

Gaps in Canadian Media Research: CMRC Findings

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Abstract: In-depth interviews conducted with leading Canadian mass media and new media managers, communication policy practitioners, and scholarly and professional media researchers reveal significant gaps in current Canadian media research. There are foreign sources but almost no Canadian contemporary sources for ongoing research in the following five broad areas: 1) Media usage; 2) Media ownership; 3) New media forms; 4) Media diversity; and 5) Media policy. These results were reported to the Canadian Media Research Consortium (CMRC) in 2007 and will shape its funding orientation and, perhaps, the direction for future Canadian media research more broadly.

Keywords: Media research; Media usage; Media ownership; Media policy; CMRC findings

Résumé : Des entretiens en profondeur menés auprès de dirigeants canadiens en gestion des mass médias et des nouveaux médias, en politique de la communication, et en recherche savante et professionnelle sur les médias révèlent des lacunes sérieuses dans la recherche canadienne actuelle sur les médias. Il existe des références étrangères dans les cinq catégories suivantes, mais presque aucune référence canadienne contemporaine : 1) l'utilisation des médias; 2) la propriété des médias; 3) les types de nouveaux médias; 4) la diversité dans les médias; et 5) les politiques médiatiques. Ces résultats ont été communiqués au Consortium canadien de recherche sur les médias (CCRM) en 2007 et vont influencer sur ses projets de subventions et, peut-être, sur l'avenir de la recherche canadienne sur les médias.

Mots clés : Recherche sur les médias; Utilisation des médias; Propriété des médias; Politiques médiatiques; Résultats du CCRM

Introduction

Canadians have been leaders in developing a critical appraisal of communication in society, but currently there is little ongoing empirical evidence gathered on trends in the mass media and new media on a national basis, and even less of it

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being published.¹ One organization that has tried to construct a scholarly model for ongoing, evidence-based, and accessible media research is the Canadian Media Research Consortium/Le consortium canadien de recherche sur les médias (hereafter referred to as the CMRC).²

The CMRC arose out of a phenomenon it would later study—media consolidation. In December 2000, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) approved a public benefits package as part of its approval of the BCE purchase of CTV. Among the benefits was a commitment by BCE to contribute \$500,000 per annum for a period of seven years (\$3.5 million in total) to fund the CMRC, a partnership of the School of Journalism at the University of British Columbia, the Joint Graduate Program in Communication and Culture at York University and Ryerson University, and the Centre d'études sur les médias, a non-profit corporation registered in Québec, associated with Université Laval, Québec, and Hautes Études Commerciales (HEC), Montréal (CMRC, 2006a).

In a brief to the CRTC in late 2006, the CMRC provided a summary of the research characteristics it had developed over the previous five years:

Canadian in orientation—fully bilingual and addressing national and regional media issues;

Comparative with other countries—working in co-operation with other national research groups to provide international comparisons. For example, CMRC's co-funding of the Canadian Internet Project, a partner in the World Internet Project, or its Report Card on Canadian News Media, with comparison with results from the Pew Center for Research for the People and the Press (United States);

Scholarly—conducted by a range of leading reputable scholars based at Canadian universities;

Applied—speaking in an accessible way to the key communication issues of the day of interest not only to scholars but also to policymakers, media organizations (management, media professionals, and consumers) as well as to civic society groups;

Independent—receiving no direct funding from governments, businesses, labour unions, or other special interest groups;

In the public domain—all of the findings made available publicly and without cost on the CMRC website, at conferences, and in scholarly publications; and

Innovative and risk-taking—providing new models of media understanding that are otherwise not invested in by business, government, and special interest groups (CMRC, 2006b).

The audience for Canadian media research

In 2006 the CMRC board of directors undertook an analysis of the consortium's success in meeting its goals and whether its research was finding an audience, not only in the academic community but also among media leaders, policymakers,

and professional researchers.³ The board commissioned this author to undertake a literature review and a series of in-depth interviews. The literature review was an attempt to place CMRC reports in the context of published Canadian and international media research. It found Canadian scholarly references to comprise a mere 2 to 3 percent of peer-reviewed published sources in three key areas of media research.

Interviews with academic and non-academic users of media research were undertaken to determine the following: 1) the perceived gaps in Canadian media research both in content and form; 2) the level of awareness of Canadian media research, especially in comparison with international sources; and 3) the perceptions of the CMRC's role in media research funding, authorship, and distribution. The CMRC also wished to determine what leaders in academic and non-academic settings would identify as priorities for media research over five years (2007 to 2012), relative to gaps as they currently exist.

Thirty-four interviews were conducted between May 23 and August 30, 2006, with Canadian media and policy leaders as well as professional and academic leaders in media research. A full list of interviewees is available in the Appendix.⁴

The results show that people from all sectors feel there are many gaps in Canadian media research, that foreign research (especially American) is often superior in content and form, and that the CMRC model, while worthy, has not done enough to address research gaps, in part because of a low awareness of the CMRC as well as limited distribution of the research it helps to fund. There was a universal desire among interviewees for more and better media research conducted in Canada.

Interviewees said they wanted more research in five areas: 1) changing media usage in a digital era; 2) media ownership and consolidation; 3) new media forms; 4) media and diversity; and 5) media policy. What follows is a taste of the qualitative results of interviews in the five areas, with more information available in the full report on the CMRC website.

Media usage

Almost all the media practitioners interviewed identified as their first priority research on the changing technological characteristics of media, and to a lesser extent their changing role in society. Interviewees raised a wide variety of specific research areas relating to the implications of these changes in terms of how media content is produced, e.g., changes to the nature of journalistic work, how media are consumed, and issues around interactivity. For instance, the CBC's Tony Burman said he was "obsessed with the whole multimedia approach to information. . . . People now want their information on their own terms, whenever they choose, in their own format." He added,

We are in a period where it's likely that the changes over the next five years in terms of the way media is consumed and produced will tower over the past 50 years. We are in a period of intense change. Anything that enables academics and media professionals to better understand the undercurrents propelling those changes would be welcome. (Tony

Burman, Editor-in-Chief, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Interview, May 23, 2006)

Claude Galipeau, then vice-president of new media for Alliance Atlantis, decried the lack of accurate and comprehensive measurement of consumers' use of various new media platforms.

I would definitely want to see a very, very good analysis of Canadians' consumption patterns on the Internet across the day. What are they doing? And what do they think about the Internet? So it should be quantitative set top box side [measurement] as well as qualitative. . . . And I would like to know what is the elasticity on that preference scale of Canadian versus American news sources on the Internet. (Claude Galipeau, Vice-President, Digital Media, Alliance Atlantis, Interview, May 24, 2006)

It was clear in the course of conducting interviews that research priorities in this area tend to be somewhat self-interested; not surprisingly, media leaders are concerned with the changing needs of their audiences and re-tooling their own work culture to meet them:

I am not primarily interested in sociological or cultural research on the media. My primary interest is about research on advertising; on finding out how advertising campaigns are successful and on how advertising works. . . . Media engagement is thus becoming an up-and-coming currency that is applicable to all media. It is still poorly defined, but represents an attempt to develop a metric of the relationships that binds a set of eyeballs to different media supports. It can be measured in terms of time spent, but also in terms of access. (Pierre Arthur, Director, Research and Marketing, *La Presse*, interview, June 27, 2006)

Media ownership

The lack of sustained year-over-year research into changing media ownership patterns arose as a key concern among many of the interviewees—less among the private media leaders, but almost universally among public broadcasters, policy-makers, professional researchers, and academics. Not surprisingly, given the high level of media ownership changes in the Canadian setting, concerns were raised about the impact of consolidation on the range and diversity of points of view and sources of information available to citizens.

He who pays calls the shots. Unless you have the situation that we have with the public broadcaster, where the law says that there is a separation [between common ownership and separate editorial voices]. Otherwise there is no such thing, in fact. There is no such thing as a Chinese wall [among different components of a media corporation]. And the reality is that with more concentration of journalistic, of media, and journalistic organizations, we have a very serious problem on our hands. (Robert Rabinovitch, President, CBC, interview, July 20, 2006)

Interviewees felt there had been little research in Canada to measure this and other outcomes of consolidation. Even among those who feel the ownership

question is “overblown” (some media managers), the lack of sustained analysis of impacts in the Canadian setting was identified as a research need. In particular, journalistic leaders in Canada had questions about the impact of consolidation on the perceived commercialization of journalism and the declining quality of journalism, which they felt has not been tracked adequately on a historical or regional basis.

In the Québec context, the geographical centralization of information is called *la montréalisation de l'information*. Another paradox is that whereas there are more modes of communication of information with the development of new media, the number of journalists has not risen. The multiplication of sources of information does not mean access to more varied information, but the circulation of the same kind of information through different platforms [translation]. (Claude Robillard, President, Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec, Interview, June 27, 2006)

Critical scholars who have an a priori concern about corporate constraints on media expression tend to agree with media leaders that the media ownership debate occurs in a vacuum, lacking evidence to ground arguments or potential policy creation either way.

Who is really trying to measure it [consolidation and its impact] in an empirical way? I honestly don't know of anyone. And in fact, I think there's some good qualitative stuff going on, but it seems to me that there is a bit of a gap between sort of sketching out the structural determinants of corporate concentration and convergence, and more really focused work on, okay, what are these big corporations actually doing, how are they performing? And honestly I can't think of anyone who does that. (Mike Gasher, Associate Professor, Concordia University, interview, June 13, 2006)

New media forms

A related priority identified was the impact of the changing forms of content in relation to new media. The concern arose about how new media forms affect established communication practices, in particular in the journalistic profession, e.g., working models of balanced reporting.

The professional status of journalists has changed with the democratization of communication on the Web so that journalists do not have a monopoly over public information anymore. Blogging, for instance, puts into question the status of journalists. If anybody can report on information, what makes journalists different from bloggers? What does being a journalist mean in a changing media environment? . . . Furthermore, journalists themselves are changing their habits. Journalistic blogs are instances when journalists try to get closer to a public mode of expression, but this also changes their work habits in terms of what they can write about [translation]. (Robillard, 2006)

However, the interest is not simply about the changing nature of journalism. It includes whole new ways in which communities represent themselves in media and new media outside the confines of traditional news reporting.

How are NGOs using the Internet to mobilize people and basically to build a stronger civic society? Again, there is a lot of individual expression and a lot of interest into people who sit in their homes and go search the Internet for this and that. But it hasn't clicked yet with the efforts and with the actual forms used by specific organizations, how they can tap into this interest, how can they create possible things and possible tools for mobilization of civic initiatives and participation via the Internet. (Maria Bakardjieva, Associate Professor, University of Calgary, interview, June 9, 2006)

Media diversity

Among interviewees the issue of cultural diversity and the media in a changing Canadian society was raised repeatedly. How different communities engage with media is a crucial concern, as well as the media role in reflecting and defining the nature of a changing Canadian society in terms of race, ethnicity, and citizenship. Some interviewees wished to supplement and update the small amount of existing empirical work on the diversity of content in the media, especially in broadcasting and on new digital platforms. Others were interested in mapping how different subgroups use the changing media.

So there's a huge question about what does multiculturalism mean, what is integration—is multiculturalism a stepping-stone to integration and hybridization or is it a platform for the war of civilizations? We don't know. And then the question would be, what role will the communication media play in either exacerbating cultural cleavages leading to conflict, potentially violent conflict, or do the communications media act as a very powerful medium, maybe equal to the system of education, in promoting not just tolerance of difference but respect for difference, even savouring the difference to the point of aspiration of hybridization? (Michael Adams, President, Environics Research, interview, June 8, 2006)

Media policy

Most interviewees were concerned with the inconsistent application of empirically based research to current media and cultural policy debates. Some were concerned about the paucity of evidence about regulation in a new media context, while others were concerned with what they saw as the failure of imagination to apply new models of Canadian public control over consolidated and global new media.

It seems to me our media landscape is obviously changing, and everybody understands that. But getting a better understanding of how the regulatory environment may also need to change, not so much as a mechanism to allow some of the conventional broadcasters to just go hog-wild without any kind of regulatory oversight or requirements, but rather how we can best support the sort of user-generated content and the amazing flourishing in the marketplace that we're seeing in the sense of individual creativity. And how we can best support that through various policy mechanisms. (Michael Geist, Canada Research Chair of Internet and E-commerce Law, University of Ottawa, interview, June 15, 2006)

I've been involved in other initiatives aimed at trying to increase the level of research in telecommunications and broadcasting. This would be the type of policy research that I think is lacking hugely in this country. We lack the depth in think-tanks that you would find in the U.S. We have pockets of researchers but we don't have a developed network of organizations that can exchange ideas, get together, talk about things. (Sheridan Scott, Commissioner of Competition, interview, June 20, 2006)

Research gaps

Interviewees were also asked to identify the key gaps in media research in the current Canadian setting. Most of those interviewed described those gaps as very wide indeed, both in content and form.

In terms of content, the concern was generally that in all of these five priority areas, there has not been the quantity of research required on an ongoing basis. This is related to the fact that most of the non-academic leaders involved with media were unaware of any media research available from academics or indeed from other sources in Canada that would answer their key questions. Insofar as there was media research available, it tended to be foreign, especially American.

I would say, broad scope, anything that gives us specifically Canadian-based media consumption habits would be a huge step forward. Right now virtually all of the good media consumption research pieces that exist out there are more American based. And certainly we've used those in terms of informing ourselves in terms of media strategy and pieces like that. (Dana Robbins, Editor-in-Chief, *Hamilton Spectator*; interview, June 6, 2006)

In terms of form, one of the main complaints expressed by interviewees regarding media research in Canada was the lack of longitudinal analysis. This makes tracking and thus planning difficult for those working in the media and those concerned with studying or making recommendations about media systems in Canada.

I think there's a need for longer-term research. We don't have a very good record for that, for longitudinal research in our country. (Catherine Murray, Associate Professor, Simon Fraser University, interview, June 13, 2006)

Academics and some others were concerned that a sufficient body of empirical work in media research had not yet been developed that would allow thorough analyses, especially within key subsectors. They relate this to a relatively small community of scholars in university positions and to a lack of ongoing funding to undertake serious media scholarship in Canada. This is coupled with concerns that bodies like the CRTC and Statistics Canada have not had adequate research resources in the area and have been poorly coordinated in gathering and analyzing basic media data.

The most important thing we need to be doing is tracking Canadians' usage of those new technologies. . . . People might have conducted private research that they're not sharing and of course distributors have

their own figures of subscribers using different kinds of technology, but I have not seen anything public or even available for subscription, which I would regard as very definitive in that respect. So when you start from there, we don't even know what baseline is. We should have been doing this in 1998 or 2000 and then every couple of years since then, but we don't even have a baseline for the penetration of digital technology and television, so it's hard to sort of track the changes. (David Keeble, Senior Vice-President, Policy and Regulatory Affairs, Canadian Association of Broadcasters, interview, June 20, 2006)

Other interviewees echoed the concern that much of the key study of media tends to be proprietary in Canada, owned either by media companies or government departments. This significantly limits the accessibility of key findings.

I'm concerned that everything done by private companies is so proprietary and the government isn't taking much of a role, right [in communication research related to public policy]. So in that context it would be interesting for someone to fill that gap. (Sue Gardner, Director, CBC.ca, interview, May 24, 2006)

Interviewees voiced concerns about the accessibility of the media research. Access seemed to be limited both by its general availability to the public but also in terms of the tone and style of academic scholarship, i.e., impenetrable or irrelevant to media and policy practitioners. This leads to a central concern that arises from interviewees about the specific role of disseminating information from the media research projects actually conducted in Canada. The CMRC as a model was praised by interviewees (those who were aware of it) but was criticized for not providing an effective digital clearing-house for much of its research.

Conclusion

Through the literature review and, more emphatically, among the interviewees, there is a rare degree of unanimity among scholars and media practitioners on the increasing media research gaps in this country. This unanimity explodes the stereotype of an academic-industry divide, at least in this area. All agree: Canada risks falling well back in the international media research field and the larger Canadian project that some have linked historically to its communicative experiments. At a transformative moment of digital communication developments, Canadians are becoming less rather than more adept at discussing and understanding the dynamic role of mediated communication in our personal and social lives—its technologies, its forms, its practices especially in regard to issues of media consolidation, political and economic impacts, cultural expression, and notions of identity and community. Even on the main issue—media consolidation—where interviewees sometimes expressed dichotomized views on pitfalls and benefits, there was an uncommon unity that the lack of indigenous, sustained, and well-supported evidence-based research not only limits the intellectual rigour of the task, but blocks the start of useful conversations.

More generally, the lack of sustained media research also means that where once Canadians were at the forefront of discussion and experimentation, Canadian media and policy leaders are making decisions without adequate evi-

dence. Alternatively, they struggle in the absence of Canadian evidence to apply foreign data to an understanding of the changing Canadian experience. On the computer screens where media practitioners and researchers increasingly search for insight and evidence, Canadian content for media research, like Canadian films on theatre screens across the country, pushes the 2 to 3% level in a good year, i.e., sustained evidence-based Canadian media research is virtually absent.

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Notes

1. A literature review was conducted by this author as part of this research project to determine the range of scholarly material that was available in Canada and internationally in three key areas of applied media research, especially as they were related to the three streams in which the CMRC is engaged: News/journalism, Internet, and broadcasting, with various subtopics. The Canadian scholarly references represented 2 to 3% in each of these areas. American publications dominated, with over half the publications. The results of the literature review are summarized on the CMRC website, www.cmrcrcm.ca.
2. The CMRC model is not the only possible approach to funding research. Many media leaders and others in the Québec context speak very highly of the Laval University-based Centre d'études sur les médias (CEM), which has a range of partnerships with the CMRC. And there are other university-based applied media research groups across the country doing excellent work.
3. The research project sponsored by the CMRC reflected a very conscious desire to "take the pulse" of what the CMRC board sees as its broad audience and to engage a range of people in the conversation about mediated communication in Canada: critical and applied scholars, media and journalistic leaders, policy managers, analysts and researchers, professional (often public opinion) researchers as well as the great number of Canadians who professionally move in and among these various roles in the course of their daily lives and careers. From the perspective of sampling interviewees this is risky—do these people even speak the same language? The evidence gathered suggests that they do have some of the same basic concerns about the evidence-based insights upon which they understand and make decisions. Equally important, the range of people interviewed is true to the goal of investigating whether and how once can create a conversation on media issues that goes beyond academic insights primarily for academe or applied research for practitioners' eyes only.
4. The sample of interviewees was broadly representative of media and research industries as well as related government and academic sectors. Of the 34 interviewees approximately one-third (11) were francophones. Media leaders included those representing national, daily, and regional newspapers; public and private broadcasters (including conventional, specialty, and pay); journalistic leaders (management and labour); and new media managers. Smaller and larger professional research firms were contacted, including the major audience research organization operating in English- and French-language markets, BBM.

The key government departments implicated in media policy and research were drawn upon with key interviewees from the CRTC, Department of Canadian Heritage, Competition Bureau, and the Culture Statistics Branch of Statistics Canada. Among the academics interviewed, a broad range of regional viewpoints (six different universities in five provinces) and disciplines (Communication Studies, Journalism, Law, and Economics) were represented.

In-depth interviews were conducted based on a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher in conjunction with the CMRC board. Interviews were conducted in English and French (based on interviewee preference) and usually lasted 30-45 minutes. The researcher adhered to the Tri-Council Policy Statement on “Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans,” with informed consent statements made available to and signed by interviewees. A full list of those interviewed is available on the CMRC website, at www.cmrc CRM.ca.

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Appendix: List of Interviewees**Media**

Tony Burman (A)	CBC, Toronto	23-May-06
Guy Fournier (F)	Radio-Canada, Montréal	13-Jul-06
Claude Galipeau (A)	Alliance-Atlantis, Toronto	24-May-06
Sue Gardner (A)	CBC, Toronto	24-May-06
Ken Goldstein (A)	Communications Management Inc., Winnipeg	14-Jun-06
Edward Greenspon (A)	The Globe and Mail, Toronto	21-Jun-06
David Keeble (A)	Canadian Association of Broadcasters, Ottawa	20-Jun-06
Pierre Lampron (F)	Quebecor, Montréal	30-Aug-06
Robert Pritchard (A)	Toronto Star, Toronto	21-Jun-06
Robert Rabinovitch (A)	CBC, Toronto	20-Jul-06
Dana Robbins (A)	The Hamilton Spectator, Hamilton	06-Jun-06
Claude Robillard (F)	Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec, Montréal	27-Jun-06
Pierre Roy (F)	Astral, Montréal	30-Aug-06
Sylvie Shapiro (F)	Astral, Montréal	30-Aug-06

Professional Public Opinion Research

Michael Adams (A)	Envionics, Toronto	08-Jun-06
Pierre Arthur (F)	LaPresse, Montréal	27-Jun-06
Pierre Delagrave (F)	Cossette Communications, Montreal	29-Jun-06
Robert Langlois (F)	BBM, Montréal	12-Jun-06
Jim MacLeod (A)	BBM, Toronto	15-Jun-06
Kasia Seydegart (A)	Erin Research, Erin, Ontario	29-May-06
George Spears (A)	Erin Research, Erin, Ontario	29-May-06
Kaan Yigit (A)	Solutions Research Group, Toronto	29-May-06

Regulatory/Policy

Michel Arpin (F)	CRTC, Ottawa	01-Jun-06
Charles Dalfen (A)	CRTC, Ottawa	21-Jun-06
Alan Zimmerman (A)	Canadian Heritage, Ottawa	20-Jun-06
Marla Waltman Daschko (A)	Statistics Canada, Ottawa	21-Jun-06
Sheridan Scott (A)	Competition Bureau, Ottawa	20-Jun-06

Academic

Maria Bakardjieva (A)	University of Calgary, Calgary	09-Jun-06
Pierre C. Belanger (F)	University of Ottawa, Ottawa	21-Jun-06
Mike Gasher (A)	Concordia University, Montréal	13-Jun-06
Michael Geist (A)	University of Ottawa, Ottawa	15-Jun-06
Pierre Trudel (F)	University of Montreal, Montréal	30-Aug-06
Catherine Murray (A)	Simon Fraser University, Vancouver	13-Jun-06
Dwayne Winseck (A)	Carleton University, Ottawa	28-Jun-06

TOTAL: 34 [23 Anglophone (A); 11 Francophone (F)]

