming, it is unfairly competing with the market, and when it replicates existing formats and/or purchases programming available on other private networks, the corporation is labeled as redundant. The conservative mandate for the CBC?—a new and wonderfully awful age of irrelevant, banal, and boring programming.

During the federal election campaign, the CBC’s ombudsman Vince Carlin addressed some of these cynical arguments in response to a campaign largely led by conservative columnists at the *National Post* against the well-known provocative liberal CBC.ca columnist Heather Mallick.² Carlin notes in response to Mallick’s over-the-top diatribe against the over-the-top Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin that the CBC should continue to promote controversial opinions. Carlin rightly notes that the campaign against Mallick was politically motivated, promoted by those who ideologically oppose any public funding for the CBC. Former CBC publisher John Cruikshank, likewise admitted that the issue was in part politically motivated. In a letter posted on the CBC website, Cruikshank stated that because the column was “a classic piece of political invective” and “intensely partisan” it “should not have appeared on the CBCNews.ca site.”³ However, after noting that the controversy and complaints were politically motivated, the CBC executives still allowed its critics to set a dangerous precedent for public broadcasting in Canada. Carlin and Cruikshank publicly concluded that Mallick’s column lacked basic facts to substantiate her opinions about Palin. The claim is a ridiculous one in the context of contemporary twenty-four seven newsmaking, where opinions are offered at lightening speed to fill in for absent and/or expensive-to-acquire facts. Conservatives were, I suspect, even more encouraged by CBC’s conclusion that the Mallick incident reflected a liberal bias of CBC news’ online offerings. To presume that CBC would become more “balanced” with the influx of partisan conservative voices, though, would be presumptuous, and, I believe, naïve. As I discovered over the course of the election campaign, truly partisan conservatives want nothing to do with the CBC—they ideologically oppose its very existence. Why then would such voices seek to join CBCNews.ca? Partisan conservatives, emboldened by an Ombudsman’s report and editorial statement that admonishes and retracts strong political opinions, are much more apt to use such editorial positions as ammunition (from their positions outside

2 “Review of complaints about Heather Mallick’s column of September 5, 2008.” Office of the Ombudsman, English Services, CBC/Radio-Canada. 25 September 2008.

3 www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/09/28/f-vp-cruikshank.html.

of public broadcasting) to continue a campaign of “balanced boredom”—an initiative meant to discipline the public broadcaster into producing the least opinionated and engaging fare on the media spectrum.

Evacuated of innovative programming, controversy, opinion, debate, and partisan politics, support for the CBC would surely erode. A strengthened mandate for our public media sectors conversely must, in addition to addressing longstanding questions over national and local relevance, reject a middle-of-the-road agenda that sees a (supposedly) balanced politics in which key political actors fail to participate and where programming is judged by its degree of inoffensiveness and banal familiarity.