



# THE NEWS **BALANCE** REPORT

Study conducted for CBC by ERIN Research Inc.



The News Balance Report, 2010

Study conducted and report written for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

by

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# Executive summary

## *Purpose*

In fulfilling its mandate of accountability and transparency, the CBC has conducted periodic analyses of its news content, the first being commissioned in 1977. The current research is the most comprehensive and detailed examination to date.

## *Method*

The News Balance Report by ERIN Research Inc. is based on a 25-week sample of television, radio and Internet news recorded between October 26, 2009 and May 2, 2010. While its focus is CBC news, both network and local/regional, it includes competing news outlets on each platform as a basis for comparison: the CTV National News, Global National, Canada.com, theglobeandmail.com, and five Corus and Rogers all-news stations. The study is, by any standard, comprehensive. It covers approximately 6,000 news stories on radio, 7,500 stories on television, and 2,400 stories on the Internet.

The information reported here derives from a content analysis of this sample – an objective description of the people and issues in the news that follows a pre-defined set of codes. Research methods are fully described in Appendix A, along with results of tests for the accuracy of coding. Reliability is high, giving assurance that the quantitative results are sound.

## Panel of Advisors

Five international media experts were selected as a Panel of Advisors to the Project. Their role is to provide methodological and interpretative advice to ERIN Research Inc.'s Directors who retain the final say. The five represent a spectrum of broad expertise and experience in mass media:

**Sarah Carter** is CBS News Johannesburg Bureau Chief responsible for the network's coverage of Africa. She was a visiting professor at University of British Columbia.

**Fred Fletcher** is Professor Emeritus, Communication Studies and Political Science at York University, Toronto. He was the founding President of the Canadian Media Research Consortium (2001-2007) and now serves as Past President.

**Hanson Hosein** is Director of the Master of Communication in Digital Media at the University of Washington in Seattle.

**Mark Jurkowitz** is Associate Director, Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ).

**Holli Semetko** is Vice Provost for International Affairs and Director of Office of International Affairs (OIA), Emory University. From 1995-2003 Dr. Semetko was professor and chair of Audience and Public Opinion Research, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

## Assessment of fairness and balance

In some instances, demographic data provide external yardsticks that are useful in assessing balance. One might expect that the amount of coverage for a province or territory would be roughly in proportion to its population (although major events such as the 2010 Olympic Games could skew this pattern to some extent). In other instances, numerical results do not, by themselves, indicate balance or lack thereof. How should the available time be divided among politics, social issues, business, crime and so on? In the end, fairness and balance are judgments: they are informed by the facts at hand, but they also rest on beliefs and values. Often, there are competing positions on how news might be presented, and different observers may legitimately disagree. This report presents factual information about news content and provides context for assessing fairness and balance, but the final determination as to whether the “right” balance has been achieved lies with the reader.

## Numeric yardsticks

In several areas, population statistics serve as guidelines (not iron-clad criteria) for assessing balance.

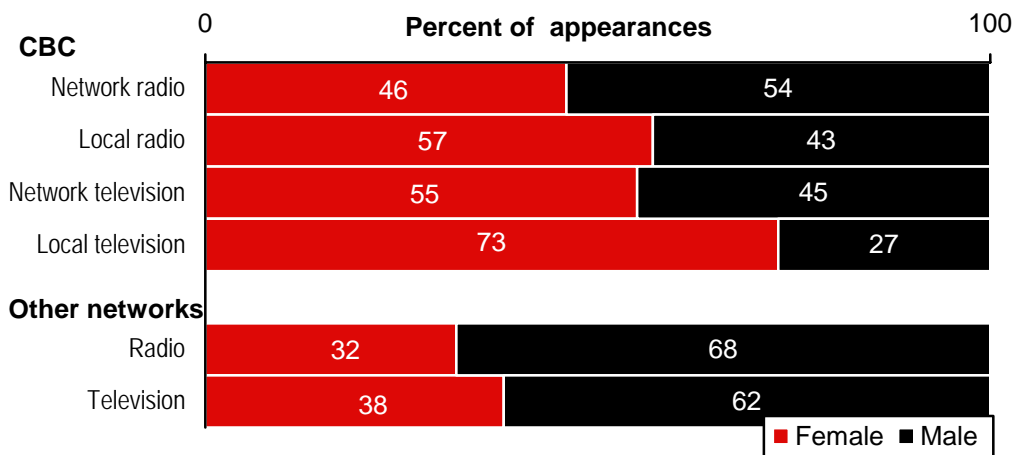
### Gender of on-air staff

The CBC’s “Guidelines on Sex-Role Portrayal” call for a “realistic balance” in the presence of women and men in programming. In the past, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) has allowed a split of up to 40:60 its standard.

Figure 1 shows the gender of anchors and hosts in several areas of CBC programming. The proportion of female anchors/hosts on CBC radio (network and local together) is 49% and on CBC television is 63%. Combining radio and television platforms, 57% of CBC news anchors/program hosts are female. On the competing networks, the overall proportion of female anchors and hosts is 35%.

Approximately one-half of the stories on radio and television have a reporter. On CBC, 47% of reporters are female and on the competing networks 35% are female.

**Figure 1. Gender of anchors and program hosts: CBC and other news sources**



## Gender of people in the news

Analyses of CBC's The National have been done periodically since 1977. At that time, 7% of those who were interviewed as news subjects were women. The proportion rose steadily to 25% in 1992. In the current study, 28% of those interviewed were women. The CTV National News and Global National are each within 1% of this figure – the differences are not statistically significant.

Combining the three CBC news platforms, 26% of news subjects are women<sup>1</sup>. Considering just Canadian news stories, the proportion of women increases slightly, to 29% for all CBC news (and 27% on the competing programs).

Since one-half of the Canadian population is female, then all things being equal, one might expect that 50% of the people who appear in the news should be female. However, a large proportion of the news, nearly one-seventh, is stories about crimes, police investigations and trials. Ninety percent of those accused or convicted are male, and this gives a male skew to the overall proportion of news subjects.

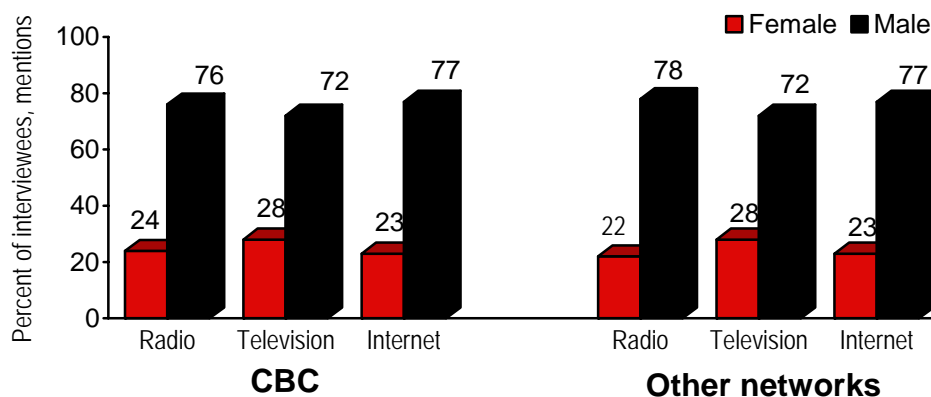
Likewise, most politicians are male, including the leaders of the four federal parties and all ten provincial premiers. Political news therefore features a large proportion of men: 83% in the results to date.

Analysts/experts is an important category of news subjects, and it has shown some growth, from around 15% female in the 1980s to 24% today.

In the business and professional sector, 23% of news subjects are female, and for individual citizens the figure is 44%.

Figure 2 shows the proportions of women and men who are either interviewed or mentioned in the news. Results are similar for CBC and the competing networks.

**Figure 2. Gender of people in the news interviews and mentions: CBC and other sources**



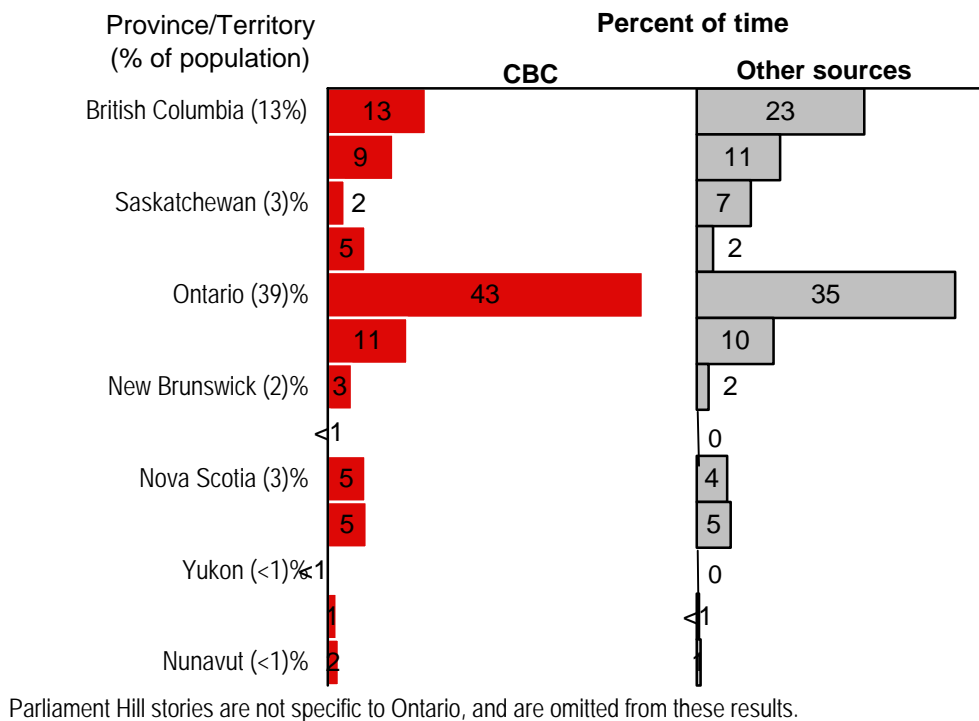
<sup>1</sup> The historical information on The National does not separate Canadian and foreign news. The current data does, and the overall numbers of women in Canadian news are slightly greater than in foreign news. The comparison of these two data sets is therefore not exact; the historical figures should be adjusted upward by approximately 2-3%.

## Locations in Canadian news stories

The CBC's mandate is to represent all regions of the country. Local newscasts focus strongly on the region in which they are produced, so the relevant question concerns the level of regional representation in network newscasts. Put simply, is the proportion of Canadian news from each province/territory close to the population of that region? (Foreign coverage is omitted from this calculation.)

With one major exception, the proportion of news about each province/territory corresponds to the population of that region (Figure 3). Quebec goes against this rule, with 23% of the population but just 11% of CBC network news. (Competing English-language news sources are similar to CBC.) This is a long-standing pattern. Historically, CBC news has reflected the geography of English-speaking Canada, while Radio-Canada news has focused on Francophone Canada.

**Figure 3. Canadian locations in network news on radio, television and Internet: CBC and the other sources (2010 Olympics are omitted)**

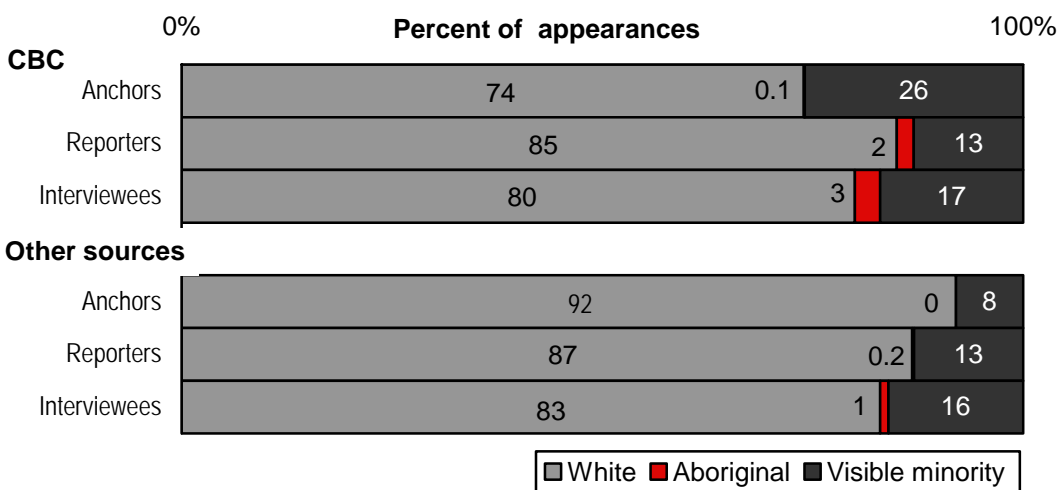


Note: For three weeks in February, the nation focused on the 2010 Olympics in BC. One-third of network news was about the Games. If coverage of the Games were added into Figure 3, the BC proportion would jump from the present 13% to 26%, and the proportion for each other province would decline slightly. Including the Olympics for the other sources increases the BC proportion from 23% to 34%.

## Representation of visible minorities and Aboriginal people

Visible minorities constitute 17% of the population and Aboriginal people another 4%. The representation of these groups is only reported for television, as the race/ethnicity of most news subjects on radio and the Internet is often unknown.

**Figure 4. Overall representation of visible minorities and Aboriginal people on television: CBC and the other sources**



## Areas without numeric yardsticks

In many areas population-based yardsticks are not relevant. The question of balance becomes more open to interpretation. Comparisons across platforms, or between the CBC and other news sources become the primary means of assessing balance.

### Topics in the news

A radio or television newscast has a finite length. Deciding what stories are included and excluded is a central dimension of balance, and it relies on professional judgments about the importance of the story, and newsworthiness.

Crime and trials make up 11% of CBC network news and 21% of local/regional news. Foreign stories (dateline outside Canada) make up almost half of CBC network newscasts. Major events have large short-term impacts: in the five days following the Haiti earthquake, 60% of CBC news, both network and local, dealt with the event in some way. On the other hand, Africa and South America together account for just 3% of network news.

In general, the topics covered by CBC and competing sources show similar profiles. Differences in emphasis that occur across platforms and within certain major stories are discussed in the report.

## Tone

The news is, to a large extent, about tensions and conflicts that exist in the world. People and groups in the news can be described in positive or negative terms, reflecting their role in these conflicts and their success or failure. In this study, tone is measured only for the intro and extro to each story. Each intro and extro is scored as having a positive, neutral or negative tone with respect to the person or group being described.

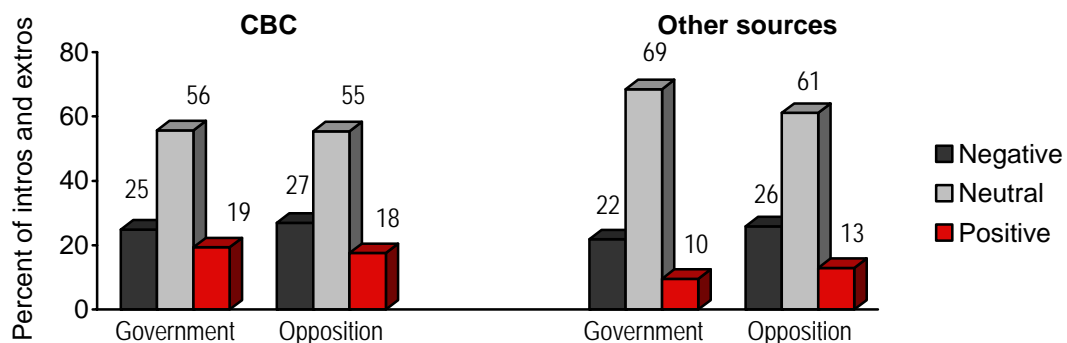
Overall, tone is similar on CBC and on the competing sources. Across all CBC programming, intros and extros are 19% negative and 15% positive. For the competing programs, the figures are 19% negative and 16% positive – not a statistically significant difference. The similarity extends to the level of individual programs. On The National, for example, intros and extros are 18% positive and 18% negative. The corresponding figures for the CTV National News are 17% positive and 17% negative, while Global’s National News comes in at 18% positive and 17% negative. These differences are not statistically significant. The close comparison among networks also holds up at the level of individual stories such as Haiti, Afghanistan and Swine flu.

### “Why is the tone of political news so negative?”

It is a common observation that coverage of politics has a negative cast, and Figure 5 shows that this is true of federal politics. Further analysis shows that the negative coverage centres on a few highly charged topics. Three stories account for less than half the total coverage but two-thirds of the negative tone. These are the Afghanistan story, dominated by the detainee issue; climate change, where the government was criticized by groups both within Canada and abroad; and the Ottawa political process, including political maneuvering, opinions polls and by-elections. Tone in CBC coverage of these stories, was 33% negative and 10% positive.

The many other substantive topics in which federal politicians were involved generated a very different balance: 14% negative and 25% positive on CBC. These topics include H1N1, business and the economy, Haiti, justice issues, relations with other countries, and others.

**Figure 5. Tone of intros and extros for federal government and opposition: CBC and other sources**

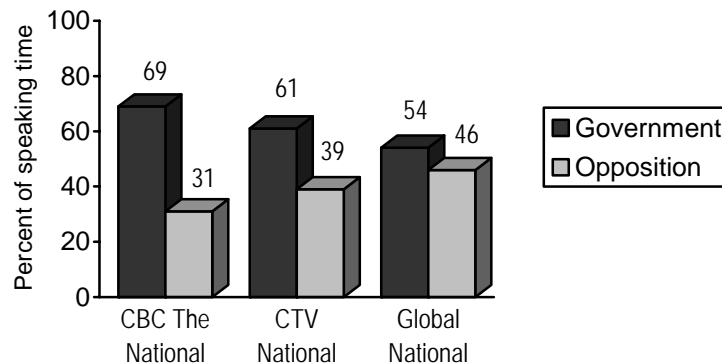


## Interview time

Politicians value the opportunity to speak directly to citizens on the national airwaves, and the balance of time that government and opposition politicians receive is therefore a critical measure. The government side often gets the greater share of time as it drives the agenda, represents the country abroad and so on. Considering all CBC network news on radio and television, the Conservatives had 63% of the interview time and the opposition parties 37%.

Focusing on the flagship television newscasts, Figure 6, the Conservatives had 69% of federal interview time on *The National*, 61% on the *CTV National News*, and 54% on *Global National*.

**Figure 6. Proportion of speaking time for members of the federal government and opposition: Three national television newscasts**



## Case studies

The report also discusses how CBC and other news sources approach major stories such as the H1N1 flu, the Haiti earthquake, and climate change through case studies of these topics.