

# THE NEWS BALANCE REPORT



Interim Report: Executive Summary  
Prepared for CBC by ERIN Research



The News Balance Report: Interim Report

Prepared 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 Interim Report by ERIN Research is based on a 10-week sample of television, radio and Internet news recorded between October 26, 2009 and January 17, 2010. The full study will span the 25-week period ending May 2, 2010. While its focus is CBC news, both network and local/regional, it includes competitors on each platform. The study is, by any standard, comprehensive. It covers approximately 440 hours of radio and television news and 2,400 stories on the Internet.

The primary results derive 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.

It is important to note that this Interim Report is based on partial data. The numerical results in the final report will differ, to varying degrees, from those reported here.

## **Panel of Advisors**

Five international media experts were selected as a Panel of Advisors to the Project. The role is to provide methodological and interpretative advice to ERIN Research 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 Behavioral Sciences, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

## Assessment of fairness and balance

The report describes how CBC and others sources present the news. In most instances, the numerical results of the study do not by themselves indicate balance or lack thereof. 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

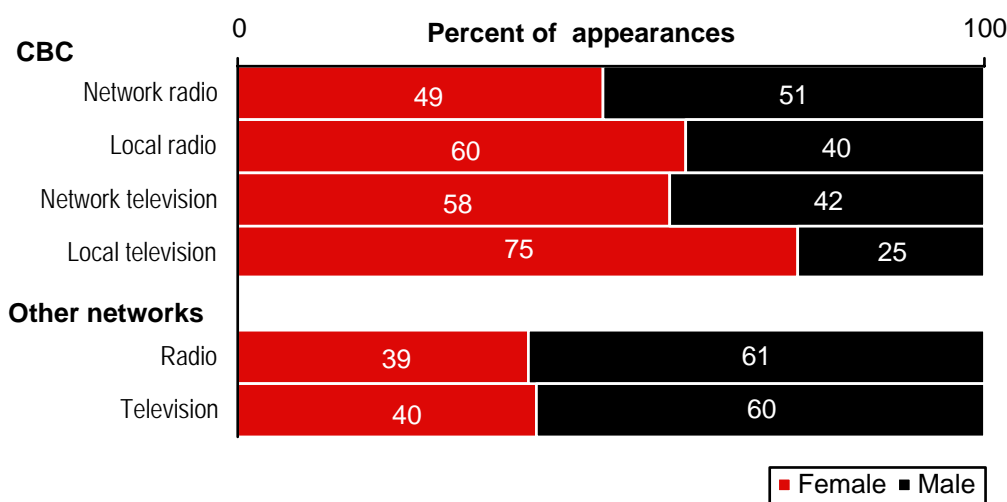
In the following areas, population statistics serve as guidelines (not iron-clad criteria) for assessing balance.

### 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 used a 40:60 gender ratio (female:male) as its standard. The present data show that 59% of CBC news anchors/program hosts are female and that 46% of reporters are female. The Commission’s expectation for balance is therefore met. (These results combine radio and television; gender of staff is often not known for Internet stories.) The proportion of female anchors and hosts on CBC’s competitors is approximately 40% while the proportion of female reporters is significantly smaller than this.

Figure 19 breaks out the gender of CBC’s anchors/hosts for radio and television news, network and local.

**Figure 19. Gender of anchors and program hosts**



## 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 appeared as news subjects were women. The proportion rose steadily to 25% in 1992. In the current study, 28% of news subjects are women. The National is similar to CBC news overall, where 25% of news subjects are women<sup>1</sup>. Considering just Canadian news stories, the proportion of women increases slightly, to 31% on The National and 28% for all CBC news.

If 50% 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 component of the news, nearly one-seventh, is stories about crime, 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.

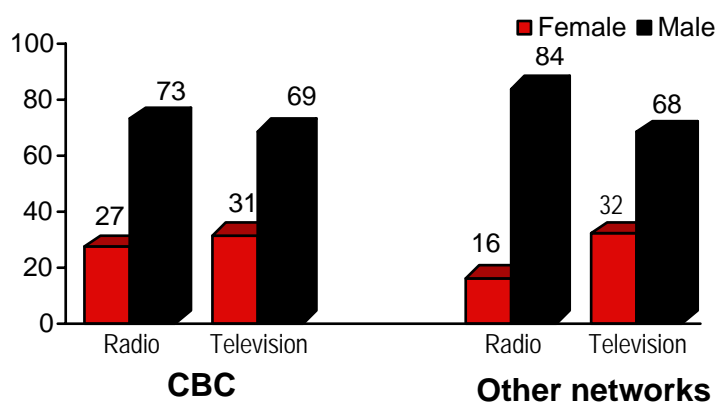
Likewise, most politicians are male, including the leaders of the four federal parties and all ten provincial premiers. Political news therefore features a large proportion of men, 83% in the results to date.

Analysts/experts is an important category of news subjects, and it has shown some growth, from around 15% female in the 1980s to 28% today.

In the business and professional sector, 27% of news subjects are female, and for individual citizens the figure is 46%.

Figure 22 shows overall proportions of interview time for women and men. On competing television networks, the presence of women in the news is similar to CBC. On competing radio networks, women have less exposure than on CBC.

**Figure 22. Gender of people in the news: Interview time, within Canada**



<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

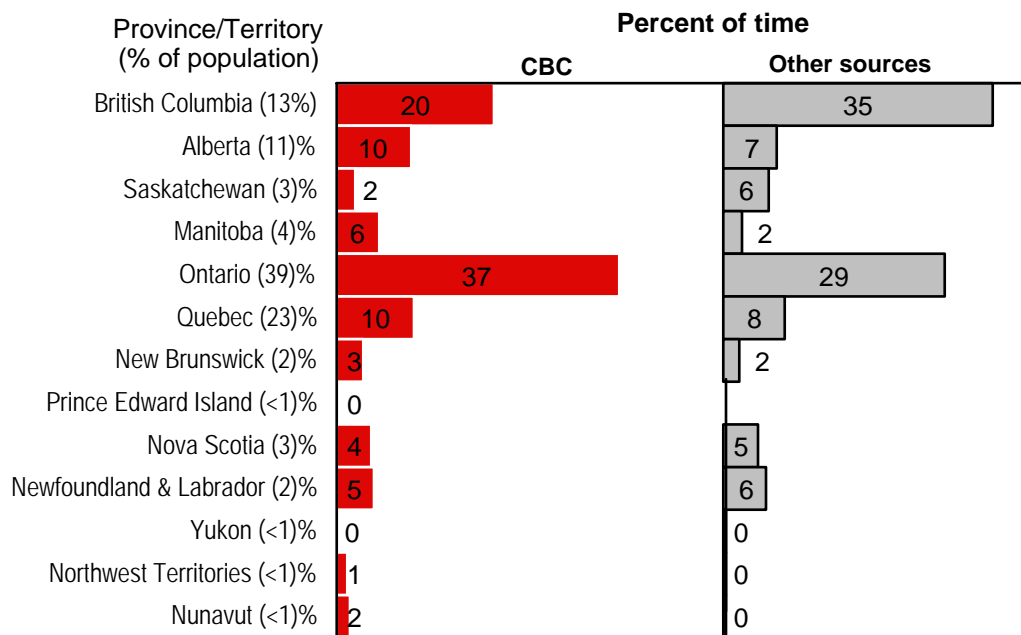
The CBC's mandate is to represent all regions of the country. Local newscasts focus strongly on the region in which they are produced, so the relevant question concerns the level of regional representation in network newscasts. Put simply, is the proportion of Canadian news from each province/territory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

With two exceptions, the proportion of news about each province/territory corresponds to the population of the region. BC goes against this rule, with 13% of the population and 20% of the news in the interim results. The 2010 Olympic Games took place in Vancouver in February, 2010.

Quebec is the other exception, with 23% of the population but just 10% 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.

As Figure 17 shows, pre-Olympic activities had a larger impact on the competing news sources than on CBC.

**Figure 17. Primary location of story: CBC network news and competitors**



## Representation of visible minorities and Aboriginal people

Visible minorities constitute 17% of the population and Aboriginal people 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 not known. Visible minorities account for 21% of the appearances by news staff on CBC, and Aboriginal people account for 1%. As news subjects, visible minorities make up 12% of the total in Canadian news stories on CBC and Aboriginal people 3%. (These figures combined network and local news.)

## 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.

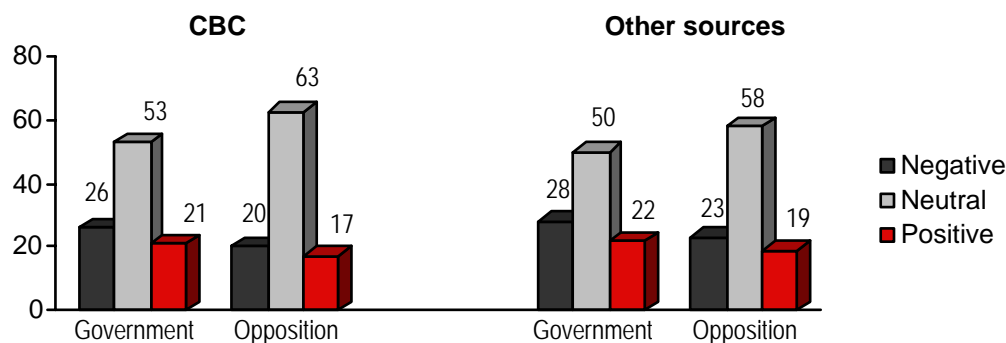
Crime and trials make up 11% of CBC network news and 21% of local/regional news. Foreign stories (dateline outside Canada) make up just less than half of CBC network newscasts and less than 10% of local newscasts. Major events have large short-term impacts: in the five days following the Haiti earthquake, 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 2% of network news to date.

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.

**Figure 38. Tone of intros and extros for federal government and opposition: CBC and other sources**



Overall, the tone of CBC news is very close to that on competing sources. On The National, for example, intros and extros are 19% positive and 19% negative. The corresponding figures for the CTV National News are 19% positive and 17% negative, while Global's National News comes in a 20% positive and 19% negative. These differences are not statistically significant. The close comparison among networks holds up at the level of individual stories such as Haiti, Afghanistan and Swine flu.

The tone of political coverage is also similar for CBC and competing sources (Figure 38, reproduced below). Tone relating to the federal Conservative and opposition parties does not differ to a statistically significant degree on CBC and the competing sources.

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

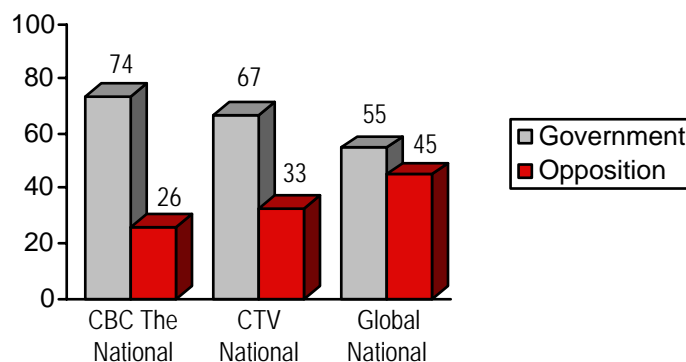
It is a common observation that coverage of politics has a negative cast, and Figure 38 illustrates that this is true of federal politics. Further analysis shows that the negative coverage, at least at this point in time, centres on a few highly charged topics. Three stories account for less than half the total coverage but a solid majority 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.

The many other substantive topics in which federal politicians were involved generated a rather different balance: 20% negative and 32% positive on CBC. These topics include H1N1, business and the economy, Haiti, justice issues, relations with other countries, and others.

### 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 70% of the interview time and the opposition parties 30%. Focusing on the flagship television newscasts, the Conservatives had 74% of federal interview time on *The National*, 67% on the *CTV National News*, and 55% on *Global National* (Figure 16 reproduced below).

**Figure 16. Proportion of speaking time for members of the federal government and opposition: Three national television newscasts**



### Conclusion

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

The final report with its more comprehensive database, will allow a more detailed examination of data in certain areas and an extended discussion of the issues involved in assessing balance.