

Canadian News Media Dominated by Corporate Lobbyists

A study carried out by Ricochet in collaboration with Jacobin Magazine finds Canadian TV panels are stacked with lobbyists, whose interests are often undisclosed

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An intensive six-week study of key political shows across multiple networks and a review of lobbyist filings conducted by Ricochet in collaboration with [Jacobin Magazine](#) has revealed significant bias in Canadian television news shows. Lobbyists for banks, oil companies, arms manufacturers and other sundry corporate interests routinely appear on news shows without any public disclosure of their big money ties.

In a typical example of the practice, former Liberal New Brunswick premier **Brian Gallant** appeared numerous times on CBC News Network’s flagship political show, *Power and Politics*, in the days leading up to this year’s federal election. Viewers of the show were not informed of Gallant’s position as a senior advisor at Navigator Inc., one of the country’s largest corporate PR and lobbying firms.

More than one in every 10 guests analyzing the news worked for firms paid to influence the government and the public. Despite their vested interests, networks often described these panellists as “strategists.”

Political panelists’ corporate lobbying interests are rarely disclosed on Canadian news shows, and this lack of transparency undermines news outlets’ claims to impartiality.

In the wake of the federal election, there was plenty of commentary about how media coverage of the party leaders and campaigns has shaped the views of the electorate. What this framing ignores is that even between elections, our media moulds our politics.

Manufacturing consent

Despite the digital revolution, television remains the dominant source of news in Canada. Last year, a [study](#) by the Media Technology Monitor found that nearly half the population finds out about current affairs by watching TV. More than twice as many said TV was their go-to medium rather than online sources, apps and social media.

Jacobin and Ricochet’s review of Canadian television news commentary and analysis from March 29 to May 9, 2021, catalogued data on more than 860 relevant television appearances. More than one in every 10 guests analyzing the news worked for firms paid to influence the government and the public. Despite their vested interests, networks often described these panellists as “strategists.”

Among on-air commentators, lobbyist or PR professional was the fourth-most-common occupation. Government officials and politicians, journalists, and medical professionals (during a pandemic) were the only occupations more commonly featured.

Corporate influencers are, unsurprisingly, more often present in discussions of certain key issues. Across Canada’s big three networks — CBC, CTV and Global — one in every five guests brought on to comment on climate change, one in every five guests analyzing the federal budget, and a staggering one in every three guests analyzing federal politics were active in the PR industry.

Furthermore, comments made by guests often found their way into other news programs as part of reports or were included in online stories. In some cases, there was no disclosure at all of the guests’ ties. At other times, critical information on a group’s funding was omitted. Often there was a lack of disclosure of guests’ relevant clients or lobbying interests. In still other instances, guests were introduced as being affiliated with one organization or company but no mention was made of their affiliations with other relevant corporations or lobbies.

PR hacks on CBC

Gallant, for example, appeared on CBC’s *Power & Politics* on five occasions during the study period. CBC’s hosts introduced him as the head of the Canadian Centre for the Purpose of the Corporation (CCPC). No details were provided about the organization on-air.

A review of the CCPC’s website reveals that it is a subsection of the main website for Navigator Ltd. The online news outlet VICE [described Navigator](#) as “the company famous Canadians turn to when they face public relations crises.” The PR and corporate lobbying giant created and continues to fund the CCPC.

The CCPC’s website fails to properly explain the organization’s aims. Instead, the company hides behind a series of poorly written platitudes:

The Canadian Centre for the Purpose of the Corporation is an initiative that will help equip Canadian businesses and organizations with insights, tools, and support as they work to redefine and strengthen both the scope of their purpose and the contributions they make more broadly to society.

For clarification, Ricochet and Jacobin reached out to Gallant. Reproducing the policy wonk-speak from his company’s website, Gallant wrote back that the CCPC seeks to help businesses “redefine and strengthen the scope of their purpose and the contributions they make to their stakeholders — and more broadly to society — through insights, tools, and

research.”

Aside from being head of the CCPC, Gallant also works as a senior advisor at Navigator. This affiliation is disclosed on the CBC’s website. However, over the six-week viewing period, the audience was not made aware of this fact in five of his six appearances on the CBC, where he was called upon to give his opinion on COVID-19, corporate taxation, infrastructure spending, and climate change.

Gallant was mostly forthcoming in response to media questions, stating that the CBC asks all panellists to self-disclose “any interests that are potentially linked to any of the subjects which will be discussed.” However, he said he could not discuss whether Navigator has any clients with interests in areas that would need be disclosed under these guidelines, due to the company’s privacy policy.

Giving limited disclosure the heave-ho

The CBC introduced Shakir Chambers, another regular TV panellist associated with the firm at the time, as a “political commentator” on four occasions. Viewers were not given any details of his work for Navigator. The CBC is well aware of his work for the firm — at the time of his appearances, the *Power & Politics* website noted that he “plays a leading role in the firm’s government relations practice and provides strategic counsel for high profile clients.”

On three occasions, former Alberta United Conservative Party president Erica Barootes of Enterprise Canada, a national lobbying firm, provided on-air commentary about COVID-19 for the CBC. The network did not disclose her registration as a lobbyist for both Astellas Pharma Canada Inc. and Shoppers Drug Mart. In addition, she was registered in three provinces as a lobbyist for Purolator — one disclosure filing shows her lobbying was related to COVID-19 vaccine distribution logistics, a frequently discussed news topic given the delay in the vaccine rollout at the time. Only her affiliation to Enterprise was noted during her appearances. The CBC did not make viewers aware of what business Enterprise conducts, let alone any of Barootes’ potentially relevant lobbying or business activities.

One in every seven guests appearing on the CBC programs was from a lobbying or government relations firm.

Earlier this year, in response to a complaint from a member of the public, the CBC’s public ombudsman, Jack Nagler, noted that merely stating the name of a firm during an introduction is “rather pointless.” In his view, the name of a firm is of little use to viewers seeking to understand whose interests they represent. “The reference to their company names is a form of shorthand that might work for people familiar with Parliament Hill but does not work for the rest of us,” he wrote.

The CBC also invited Jenni Byrne, former top aide to Doug Ford and Stephen Harper, to share her opinions on the pandemic while she was a registered lobbyist for Tridan/CBS Group Inc. The company was, at the time of her appearance, pursuing a government contract for its COVID-19 rapid test kits. In addition, Byrne lobbies the Ontario Ministry of Long-Term Care and has also registered to lobby for BioVaxsys Tech, Bausch Health Companies, and Proctor & Gamble. Only her eponymous company name was disclosed by the CBC.

PR on CTV

CTV is also guilty of failing to disclose commentators' affiliations. In April, the network twice invited former Conservative MP Lisa Raitt to discuss the federal budget and pandemic-related airline bailout packages.

Raitt was introduced as a former cabinet minister, but no mention was made at that time of the fact she is the vice-chair of global investment banking at the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. Presumably the bank and its clientele would have an interest in the government's approach to issues such as corporate taxes, wealth taxes, wage subsidies, and federal deficit spending contained in the budget.

In cases where a television commentator's most relevant company affiliation was noted, the nature of the firm's lobbying or business activities often wasn't disclosed by CTV. This was the case even when they were related to the supposed expert analysis being provided to viewers.

CTV did not disclose that Marr is the former CEO of the Petroleum Services Association of Canada, or that the Canada West Foundation is heavily funded by fossil fuel corporations.

Greg MacEachern, the senior VP of Proof Strategies, appeared on CTV News Channel multiple times to discuss subjects such as the federal budget and COVID-19. His affiliation with the lobbying firm was properly disclosed, but the fact that he is a registered lobbyist for companies such as Netflix and eBay was not mentioned. These firms stood to be negatively affected by changes to internet taxation and regulation contained in the federal budget and in Bill C-10, which sought to alter how the internet is regulated in Canada. A review of the federal lobby registry shows that, around the time of his appearances, MacEachern held discussions with the federal government ministries involved in these changes.

Proof Strategies is registered in multiple provinces to lobby on behalf of Scarsin Corporation, a health technology firm seeking COVID-related contracts from provincial governments. MacEachern has led the government relations work at Proof Strategies since 2011, according to the lobby firm's website.

In response to emailed questions, he stated that he meets with producers "a few hours before the panel is taped and the topics [that will be discussed] are specifically reviewed and flagged for any conflicts."

Not just the right

One might assume that these undisclosed ties to corporate interests occur mostly among guests representing the right wing of the political spectrum. However, a number of former operatives from Canada's New Democratic Party have also transitioned into lobbying.

In one instance, former NDP strategist Kathleen Monk — at the time a principal at Earncliffe Strategy Group — discussed the ongoing pandemic on *Power & Politics*. CBC did not note that she is listed in the federal lobby registry as a representative of organizations with interests in COVID-related policy. This work includes lobbying for a company named InkSmith. The aforementioned firm has advocated for intellectual property rights to be applied to vaccines during the pandemic. In fact, Monk met with a senior ministerial staffer to represent InkSmith on files related to COVID-19 issues two days before one of her CBC appearances, according to lobbying filings reviewed by Ricochet and Jacobin.

The "responsibility to disclose and address conflicts of interest to our audience — perceived

or otherwise — falls to the lobbyists.”

The publicly funded broadcaster regularly invites Monk onto its shows to represent the NDP perspective. Brad Lavigne, a former senior aide to late NDP leader Jack Layton, is also regularly brought onto CBC shows to discuss current affairs and present the NDP perspective. Lavigne is currently a partner and vice president at Counsel Public Affairs, another national lobbying firm.

On five occasions, Lavigne discussed COVID-19 in on-air appearances without CBC noting that he was a registered lobbyist for a health industry firm in Alberta. The CBC also did not mention Lavigne’s presence in the B.C. provincial lobby registry due to his COVID-19 work on behalf of multiple clients.

Counsel Public Affairs has several other staff lobbying for pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline and other health industry clients on issues that may be linked to the analysis Lavigne provides on national television. Lavigne and Counsel Public Affairs did not respond to questions about this work.

Think tank “shadow lobbying”

Ricochet and Jacobin’s review also provided a glimpse into possible disclosure issues among guests representing think tanks. Such guests can engage in what is often called “shadow lobbying,” in which donors underwrite their work and benefit from seemingly neutral third parties advocating for their interests.

CTV’s *Power Play* invited Gary Mar, president of the Canada West Foundation, to discuss the potential shutdown of the Line 5 pipeline, which brings fossil fuels to Quebec and Ontario via the United States. The governor of Michigan along with several environmental groups are opposed to the pipeline, which is owned by Alberta-based Enbridge. In his CTV segment Mar stated that he thought that “Enbridge is taking the right position to say ‘we are not shutting down any of the supply until we are ordered to do so by a court.’”

This range of perspectives does not appear to include civil society, or advocacy or activist groups. Such voices were largely absent from the airwaves.

CTV did not disclose that Marr is the former CEO of the Petroleum Services Association of Canada, or that the Canada West Foundation is heavily funded by fossil fuel corporations, including Cenovus, Suncor, Husky Energy, Shell, Imperial Oil, Ovintiv and others. Most notably, Enbridge itself has provided at least \$50,000 annually to the think tank, according to its most recent publicly available annual report. This makes the corporation a top donor to the foundation. Enbridge’s funding may in fact be significantly higher than that number — \$50,000 and above is the highest donation threshold listed in the report.

The Canada West Foundation declined to comment on whether CTV was aware of Mar’s ties to Enbridge prior to arranging what turned out to be positive commentary on the company’s pipeline. A spokesperson responded that the think tank acknowledges supporters publicly on its website and in communications materials: “We think it’s great that engaged citizens and organizations are willing to open their wallets in the pursuit of good public policy.”

Ricochet and Jacobin reached out to multiple CTV staff for comment but did not receive a reply.

Suspicious ratios

The proportion of guests who were journalists or medical professionals was roughly the same across both CTV and CBC. However, the proportion of commentators on CBC whose day jobs were in lobbying or PR was roughly double that of CTV.

Although COVID-19 dominated the news, making up nearly half of the news coverage on both networks, one in every seven guests appearing on the CBC programs was from a lobbying or government relations firm. This is roughly the same proportion as that of medical professionals invited onto panels during a pandemic.

In an email, Chuck Thompson, CBC's head of public affairs, said that lobbyists are featured "on occasion" due to "their past experience, often as government leaders or decision makers." He added that they are not invited for their objectivity, but for their ideological perspective and partisan political analysis. Thompson claims that the network achieves the right mix of guests comprising "a cross section of individuals who bring different perspectives to any given discussion." This range of perspectives does not appear to include civil society, or advocacy or activist groups. Such voices were largely absent from the airwaves.

When guests' views are informed by their lobbying work, this narrows the spectrum of viewpoints available to an audience. CBC's Journalistic Standards and Practices states that "it is important to mention any association, affiliation or special interest a guest or commentator may have so that the public can fully understand that person's perspective."

CBC was asked what processes the network uses to adhere to this principle. The public broadcaster replied that it takes the issue seriously, and the "responsibility to disclose and address conflicts of interest to our audience — perceived or otherwise — falls to the lobbyists after speaking with our chase producers. The process we have in place goes a long way to ensuring transparency."

What this research shows is that these processes clearly do not go far enough.

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