Listening to Labour: Mainstream Media, Talk Radio, and the 2005 B.C. Teachers Strike

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Abstract: In October 2005, B.C. public school teachers conducted a two-and-a-half-week illegal strike that attracted widespread support from the public. This article conducts a comparative content and discourse analysis of the news coverage provided by the leading provincial outlets in three media types: The Vancouver Sun (newspaper), the News Hour on Global (television), and The Bill Good Show (political talk radio). The Bill Good Show’s open-ended, participatory format, coupled with the host’s commitment to journalistic norms of objectivity and diversity, allowed teachers to play an active and significant role in shaping discussion and debate about the strike. Conversely, coverage by The Vancouver Sun and the News Hour, both owned by CanWest Global, largely failed to reflect public opinion and instead reproduced the ideological bias of conventional strike scripts.

Keywords: News media; Talk radio; British Columbia; Labour

Résumé: En octobre 2005, les enseignants des écoles publiques de la Colombie-Britannique ont mené une grève illégale de deux semaines et demie qui a suscité l’appui du public. Cet article effectue une analyse de contenu et de discours comparative de la couverture médiatique fournie par des représentants importants de trois formes de média dans la province : le Vancouver Sun (quotidien), le News Hour on Global (journal télévisé) et le Bill Good Show (radio parlée politique). Le format ouvert et interactif de ce dernier, doublé d’un engagement de la part de l’animateur envers les normes journalistiques d’objectivité et de diversité, a permis aux enseignants de jouer un rôle actif et important dans les discussions et débats entourant la grève. En revanche, la couverture du Sun et du News Hour, tous les deux propriétés de CanWest Global, n’a pas reflété l’opinion publique, reproduisant plutôt des partis pris idéologiques entourant les discours conventionnels sur les grèves.

Mots clés : Médias d’actualité; Radio parlée; Colombie-Britannique; Main-d’œuvre

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“It says here”: Strikes, media, and the public good

Writing in the 1920s, Upton Sinclair observed that “whenever it comes to a ‘showdown’ between labor and capital, the press is openly or secretly for capital” (cited in Bekken, 2005, p. 72). Over the past four decades, critical analyses of media coverage of labour issues confirm that little appears to have changed (e.g., Bekken, 2005; Douglas, 1986; Hackett, 1983; Kumar, 2007; Martin, 2004; Puette, 1992). Summarizing the stark findings of this research, Jon Bekken notes that “every empirical study of labour coverage has concluded that it is generally superficial and hostile, and increasingly rare” (2005, p. 73). The combination of minimal attention to workplace issues and conditions with occasional sensationalistic reporting on labour disputes has been toxic for unions and their members: stripped of the broader social, economic, and political factors that set them in motion, strikes appear as needlessly disruptive and confrontational events in which a select group of (privileged) workers holds the public hostage in order to serve their own particular needs and interests (e.g., Goldman & Rajagopal, 1991; Knight, 1982).

As Christopher Martin (2004) documents in extensive detail, these patterns of coverage (and omission) only grew worse in the 1990s, when the “consumer frame” truly achieved hegemony and anything that interrupted or limited the freedom of individuals to buy goods and services as easily and cheaply as possible was construed as destructive of the public good. Yet as Deepa Kumar (2007) and Martin have also argued, there are rare instances, such as the 1997 strike by United Parcel Services employees, in which workers can challenge this script and secure more balanced media coverage that looks beyond the disruptive effects of a strike or protest to explore the conditions behind it or why those engaged in it believe their actions are justified. The legitimacy of the news media in a democracy and, more importantly perhaps, the marketability of its products depend upon the perception—however illusory or ideological in nature—that the news both serves and reflects the needs, desires, and values of its audience. Thus when the public supports a strike, it can become more difficult for the news media to recycle one-dimensional strike scripts in which any signs of disruption and inconvenience automatically mean that the strike is “bad news” (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976).

In October 2005, 40,000 B.C. teachers walked off the job for just over two weeks in an illegal strike after the Liberal provincial government imposed a contract upon them for the second time in three years. Teachers were especially frustrated with the government’s refusal to negotiate on the classroom conditions and bargaining rights issues that rank-and-file teachers had identified as key priorities. Despite an aggressive campaign by the provincial government attacking teachers for breaking the law, a B.C. Supreme Court (BCSC) decision finding their union in contempt, and the fact that 600,000 students were kept out of school, the public sided with the teachers throughout the dispute. The British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) also received strong support from members of other unions, especially the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and, in the strike’s second week, from the B.C. Federation of Labour (BCFL), in the form of sympathy strikes and protest rallies, including an October 17 shutdown of the provincial capital.
Faced with escalating labour action, strengthening public support, and unity on the picket lines, the government was forced to bring in mediator Vince Ready to facilitate talks. On Friday, October 21, Ready offered non-binding recommendations for settlement (which fell considerably short of what teachers had asked for, especially in the area of learning conditions), and the BCSC imposed a $500,000 fine on the BCTF for failing to obey previous court orders. Seemingly under significant pressure from the BCFL to end the strike, the BCTF held a weekend vote in which their members voted to return to their classrooms. For a variety of reasons, the strike presents an ideal opportunity to further explore questions raised by Kumar, Martin, and others about the intersection between labour conflict and the public good in the news.

First, it received extensive coverage in the regional media, generating an average of six items per day (excluding letters to the editor) in both the leading daily and on the most popular provincial newscast. The strike was featured every day on the former’s front page and as the latter’s top story on all but two evenings. In terms of public attention, political significance, and social impact, it was the most significant labour action in Western Canada since “Operation Solidarity,” when a coalition of B.C. labour unions and social movements had opposed budget cutbacks and neo-liberal social policies in the early 1980s (Magnusson et al., 1984).

Second, the struggle of each side to articulate their own particular interests as universal or “popular” (Laclau, 1977) played a far more central role in this dispute than in most labour conflicts. Such struggles often feature far more prominently in public sector disputes, especially those with a high media profile: as the employer, governments rationalize hardline positions as reflective of their democratic obligation to represent the interests of all citizens, usually conceived of as taxpayers; for their part, unions try to associate the terms and conditions of their employment with the quality of services available to the public. In this case, the fight of both parties to position themselves as guardians of the public good was further intensified by additional factors.

On the one hand, the fact that the teachers were clearly breaking the law combined with the strike’s extraordinarily disruptive effects on the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of families supplied powerful rhetorical ammunition to those who argued that the action was not only hurting the public but also in clear violation of the core values of a democratic society based on the rule of law. The teachers countered by invoking the ideas and symbols of civil disobedience to position their action as an ethically justified protest against the punitive and fundamentally unjust law used to impose the contract. They also offered a compelling defence of the strike as a desperate bid to resist neo-liberal cutbacks to the public education system and reassert the right of public sector workers to engage in free and fair collective bargaining. Further complicating matters for the Liberals was a healthy budgetary surplus, which effectively deprived them of the economistic frame that federal and provincial governments had used with such success in the previous decade to justify cutbacks in the civil service (Knight, 2001). How were these struggles to define different visions of the public interest reflected (or marginalized) in the news media?
Third, recent Canadian scholarship in this area has tended to focus upon Ontario (e.g., Knight, 1998, 2001; Kozolanka, 2006, 2007), with very little attention paid to Western Canada. Given the draconian nature of the “common sense” revolution launched by Mike Harris’s Conservative Party in 1995 and the fierce resistance to it mounted by labour and social justice groups, this emphasis upon Central Canada is not entirely surprising. However, as David Camfield (2006) persuasively argues in his analysis of the 2004 Hospital Employees’ Union strike, this pattern of neo-liberal restructuring and working-class opposition was equally as pervasive in British Columbia after Gordon Campbell’s Liberals took office in a landslide victory in 2001.

From a media studies perspective, the lack of recent critical scholarship on the state of the B.C. news media is especially surprising given how the corporate media landscape has evolved in the province over recent years. In 2000, CanWest Global, a transnational media conglomerate controlled by the Asper family of Winnipeg, completed a blockbuster deal with Conrad Black’s Hollinger corporation in which it acquired ownership of both of the city’s daily newspapers, The Vancouver Sun and The Province, as well as a chain of 12 Lower Mainland community papers. CanWest currently exercises a stranglehold over local news, controlling over 90% of paid daily circulation in Vancouver as well as a 70% share of the supper hour news with the News Hour on Global (Gutstein, 2005). According to one report, the city now has “the most highly-concentrated media ownership of any major city in a G7 country” (Edge, 2007, p. 163).

Media convergence and consolidation have devastated newsrooms with budget cuts and layoffs as well as varying degrees of editorial pressure to conform to the business-friendly philosophy of owners and managers (Edge, 2007; McChesney, 2004; Skinner et al., 2005). Over the past 15 years, for example, The Vancouver Sun and The Province have experienced staff reductions of 50% (Sandborn, 2007). This has taken an especially damaging toll on the labour beat, leaving many reporters with little understanding of and even less empathy for the issues and concerns of unions and their members (Costain, 2005; Serrin, 2002). Many critics, including former Sun staff, also allege an editorial bias at CanWest media outlets that favour the provincial Liberals and a pro-business and anti-union political agenda (Edge, 2007).

Although Sun reporters aren’t given direct orders to write glowing reports about the provincial government, they say they are discouraged from writing claims made by government critics. There has also been a conscious decision from the paper’s management to ignore government protesters, even when their actions are top stories for national news agencies. More often than not, The Sun is not a voice of the community, but a mouthpiece for the provincial government. (Condon, 2007)

The 2005 strike which pitted the Liberals against the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, their allies in the labour movement, and a public largely sympathetic to the teachers offers a perfect case in which to assess these criticisms. As the leaders in their respective fields and the two most influential sources of news in British Columbia, the News Hour on Global and The Vancouver Sun set the agenda for political news in the province. Did their coverage of the strike reflect public sup-
port by providing a more sympathetic and/or balanced treatment of the teachers’ action? Or did the news media invoke the traditional strike frame of disruption and thereby bolster the government’s case against the BCTF and its members?

Virtually all critical scholarship that examines the representation of labour in the news focuses upon newspapers, magazines, and broadcast news. The medium of talk radio, which has emerged in the past two decades as one of the most important venues for the formation and expression of political opinion, has been entirely ignored. This absence is especially surprising given arguments from many in the labour movement that the most effective education and communication campaigns are those that allow workers to tell their own stories in their own words (Glass, 2003). Notwithstanding the openly conservative ideological bias of many talk radio shows (Barker, 2002; Brock, 2004; Jamieson & Capella 2008), this medium is more accommodating to the expression of personal experience (and the political opinions that emerge from it) than any other in the news genre (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994).

In British Columbia, the leading program of this type is *The Bill Good Show*, which is broadcast Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to noon on CKNW (BBM Canada, 2005). Much like the *News Hour* and *The Sun*, the program devoted considerable attention to the strike: the topic occupied more than half of the show’s 3½ hours for 8 of 13 broadcasts, including three days in which it was the only item discussed. How did this coverage compare with that provided by print and broadcast media? In particular, how did the flexible, participatory format of talk radio affect the range, diversity, and depth of issues that were considered? Did it privilege a “consumer” frame in which individuals railed against the union and its allies for causing disruption and inconvenience? Or did it provide an opportunity for teachers, parents, and students to speak about their experiences and interests with respect to public education?

**Strike stories: Crowded classrooms, suffering students, and the lawbreakers who love them**

As noted above, the two-and-a-half-week strike (October 6 to 24) received significant coverage in each of the three outlets: in total, the *News Hour* broadcast 96 stories (with an average duration of just under 2½ minutes); *The Vancouver Sun* printed 152 items (including 47 news reports; 23 columns, editorials, and op-eds; and 61 letters); and *The Bill Good Show* aired 131 segments (averaging close to 7 minutes in length). The content of each item was coded according to four broad types of variables: the type, size, and placement of the item; the primary topic; the presence of 23 key facts and arguments relevant to the dispute; and the type of source, guest, and caller that appeared, including their orientation to the strike. All stories were coded by the author, and an intracoder reliability test was conducted that verified the consistency and accuracy of the results. Although the different formats of these sources limit the extent to which one can statistically compare these three venues, a comparative quantitative description does provide a broad sense of which themes and issues each one prioritized as well as the type and disposition of the sources utilized. This overview lays the foundations for the discursive analysis to follow in which dominant themes in the *News Hour* and *The Bill Good Show* are explored at greater length.
Topics, sources, and callers: A study in contrasts

Not surprisingly, all three venues prioritized the issue of law and order, which involved both reporting upon the legal issues at play in the dispute as well as the philosophical and political debate about whether teachers were ethically justified in breaking the law to defend public education and their right to collective bargaining. The struggle between the teachers and the government to frame their own perspective as reflective of the public interest was clearly dependent upon how the causes and consequences of the strike were portrayed. Why were the teachers out on strike and what were the effects of such an action likely to be?

As Table 1 shows, we find there is a striking divergence in the answers provided by The Vancouver Sun and the News Hour on the one hand, and The Bill Good Show on the other. In devoting more stories (and time) to the disruptive effects of the strike than any other topic, Global stuck very closely with a conventional strike script, which interpellated the audience as self-interested consumers whose primary interest and concern in such disputes is (or ought to be) how their everyday lives have been negatively affected: 12 of 17 newscasts featured at least one such report. Once other labour groups joined the fight against the government, the News Hour turned its attention to their supporting actions and associated negative effects. In both types of stories, unions appeared directly responsible for the infliction of hardship and inconvenience upon ordinary people in order to achieve their own objectives. Beyond an occasional nominal mention, the core teacher demand for improvements to classroom conditions was almost entirely ignored by the News Hour.

At first glance, The Sun’s coverage appears somewhat better in terms of balancing the three key themes of law and order, classroom conditions, and disruptive effects, especially when the letters page is figured into the data. However, the picture becomes much bleaker when the numbers are broken down by the type of article: while 14 of the 16 items on disruption were penned by the paper’s reporters (and thus sanctioned as “hard” news), not a single one of the classroom conditions pieces was written by a journalist. In other words, neither The Sun nor the News Hour chose to provide any substantive coverage at all to the most significant issue of the strike and, more importantly, the one that explained why so many teachers felt justified—even obligated in terms of safeguarding the learning conditions of their students—in breaking the law.

In contrast, The Bill Good Show devoted extensive air time to discussing and debating the issue of classroom conditions, especially concerns about growing class sizes and declining resources for children with special needs. Unlike traditional news venues or some host-driven talk radio programs with limited opportunities for audience participation, The Bill Good Show’s political agenda is strongly influenced by what the callers want to discuss. Given the extensive focus upon disruption in the other two venues, one might have expected the show to have been flooded with calls from angry, frustrated parents venting about the inconvenience they were suffering. Yet only 4 segments, just over 3% of the total, dealt primarily with this topic, and all of them during the latter half of the strike. At one point, the host even explicitly set aside time to discuss the
strike in these terms, urging people to call him with stories about how they were coping with the disruption, yet those who phoned insisted upon raising other issues, such as the state of education in the province or who was to blame for the impasse. Equally as significant as the time given to classroom conditions was the clustering of these segments in the strike’s early days, when the two sides were engaged in such a fierce competition to frame the dispute in their own terms: 18 of the 24 segments on this topic aired in the first four days, with 8 on the first day alone.

Table 1: Primary topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The News Hour (w/out letters)</th>
<th>The Sun (w/ letters)</th>
<th>The Sun (w/ letters)</th>
<th>The Bill Good Show</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>law and order</td>
<td>17 (17.7%)</td>
<td>22 (24.2%)</td>
<td>31 (20.4%)</td>
<td>25 (19.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classroom conditions</td>
<td>1 (1.0%)</td>
<td>8 (8.8%)</td>
<td>18 (11.8%)</td>
<td>24 (18.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher salaries/benefits</td>
<td>3 (3.1%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (1.3%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>role of labour unions</td>
<td>15 (15.6%)</td>
<td>10 (11.0%)</td>
<td>10 (6.6%)</td>
<td>5 (3.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flawed negotiating process</td>
<td>1 (1.0%)</td>
<td>8 (8.8%)</td>
<td>13 (8.6%)</td>
<td>13 (9.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effects and disruption to parents/students</td>
<td>21 (21.9%)</td>
<td>16 (17.6%)</td>
<td>20 (13.2%)</td>
<td>4 (3.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unity/support of teachers for BCTF/strike</td>
<td>6 (6.3%)</td>
<td>1 (1.1%)</td>
<td>1 (0.7%)</td>
<td>7 (5.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education funding/ administration</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (1.1%)</td>
<td>1 (0.7%)</td>
<td>2 (1.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ready mediation/ recommendations</td>
<td>9 (9.4%)</td>
<td>7 (7.7%)</td>
<td>7 (4.6%)</td>
<td>6 (4.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teachers’ vote to accept back to school</td>
<td>3 (3.1%)</td>
<td>1 (1.1%)</td>
<td>1 (0.7%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>back to school</td>
<td>3 (3.1%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critical of BCTF/Sims</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11 (7.2%)</td>
<td>3 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critical of Liberals</td>
<td>2 (2.1%)</td>
<td>4 (4.4%)</td>
<td>16 (10.5%)</td>
<td>2 (1.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no central theme</td>
<td>3 (3.1%)</td>
<td>3 (3.3%)</td>
<td>6 (3.9%)</td>
<td>40 (30.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>12 (12.5%)</td>
<td>10 (11.0%)</td>
<td>15 (9.9%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>96 (100%)</td>
<td>91 (100%)</td>
<td>152 (100%)</td>
<td>13 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages refer to units or “items” (not time or word count). Percentages calculated on the basis of time and word counts do not differ substantially from those based on units.

In order to dig a little deeper into the substance of the coverage, each item was also coded for references to 23 key facts and arguments (Table 2). This variable did not measure the extent to which an issue was discussed but simply whether or not it was mentioned. Given the differences in format between the three media, caution must be exercised in using these results for comparative purposes: a segment on The Bill Good Show, for instance, is close to three times the average length of a Global news story, and thus one can reasonably expect it to include a greater quantity of information.

Even taking these differences into account, though, some significant patterns confirm the trends noted above. First, references to class size and composition issues occurred in over half of The Bill Good Show segments, a significantly
higher proportion than the other two. Second, given the absence of accurate, reliable statistics on classroom conditions (the provincial Ministry of Education did not collect this data), anecdotal evidence from personal experience was the principal source of information on this issue for the public and, more importantly perhaps, counterbalanced stories about frustrated parents and students who were inconvenienced by the strike. It was an essential component in the teachers’ argu-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>News Hour</th>
<th>The Sun (w/out letters)</th>
<th>Bill Good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberals breaking the law</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government now has a financial surplus</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other public sector unions accept zero wage increase</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCTF political campaign against Liberals in election</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal story supporting the strike</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal story opposing the strike</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public support for the strike and/or the BCTF</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public frustration with the strike and/or the BCTF</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support of rank-and-file teachers for the BCTF</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disunity between rank-and-file teachers and the BCTF</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support of other labour unions for the BCTF</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disunity between other labour unions and the BCTF</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arguments in support of the strike as civil disobedience</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>26.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condemnation of the strike as breaking the law</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arguments in favour of sympathy strikes by organized labour</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arguments against sympathy strikes by organized labour</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of the BCTF</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>46.2%</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for the BCTF (excluding rank and file teachers)</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of the Liberal government</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for the Liberal government</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom conditions: class size</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
<td>50.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom conditions: class composition</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>50.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom conditions: other</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages refer to the percent of items that mention the specific topic/issue.
ment that short-term disruption that resolved problems of overcrowding and underfunding was preferable to the much longer-term and far more disruptive effects of allowing those problems to grow worse.

Based on its preference for official sources, *The Sun* gave little attention to any personal stories (though they obviously featured prominently on the letters page). Global’s extensive reliance upon the disruptive frame clearly privileged the experiences of those suffering because of the teachers’ action (or encouraged those it featured to conceptualize the strike in terms of its negative, short-term effects). Conversely, over one-fifth of *The Bill Good Show*’s segments included at least one personal comment in support of the action, which most commonly took the form of teachers, parents, or students describing their experiences in the education system.

Third, the *News Hour* and *The Sun* were each twice as likely to feature arguments condemning the strike as an illegal action as compared to those supporting the action as a legitimate form of civil disobedience. Good’s program was far more balanced in terms of presenting both arguments. Lastly, mentions for most topics—15 of 23—were highest on talk radio, suggesting that its audience was consistently exposed to a greater range of facts, arguments, and background information, supporting both positions, than in the other venues. Much of the animosity between the BCTF and the Liberals, for instance, was symptomatic of the toxic political relationship between them that had evolved over the past four years, especially during the bitterly contested provincial election campaign of May 2005. Good’s program was far more likely to refer to this historical context than the other two. Even more remarkable is the divergence in the content in terms of covering the Liberals’ record of breaking collective agreements with other unions and its subsequent censuring by the International Labour Organization (ILO) of the United Nations: close to one-third of Good’s segments included reference to these important details, as compared to only 11% of *Sun* stories and a minuscule 3% of *News Hour* items.

Looking at how sources appeared in each venue (Table 3), the most notable difference was *The Sun*’s much greater reliance upon official, institutional representatives and spokespeople as opposed to the predominance of parents, teachers, and students on the *News Hour* and *The Bill Good Show*. Over half of those featured on Global’s newscasts were from these three groups, and they constituted close to one-third of Good’s guests (and the majority of those who called the program), but they were cited in only 16% of *Sun* items. However, the prominence of teachers on Global did not translate into an opportunity for them to speak to the issues they considered important: they rarely served as “definers,” who set the story’s theme and suggest how the audience is to make sense of it (Hackett & Gruneau, 2000, p. 195). Instead of addressing learning conditions, for instance, teachers were more commonly called upon to justify their actions as lawbreakers or apologize for disrupting the lives of parents and students. Similarly, students on Global appeared nearly 40 times in stories about disruption but only twice in the single item on classroom conditions. Along with parents, they were overwhelmingly portrayed as victims of the strike, helpless to do much other than complain about how their lives were being negatively affected.
Conversely, the much looser constraints on talk radio in terms of time and narrative consistency allowed parents, teachers, and students much greater freedom and autonomy to speak about the issues that mattered to them, thereby modelling a far more active form of deliberative citizenship in which individuals have the ability and the desire to form their own opinions about political issues rather than supply sound bites for the scripts assembled by others. Political pundits and columnists were the most frequent source type on The Bill Good Show, and their principal role was to supply critical analysis, background, and political commentary. Again, fewer time constraints as well as the chance to engage in often spirited debates with callers meant these segments often featured a much deeper and more far-ranging analysis of the causes, conduct, and possible consequences of the strike than occurred in the other two venues.

Consistent with the dominant paradigm of objectivity in which balance is secured through the citation of competing sources (Hackett & Zhao, 1998), The Sun leaned heavily on union representatives, provincial politicians, and school board and other institutional spokespersons to frame, define, and describe the strike and its implications. This helps explain the paper’s greater attention to issues such as the legal wrangling between the parties in the court, including the decision by the B.C. Supreme Court to hold the BCTF in contempt of court for its actions, the strike’s effects on different organizations, and official statements from power-

Table 3: Sources utilized during strike media coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Type</th>
<th>News Hour</th>
<th>The Sun (w/out letters)</th>
<th>Bill Good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BCTF representative</td>
<td>22 (7.8%)</td>
<td>41 (13.3%)</td>
<td>8 (4.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal politician</td>
<td>25 (8.8%)</td>
<td>39 (12.7%)</td>
<td>8 (4.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCPSEA representative</td>
<td>9 (3.2%)</td>
<td>16 (5.2%)</td>
<td>7 (4.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDP politician</td>
<td>2 (0.7%)</td>
<td>13 (4.2%)</td>
<td>1 (0.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>schoolboard representative/trustee</td>
<td>8 (2.8%)</td>
<td>10 (3.2%)</td>
<td>12 (6.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school administrator</td>
<td>1 (0.4%)</td>
<td>7 (2.3%)</td>
<td>5 (2.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>representative from other union (eg. CUPE, BCFL)</td>
<td>27 (9.5%)</td>
<td>41 (13.3%)</td>
<td>1 (0.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pundit/columnist</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (0.3%)</td>
<td>48 (27.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>academic/expert</td>
<td>7 (2.5%)</td>
<td>20 (6.5%)</td>
<td>13 (7.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parent</td>
<td>41 (14.5%)</td>
<td>13 (4.2%)</td>
<td>23 (13.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher</td>
<td>53 (18.7%)</td>
<td>24 (7.8%)</td>
<td>35 (19.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student</td>
<td>56 (19.8%)</td>
<td>12 (3.9%)</td>
<td>4 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other education system stakeholder</td>
<td>7 (2.5%)</td>
<td>11 (3.6%)</td>
<td>10 (5.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC Court judge/official</td>
<td>2 (0.7%)</td>
<td>10 (3.2%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mediator Vince Ready</td>
<td>1 (0.4%)</td>
<td>5 (1.6%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>institutional/corporate spokesperson</td>
<td>10 (3.5%)</td>
<td>29 (9.4%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>person-on-the-street</td>
<td>4 (1.4%)</td>
<td>8 (2.6%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>8 (2.8%)</td>
<td>8 (2.6%)</td>
<td>2 (1.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>283</strong></td>
<td><strong>308</strong></td>
<td><strong>177</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note*: Numbers refer to guest appearances within one unit. Multiple guests of the same type may be present within one unit and are counted multiple times.
ful provincial political actors, including the B.C. Federation of Labour and corporate leaders in the province. Commentary from academics or other experts did not feature prominently in any of the three venues, and when these sources did appear it was to address topics such as law and order, the dysfunctional bargaining process, and the role of mediation in labour conflict: at no time was an academic or other expert called upon to discuss or analyze educational policy or changing learning conditions in the province’s classrooms.

In terms of orientation to the strike (Table 4), sources in favour of the teachers’ action moderately outnumbered its critics in all of the venues. The higher numbers for the News Hour and The Sun are, in large part, a consequence of two patterns: first, teachers and members of other unions were often used as sources; and, second, they were virtually unanimous in supporting the strike. In The Sun, for instance, BCTF representatives, teachers, and other union members accounted for more than 80% of pro-strike sources. However, when it came to parents and students, the two groups most closely associated with the broader “public interest,” the numbers are quite different. The balance between students explicitly taking a position in favour of the strike and those directly opposing it was pretty even on Global, at 11 to 9. But the ratio shifts decisively once we factor in the 30 students who spoke about the hardship the strike had imposed without directly blaming either party. In terms of the parents who appeared on the News Hour, 23 described the action and its effects in negative terms, with only 5 speaking in support.

Table 4: Source orientation to the strike

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>News Hour</th>
<th>The Sun (w/out letters)</th>
<th>Bill Good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>source supports the strike</td>
<td>113 (39.9%)</td>
<td>127 (41.2%)</td>
<td>53 (29.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>source broadly supports education change but opposes the strike</td>
<td>7 (2.5%)</td>
<td>13 (4.2%)</td>
<td>9 (5.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>source opposes the strike</td>
<td>58 (20.5%)</td>
<td>77 (25.0%)</td>
<td>34 (19.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>source disrupted by the strike but no explicit opinion in favour or opposed to it</td>
<td>46 (16.3%)</td>
<td>29 (9.4%)</td>
<td>3 (1.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>source has mixed opinion on the strike</td>
<td>5 (1.8%)</td>
<td>2 (6.5%)</td>
<td>17 (9.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>source is neutral or cannot identify his/her opinion</td>
<td>54 (19.1%)</td>
<td>60 (19.5%)</td>
<td>61 (34.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both as guests and callers, teachers also furnished the majority of strike-supportive voices on The Bill Good Show. Similarly, the majority of parents opposed the action, though not in the same unbalanced proportions as on Global. More interesting, though, was the fact that guests and callers on Bill Good’s program were far less likely to speak only to the strike’s disruptive effects without also taking a position on the action itself. Although this may be partially explained by the high priority given to disruption stories on the News Hour and in The Sun, it also speaks to the very different role that sources play in talk radio as compared to print and broadcast news. In the latter case, they largely speak through quotes and
sound bites, which are selected and edited for their relevance to a news item’s principal theme as determined by the news organization. Unconstrained by such limits, callers and guests on Good’s program often moved beyond the largely passive role of a victim or witness describing the strike’s impact into the more active (and political) position of explaining why it had happened, whether or not it was a good or necessary action, and how it should be resolved.

It is also worth noting that the pro-teacher disposition of the majority of The Sun’s sources (as well as the public at large) was not at all reflected in the paper’s editorials, columns, or op-eds. Of 12 columns pertaining to the strike, 1 was supportive, 4 were critical, and 7 were of mixed opinion; 2 of The Sun’s 5 editorials were critical and 3 were of mixed opinion (though decidedly more critical of the BCTF than of the government); and 2 of the 5 guest op-eds were critical, 2 were mixed, and only 1 was supportive. In sum, less than 10% of the commentary and opinion published by The Sun favoured the strike, while over one-third was clearly opposed. Far more representative of public opinion were letters to the editor, with 28 supporting the union’s actions and 18 opposed.

Overall, the somewhat surprising picture that emerges from this content analysis is that talk radio, a medium commonly disparaged for its right-wing ideological bias and superficial treatment of politics, offered more substantive, balanced, and diverse coverage of the strike than its counterparts in print and broadcast news. The Bill Good Show devoted considerable attention to the principal strike issue for the teachers, namely, the deterioration of classroom conditions through increasing class sizes and fewer resources for special needs students. It also regularly touched upon a wide variety of background issues and provided its listeners access to a diverse range of opinions, arguments, and analysis that located consideration of the strike’s illegality and disruptive effects in a broader social, political, and historical context. While the host showed a slight bias against the strike (tending to disagree more with its supporters and agree more with its critics), the show’s open-ended format allowed those who favoured the action ample opportunities to make their case.

In contrast, the most noticeable characteristic of The Sun and the News Hour’s coverage was an almost complete failure to investigate or even report upon classroom conditions in any depth, a shocking omission given the critical significance of this issue to the conflict. Instead, both outlets privileged questions of law and order and prioritized documenting the strike’s disruptive effects on students and parents, a news agenda that fit very well with the communicative strategy of the Liberal government. In order to flesh out these patterns with illustrative examples and a more qualitative treatment of key themes, let us move on to a critical discursive analysis of the News Hour and The Bill Good Show.³

Speaking of the public: the News Hour on Global

Ten days into the dispute (and on the same day that a massive rally in favour of the teachers occurred in Victoria), News Hour anchor Tony Parsons introduced a story on the continuing support of British Columbians for the teachers as follows: “As the strike enters its second full week, you might be surprised to learn that the B.C. public is still siding with the teachers” (“Public Opinion,” October 17). ⁴ Why would Global’s audience—which is presumably somewhat reflective of the
general public—be surprised to find out what it thinks? And yet, in the context of
the station’s unequivocal portrayal of the strike as bad for students and parents,
its claims that the union lacked the support of its members, and its spectacular
failure to spend any time investigating why so many teachers felt they had no
choice but to engage in an illegal action, Parson’s comment makes perfect sense.
If one’s only source of information about the strike had been the News Hour, it
would have been impossible to conclude that teachers were not only defending
their own interests but also those of the broader public. Story after story about
canceled sports events, anxious high school seniors worried about final exams,
and stressed out parents wondering how to care for their kids reinforced a con-
ceptual and normative divide with teachers on one side and the public on the
other. The bald logic at play here was that people simply do not support strikes,
especially when they “drag on” for more than a couple of days: disruption and
inconvenience invariably trump whatever sympathy or solidarity people might
have felt for the teachers.

Consider, for example, the single story by Global that did focus upon class-
room conditions and which was nominally organized around two pro-teacher ral-
lies in Vancouver, one conducted by students and the second by parents. “Recent
opinion polls have shown that a majority of parents support the teachers in the dis-
pute,” observed Parsons, “but how are parents feeling right now as the strike drags
on with no end in sight?” Clearly, Parson’s reasoning suggests, support for the
teachers will likely dissipate in the face of widespread inconvenience for parents.
Growing public frustration and anger will (and ought to) be properly directed at
the teachers and their union; the possibility that it might also be focused upon an
intransigent Liberal government is never considered. The piece opens with brief
clips of student demonstrators talking about overcrowding and funding cuts,
which are followed by the reporter openly challenging the significance of the
protests, reminding the viewer that many people do not agree with the students.

While these students support their teachers, there are many parents who
feel differently. We’ve been getting emails from around the province say-
ing that teachers need to stop holding children hostage, they need to stop
breaking the law and they need to go back into the classroom before
more valuable school days are lost. And people we’ve stopped on the
street—parents—they feel the same way.

A few brief “streeters” are featured in which passers-by express mild skepti-
cism about the strike. The story ends by briefly covering the second rally by par-
ents and, again, the suggestion is made that once the reality of the situation sets
in, support for the teachers is likely to diminish. “Even though their children have
missed a week of class, many parents sympathize with the teachers, at least for
now” (“Student Rally,” October 14, emphasis added). Polls and protest rallies are
both important instruments through which the values, beliefs, and opinions of the
public are expressed, and when they converge in support of a particular view,
such as favouring the teachers, the media have an obligation to represent the pub-
lic accordingly. In this case, the News Hour did almost exactly the opposite, con-
structing and framing the story so as to minimize the significance of public
support for the teachers.
Given the *de facto* positioning of journalists and anchors as representatives of the public, the statements, arguments, and questions they present on-camera furnish powerful conceptual and affective cues as to how the audience itself ought to think and feel about the issues, actors, and events at hand. Such cues also help establish the hegemony of certain views, values, and perspectives as widespread, normal, and reflective of common sense. Thus when anchors and reporters modelled an aggressive, confrontational stance toward teachers or their union, the underlying message was that the public ought to treat them (and their arguments) in the same skeptical fashion.

Noteworthy in this regard are several occasions in which *News Hour* reporters confronted teachers and BCTF officials about the democratic and ethical legitimacy of their actions. On the first day of the strike, for instance, a story entitled “A Bad Example?” wondered how teachers could possibly justify their actions. As teachers and students explained the historical, ethical, and legal foundations for civil disobedience in Canada, they were challenged with questions that echoed government talking points on the topic almost exactly. “If it’s illegal does that mean that . . . you can just . . . pick and choose what laws you like and what laws you don’t like, and you can break them?” (“A Bad Example?” October 7). A few nights later, after the B.C. Supreme Court found the BCTF in contempt, teachers were once again interrogated about the ethics of their actions. “Are you at all worried . . . that as a role model you’re setting the wrong example for the kids by breaking the law?” (“SCBC Ruling,” October 12). Most egregiously perhaps, as the strike was drawing to a close and the BCTF were preparing to vote on the Ready recommendations, a reporter asked, “Was breaking the law worth it? You don’t feel that you’ve been used by the BCTF?” (“On the Picket Line,” October 21). Teachers are given a fair opportunity to respond, but the fact that these difficult and often hostile questions were reserved almost entirely for one side suggests that it is the words and actions of teachers that must be carefully scrutinized and challenged.

Interviewed on *The Bill Good Show* as a regular participant in a segment on B.C. politics, Keith Baldrey, the senior legislative reporter for Global, acknowledged the central importance of classroom conditions to the strike, claiming that “everybody’s newscast has had the same stories with teachers . . . explaining exactly what’s going on in the classrooms” (October 14, 10-11am). As the preceding analysis has shown, this was clearly not the case. In the absence of such stories, the strike and those positioned as bearing primary responsibility for it were consistently and unequivocally portrayed as standing in opposition to the public interest. Within the constraints of a 10- or 15-second clip, students, teachers, and other union members were given the chance to make their case that the strike’s ultimate objective was to increase and protect educational resources for B.C. classrooms, a fundamental public good that outweighed the short-term hardship caused by the disruption. But this perspective was never sanctioned by the *News Hour* in the form of stories exploring it at any greater length. Moreover, it was consistently drowned out by a sea of stories about cancelled athletic and student leadership events, overstretched families struggling to cope with emergency child care costs and arrangements, and high school seniors worried about missed
opportunities for university scholarships: night after night, the News Hour offered graphic, compelling, and often highly emotional evidence about how the strike was taking a serious toll on the public. Quite simply the interests, values, and beliefs of the public were consistently framed as logically and categorically distinct from and opposed to those of the BCTF and its allies, ignoring and trivializing powerful evidence to the contrary from polls, rallies, and support for teachers on the picket lines. A couple of stories bucked this overall trend, but they were few and far between, rare exceptions in a field of coverage in which anchors and reporters championed the interests of a public seemingly more concerned with disruption, inconvenience, and the rule of law than with deteriorating learning conditions and the erosion of collective bargaining rights.

**Talking to teachers: The Bill Good Show**

On the first morning of the strike, Bill Good remarked on the fact that guests Vaughn Palmer, political columnist for The Vancouver Sun, and the aforementioned Baldrey were uncharacteristically quiet. “It’s not a bad day for listening,” replied Palmer, reflecting upon what he had heard: “When you’re talking about class size or the problem of special needs children, you’re not talking about a pay raise for teachers, you’re talking about putting resources in the system.” In the space of a few words, the context in which to understand and assess the motives of those on strike shifted dramatically from personal gain to the learning conditions of students, from self to public interest. Palmer did not discount this logic as a BCTF public relations strategy but instead attributed it to the process of listening to teachers explain their motives by describing conditions within their classrooms. Moments later, “Brad” called:

I am a teacher in Coquitlam. And I’d like to talk briefly about the composition of my [grade three] class. . . . I have 20 children, 11 ESL children. . . . I have one boy who is reading . . . at a grade 9.2 level . . . and I have another gal who doesn’t know her ABCs, she can make the letters up to H and that’s it. She doesn’t recognize numbers after 11. . . . And this girl has no extra help in my classroom. She does go until 11:30 each day to the resource room and then she’s back in my class. . . . I’m fighting to get help for her.

The caller went on to explain why he believed the analogy between the civil rights movement and the current strike was justified. After thanking him, Good urged other teachers to call in with their own thoughts, experiences, and opinions: “We have the benefit of hearing directly from teachers and I hope we will until this is resolved because it is important that people hear what teachers’ working conditions are like, how they have evolved and why they feel under such stress and pressure” (October 7, 10-11am).

Beyond simply offering individual teachers, among others, an opportunity to express their views and share their experiences, this dynamic established a basic familiarity with these views and experiences as an essential prerequisite for developing a rational, coherent, and informed opinion on the strike. To be informed, in other words, required one to acknowledge, listen to, and learn from the views of the workers. Such an approach represented a clear departure from
conventional strike epistemologies, as mediated and scripted by the news media, in which even minimal levels of inconvenience and disruption justify the public’s normative dismissal of strikes as unethical and unjustified, irrespective of the reasoning and experience of workers.

Both as guests and as callers, teachers were framed as the crucial source of knowledge about the state of education in British Columbia. For a variety of reasons, including the lack of official data on class size and composition and the government’s reputation for ruthless cost-cutting in its first term, the Liberals had little credibility with the public on issues of education policy: the government’s positioning of the Labour Minister, not the Minister of Education, as their principal spokesperson on the strike only reinforced this perception. Thus the BCTF and, more importantly, its members were the only group that could credibly address the issue of learning conditions in provincial classrooms. As we’ve seen, The Sun and the News Hour largely ignored the stories of teachers on this topic, nominally reporting that class size and composition were important to the union but never investigating their concerns in any depth. In contrast, Good’s program assembled several panels to investigate these topics in the strike’s first week, bringing teachers and parents together to discuss their own experiences in the school system and reflect upon how they might help the public understand the root causes of the dispute.

On the first day of the strike, for example, Good and his callers spent a full hour engaging four teachers on issues ranging from the effect of larger class sizes on learning conditions and interaction with students to the experience of integrating special needs children over the past decade to why they believed an illegal strike was their only option to advocate for their students. “You don’t strike me as a lawbreaker,” Good noted in conversation with an elementary school teacher. “You don’t strike me as being incredibly militant or over the top political . . . but you feel you have no choice?” “I think it is really important that I do stand up and say no on this issue,” she explained, because it’s not about me, it’s about the kids. It’s about improving the working and learning conditions and historically . . . the only time that improvements to education have come about is when teachers have stood up and said no . . . and the feeling of frustration comes from being pushed into a situation where I feel I have to stand up and do this because I have no other way to say no, enough is enough.

Expressed in concert with personal stories about their classroom experiences, arguments such as this offered compelling accounts of why “law-abiding citizens” were willing to take the extraordinary step of collectively engaging in an illegal strike. Equally as important, they countered the government’s claim that the strike reflected the political ambitions of militant BCTF leaders, not the will of its members. On the following Monday, the program devoted an hour to a parents panel, with two supporting the strike and two opposed. And the day after that, another full hour was spent discussing class composition with two special needs teachers, including the president of the Special Education Association of B.C. and two parents of children with special needs. Segments such as these provided extensive detail and significant insight into the working and learning con-
ditions in the classroom as well as a diverse range of opinion about why those conditions had deteriorated and how they might be improved.

Beyond offering a forum in which classroom experience could be shared, *The Bill Good Show* excelled as a space in which facts, observations, and historical details were forged into competing political arguments. From academic experts and partisan political commentators to the teachers, parents, and others who called in, the program modelled a form of deliberative, democratic discourse that was virtually non-existent in the other two venues. Not unexpectedly, the quality of debate and analysis was highly uneven: sophisticated, insightful, and complex interventions mingled with comments that can charitably be described as simplistic, clichéd, and often misleading. Yet the overall effect was the creation of a public sphere in which individuals with varying levels of knowledge and rhetorical ability were not only encouraged to develop and share their opinions and experiences with others but, more importantly perhaps, to reflect upon, defend, and even modify their views as they listened to, learned from, and engaged with the arguments of others. Where partisan rhetoric in the news media is usually served up in the form of serialized talking points—the proverbial menu of “he said, she said”—the presentation of fact and opinion on Good’s program was often subject to a rigorous, though usually fair, deconstruction by those with differing views. Thus the spectacular interpellation of the audience as a passive consumer of information was challenged by a deliberative discursive practice that called upon listeners to actively engage with and assess the different arguments on the table.

Similar to the other venues, the topic of law and order received more attention than any other topic on *The Bill Good Show*. But rather than dwell upon the procedural aspects of the legal process or simply attack teachers for setting a bad example, the program delved into these issues from a variety of different angles. First, it consistently problematized the distinction between the teachers as law-breakers and the government as impartial custodians of the rule of law. The Liberals’ blatant disregard for legal contracts, binding arbitration, court decisions, and international treaties received a great deal of attention on the show, not simply as points of fact but as a means of challenging the common sense equation of law and justice as well as drawing attention to the use of legislation as an instrument of power. The following quote from a caller is lengthy but worth reproducing in its entirety to illustrate the often complex arguments that appeared in this context:

I wanted to reframe the question a little bit because we’ve been talking a lot about whether it is ethical for teachers to go out on an illegal strike. But I think for me the issue is really is it ethical for the government to use legislation to really just pre-empt any negotiation at all and just say “No, we’re not going to talk, we’re just going to make it illegal and you’re just going to have to accept that.” For me that is a profoundly unethical thing for them to have done to us, to say “We won’t even talk to you.” And I think that is really the reason that you see so much frustration from teachers, is that we’ve really just been shut out and shut down. And it’s not like they had a reasonable settlement that we turned our nose up and said it wasn’t good enough. They had no offer, no
options, “just accept what you’re given.” And I don’t know too many people who would accept that from their employer no matter who it is. It is a fundamental right to be able to sit down with your employer (October 13, 11am-noon)

Expressed in an accessible yet sophisticated and critical manner, explanations such as these challenged simplistic arguments that teachers had to obey the law like everyone else.

Second, guests and callers spent considerable time unpacking the deeper connections between civil disobedience and democracy. One of the teachers who joined Good on the strike’s first day, for instance, reminded listeners that obedience is only one element of the rule of law in a democracy. “The second part of the equation is that everyone is to be treated fairly by the law. And where you see unfairness you have to take steps to remedy it” (October 7, 9-10am). A few days later, Good brought in a series of expert commentators to address civil disobedience in greater detail. A board member of the B.C. Civil Liberties Association explained that the democratic objective of civil disobedience was to shift important political issues out of the legal system and return them to the public sphere for deliberation by their fellow citizens (October 13, 11am-noon). Mark Thompson, a professor of industrial relations, ventured that “democracy isn’t only about elections. . . . It also entails respect for minority rights and this government has imposed more contracts by legislation than any government I know of in Canadian history . . . in the order of nine times. I think that’s part of the frustration we’re seeing” (October 18, 10-11am).

The devolution of public speech into sound bites and talking points, endlessly repeated by politicians and others trained to stay “on message,” makes it more important than ever for the news media to investigate the veracity, meaning, and intent of the discursive shorthand that now passes for political dialogue. Shifting coverage of this issue beyond repetition of abstract pieties about the rule of law or rhetorical invocations of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, The Bill Good Show supplied its audience with information, analysis, and debate that ranged widely over diverse conceptual and political terrain. Above all, it invigorated a deeply political understanding of the core issues and principles of the dispute as contestable, subject to public deliberation and discussion in which the quality of any particular claim or argument was dependent upon sound reasoning, supporting evidence, and an expansive understanding of political and historical context.

**Class dismissed? Concluding thoughts**

Based on the preceding analysis of the News Hour and The Vancouver Sun, the mainstream news media in Vancouver appeared remarkably immune to the democratic logic of accountability that Kumar (2007) and Martin (2004) have discerned in corporate media coverage of labour disputes. Instead of accommodating and reflecting the public’s solidarity with the teachers based on a shared interest in a well-funded public education system, both news organizations maintained their focus upon the strike’s illegality and its disruptive effects. They remained committed to the ideological public of conventional strike scripts to whom the only thing that really matters is how, when, and to what extent they
are inconvenienced. When that public failed to appear spontaneously, the News Hour desperately tried to create it through endless news reports about suffering students and frustrated parents while, for the most part, avoiding stories that might have highlighted the common interest of teachers and the public in a stable, well-funded public education system.

For its part, The Sun’s editorial position consistently favoured the government by insisting that the only way to resolve the crisis was for teachers to return to work and accept the Liberals’ offer to discuss their concerns through multi-stakeholder consultations. Given the strategic mishandling of the strike by the Liberals, it was very difficult to position the government as the custodian of the public’s interests. Accordingly, the media initially slotted judge Madam Justice Brenda Brown (and the principle of the rule of law) into this role: her contempt ruling, for instance, was widely praised and portrayed as giving the BCTF an honourable means of backing down. In the dispute’s final days, however, Brown’s place was, somewhat surprisingly, taken by Jim Sinclair and the BCFL. As lead organizer and spokesperson for a wave of sympathy strikes by “big labour” to bolster the BCTF, Sinclair was initially (and predictably) framed as a “union boss” mobilizing his authoritarian control over workers to attack a democratically elected government.

In the strike’s latter days, though, the BCFL head was celebrated for his eminently pragmatic schooling of the teachers in the realpolitik of labour relations, which decreed that they had no choice but to accept a settlement that fell far short of their objectives. In the end, then, media coverage in this case largely followed the ideological scripting of strikes as newsworthy to the public only insofar as they cause disruption and inconvenience.

Explaining the failure (and unwillingness) of the News Hour and The Sun to reflect public solidarity with the teachers lies beyond the scope of this paper. One might, however, reasonably conclude that the monopoly CanWest Global holds over regional news was a major factor in allowing the News Hour and The Sun to be so remarkably unresponsive and unaccountable to the public that they ostensibly serve. In the absence of a real choice between different media organizations, news agencies are easily able to insulate themselves from pressure to better reflect the diverse views and opinions of citizens.

“Workers,” argues Fred Glass, “are the best experts at their own lives” and thus, “the first rule of an organizing model for labor communications should be simply to trust workers” (2003, p. 7). He goes on to develop an alternative approach to labour education and communications that abandons the tools, techniques, and priorities of commercial public relations in favour of giving workers the opportunity to tell their own stories in their own words. It is an approach that the BCTF seems to have taken to heart. Following the gutting of their collective agreement in 2002, the teachers fought back with a multi-faceted campaign to raise public awareness about the deleterious effects of the government’s policies upon the provincial education system, including extensive efforts to mobilize rank-and-file teachers to speak about the worsening conditions in their classrooms. Moira MacKenzie, director of Communications and Campaigns for the BCTF, explained that the union “deliberately and clearly chose classroom teacher voices . . . and really wanted to make sure that their stories and their experiences,
the learning conditions that they had in their classrooms, were really a big feature” of outreach campaigns (personal communication, January 12, 2007).

The first target for such campaigns were often teachers themselves, who worried about being perceived poorly by the public. Peter Owens, also a BCTF communications officer, recalls focus groups with teachers in 2004 in which they expressed a reluctance to speak out on these issues, preferring that the BCTF make the case for them. Accordingly, the union had to convince members that they “were the most credible source of information about public education . . . and that the public did want to hear from them because that’s who they believed the most . . . about the neighbourhood school” (Peter Owens, Assistant Director, Communications and Campaigns, BCTF, personal communication, January 12, 2007). Strong, personal connections between children, parents, and teachers was a crucial factor in explaining the strength and longevity of public support for the strike, especially in the face of such hostile media coverage. Once teachers had the confidence to share their concerns directly with parents (and the union secured their legal right to do so by overcoming strong opposition from the Liberals, Ministry of Education bureaucrats, and some school boards), they were no longer so dependent upon the news media to communicate their concerns to the public.

However, personal communication is not the only way through which the experience, expertise, and knowledge of workers may be shared. New and/or alternative media are commonly fetishized as the only means of circumventing the ideological filters of the corporate media system. The most interesting finding of this study, however, is how talk radio can become a site of contestation and struggle over the meaning of labour actions, especially those which spill across the borders that usually separate the worlds of work and politics. “The big benefit of having our teachers out on picket lines with cellphones,” explained Owens, “was that they could listen to radio talk shows and phone in and tell their story, and they did over and over and over again. It was a big advantage: the nature of the talk shows changed” (personal communication, January 12, 2007).

Often associated with conservative political “shock jocks” such as Rush Limbaugh, talk radio is easy to dismiss as a biased, confrontational, and largely right-wing medium with little credibility as a serious venue for political dialogue. As this study has demonstrated, however, programs such as The Bill Good Show that have preserved a commitment to traditional journalistic conventions such as objectivity and balance can accommodate a diverse range of views on political topics. Previous news media scholarship (e.g., Hackett & Zhao, 1998) has rightly criticized the ideological role that the “regime of objectivity” has often played in disguising the systematic and structural bias, which often characterizes the production of news. Yet, considered in the specific context of talk radio, this regime can also have the salutary effect of allowing this medium to serve as a venue in which a diverse range of views, opinions, and experiences can be shared, discussed, and debated. The growing dominance of this medium by personalities who unabashedly celebrate their allegiance to conservative ideological values and perspectives, and thereby condemn commitments to objectivity and balance as antiquated and irrelevant, increasingly make such conversations unlikely (Jamieson & Capella, 2008).
However, those programs and hosts that buck this trend, in part by maintaining a commitment to diversity, balance, and a desire to learn from different types of guests and callers, can serve as sites for deliberative, democratic discourse. In such cases, irrespective of the political orientation of the host (and most do lean to the right), the genre’s heavy reliance upon “ordinary” people and preference for opinions that are grounded in “real world” experience make it a surprisingly hospitable venue for workers to speak as experts about their own experiences. This is precisely what the teachers did, allowing them to carve out a public sphere in which the strike was analyzed, discussed, and debated in far greater detail and with a much broader range of perspectives than one found in the leading daily newspaper or television newscast.

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Notes
1. Due to technical problems capturing the News Hour and The Bill Good Show, there are small gaps in the sample: the Global newscasts on Sunday, October 9, and Monday, October 10, are missing, as is a one-hour segment on The Bill Good Show that aired on October 17 from 10:00 to 11:00 a.m. Although these absences are unfortunate, they represent comparatively minor gaps and, therefore, do not compromise the validity of the quantitative or qualitative findings.

2. Several months after the initial coding was completed, 10% of the items from each source were recoded. All variables were above 80% in terms of consistency with the earlier results. The testing showed 92.6% consistency for the 30 variables in The Vancouver Sun coding schematic, 93.7% for the News Hour, and 91.9% for The Bill Good Show. These results are well within the range of acceptability for media content analysis.

3. Unfortunately, due to considerations of space, a similar discussion of The Sun has not been included. Given the relative absence of academic treatments of regional broadcast news media in British Columbia (as compared to several good studies that focus upon print media such as The Sun—e.g., Hackett & Gruneau, 2000), I have given priority to the News Hour and The Bill Good Show in the latter half of this article.

4. Citations from the News Hour broadcasts take the form of a story title and date.

5. Citations from The Bill Good Show take the form of the date and hour in which the segment was originally broadcast.

References


