

# Mobilizing Against “Paid Content” in the Mainstream Media: Journalists versus Management at CBC

Tamar Weinstein

---

*The case study examined in this paper resulted from my intimate knowledge of the organization and many of the people involved in the campaign against management I describe. I was a documentary director/producer at The Fifth Estate, the preeminent investigative television program at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) for twenty years.*

**Keywords:** Paid Content, Media Management, CBC

---

On November 23, 2020, a week before his retirement, D.G., a well-respected journalist at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), the Canadian public broadcaster, wrote an email to Catherine Tait, the president and CEO of the corporation expressing his concern with a new form of advertising management had embarked on:

*For 35 years, I could always say that the CBC was making Canada a better place because the audience could always believe that what we were telling them was the result of intelligent discussion, rigorous fact-checking and a commitment to being totally relevant. Which, of course, brings me to Tandem. No need for me to say much more. For the love of God, cut your losses and drop it.... You are now at a crossroads: everyone from former CBC presidents to world-renowned journalists are pleading with you to do the right thing and to admit it was a mistake.<sup>1</sup>*

This email was sent, nearly two months into the campaign against Tandem, CBC's "paid content" initiative, that mobilized hundreds of current and former employees of the public broadcaster.<sup>2</sup> It was the first time in its history that such a broad network of CBCers came together for a common cause.<sup>3</sup>

"Paid content" has been a growth industry within mainstream news organizations and digital news platforms. It is advertising packaged in a new and more sophisticated way, borrowing the style and mimicking the function of the "host" news organization and addressing audiences in a seamless way rather than being disruptive. It can be generated by units that are part of the production process within a news organization, content creation companies or by departments based in large corporations (e.g., Visa or Coca Cola). "Paid content" is to journalism what "product placement" is to the film, TV entertainment and much of the reality-TV industries.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The email was shared with me as a former CBC employee associated with the campaign against Tandem. Much of my description of the opposition to Tandem in this paper is based on the extensive email exchanges, documentation, articles that were shared with everyone on the mailing list. I also had numerous conversations with current and former CBCers about Tandem in the capacity of friendships in my post-CBC life. While at CBC, I was a director/producer at *The Fifth Estate* for close to 20 years. For the remainder of the paper, I will either use initials or job description when identifying media activists in the anti-Tandem campaign unless I am quoting from an opinion piece published in the press where the journalist's name was made public. In addition, I will identify anti-Tandem activists that are publicly known as on-camera journalists or as former senior CBC staff.

<sup>2</sup> "Paid content" is used throughout this paper even though there are other definitions of this phenomenon including "sponsored" or "branded" content and "native" advertising. That is because former and current CBC journalists decided after much e-discussion to use "paid content" in their correspondence, in public statements and in their discussions with management and others.

<sup>3</sup> A very different kind of common cause was imposed on CBCers, when management locked out 5,000 employees, members of the Canadian Media Guild (CMG) after contract negotiations broke down in August 2005. I will refer to this six-week period when CBC/CMG workers walked the picket line later in this paper as a very important period of consolidation of a worldview of what CBC as a public broadcaster should be.

<sup>4</sup> There are exceptions in reality TV productions whereby accurate information is a part of the mandate. In such cases "product placement" and "paid content" are one and the same and can cause serious ethical problems for producers who are often freelancers. For example, in an email from November 27, 2020 to CBC's President and CEO Catherine Tait and later shared with the anti-Tandem group, one of the former CBCers, D.G. wrote about his experiences producing and having to incorporate "paid content" into a food related health reality-TV series for Shaw Media: "we had to – at the last minute - twist story lines to feature meat and seafood from Prince Edward Island, and

Journalism has, most likely, always been enticing “real estate” precisely for its seriousness of purpose in claiming to produce a *non-fiction reality*.<sup>5</sup> But professionals in the journalism field clung to the hope that news exists for something more necessary than just *selling products*.

In recent years numerous mainstream news organizations including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have created an in-house “paid content” production unit. The BBC *StoryWorks* also creates paid published content with an editorial style which runs “natively” on BBC.com but not on its other news programs.<sup>6</sup> At online news platforms such as Vice and BuzzFeed, content creation companies provide their seamless “advertising” product. In Canada, *The Globe and Mail*, and news organizations associated with Corus, Rogers and Bell Media have been producing “paid content” for years.<sup>7</sup> In September 2020, CBC management publicly announced the creation of its own in-house “paid content” department - Tandem.<sup>8</sup> CBC was going to insert paid content into TV and radio programs, podcasts as well as online and, most importantly, using some of its own journalists.<sup>9</sup>

Within days after the Tandem announcement, current and former CBC journalists mobilized against the establishment of the new department. They soon organized petitions, lobbied MPs and senators and ensured their concerns were heard at the CRTC CBC license renewal hearings in January 2021. Such activism never happened in the history of CBC whereby journalists organized *a campaign against a management policy*. From the perspective of the journalists, “paid content” can only succeed as it deceives. Moreover, CBC was putting up for sale what has been most valuable in the *primarily publicly funded* organization: its journalistic reputation by sowing confusion, blurring the line between journalism and commercialism. This is the background of my research question: why did current and former CBC journalists come together - to become media activists - to fight “paid content” in a way that journalists working for other news organizations did not?

shamelessly extolled the virtues of a brand of paper towels throughout the series. We worked under the incessant and often misguided oversight of the clients and agencies, while skirting the rules and regulations of the Canadian funding agencies that made the series possible. I believe we lied to both a public who expects the best information possible, and to those regulators. Because call it integrated content or leveraged content or Tandem or anything else you want, this “genre” is advertising masquerading as non-commercial content.”

<sup>5</sup> While news media have often fallen short of the ideals of independence and objectivity, my paper will not engage with these failings. For an excellent exploration of these issues, see: Candis Callison & Mary Lynn Young, *Reckoning: Journalism's Limits and Possibilities*, Oxford University Press (2020).

<sup>6</sup> See: BBC's Paid Content unit <http://www.bbc.com/storyworks> (Also not used for domestic audiences only on its international website)

<sup>7</sup> In September 2020, for example, *The Globe and Mail* ran “paid content” that for the first time raised concern among journalists. The content was from state-owned China Daily, which publisher and CEO Phillip Crawley admitted “should have been more clearly marked.” See: Rosie DiManno, “Shame on the Globe and Mail for running Chinese government Propaganda,” *The Toronto Star*, September 24, 2020 (Retrieved March 11, 2021)

<sup>8</sup> While the Tandem marketing group was new, CBC had been offering branded content services through its sales department since 2017. This fact, however, was not known to employees until the Tandem initiative.

<sup>9</sup> Branded content produced by CBC's Tandem in the first month after the announcement included videos on Radio-Canada's website about how HSBC, a bank, helps entrepreneurs confront the business challenges of COVID-19, a podcast series promoting Athabasca University and Olympic-themed videos sponsored by Visa. The sponsor is identified in each case through text or a logo.

The issue of “paid content” has been discussed by a number of scholars. Often described as “branded” content or “native” advertising, the research examines the issues surrounding the appearance and intentionality of this form of advertising.<sup>10</sup> If there has been any opposition or resistance to this form of “journalism,” it has not been documented. At the same time, scholars looking at forms of protest instigated by journalists, tend to overlook initiatives taken by those working *within* mainstream news departments and, in particular, with links *to public broadcasters*. Whether confronting the existing capitalist model or not, research about opposition to mainstream news agendas by the journalists themselves has been neglected. Studies of news start-ups that emerged in the midst of turmoil such as *Indymedia* and the 1999 protests against the WTO in Seattle are insightful but they do not address the core issues facing *mainstream* journalists whether commercial or publicly financed.<sup>11</sup> In Canada, most scholarly work has been on alternative media forms and their role in the journalistic landscape of the country.<sup>12</sup> In brief, scholars have overlooked mobilization among journalists - employees and former employees - within mainstream news organizations (and in particular, public broadcasters) who combat what they consider fundamental journalist issues. This gap is about those who do not standby, opt out, leave or join alternative journalistic platforms, but fight decisions they believe are compromising the integrity of their professionalism.

A helpful way to study the emergence of and practices of those engaged in such activism is offered by Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT).<sup>13</sup> It provides tools and methodology that enables tracing the diversity of actors - human and nonhuman - and the ways in which they come together to produce networks of use for whatever is a priority for them.<sup>14</sup> Everything we study, according to Latour, should be seen as processes of production, relational structures and heterogeneous associations. Nothing is self-evident and there is nothing that does not need to be explained. We include networks, because they comprise different elements; and actors because they incorporate activity and action. However, they cannot be reduced to either of the two. Hence, analytically, the actor network describes the product (and process) of compromises and relational effects of a network that brings together and combines other entities (that are always heterogeneous). This framework sets the stage for my exploration of the activism of current and former CBC journalists. My specific research questions are: What was it about CBC’s Tandem that brought about resistance

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Michael Serazio, “How News Went Guerrilla: A History, Logic and Critique of Brand Journalism,” *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 43, No. 1, (2021), pp. 117-132.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Natalie Fenton, “Indymedia and the Long Story of Rebellion Against Neoliberal Capitalism,” *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 42, No. 6, (2020), pp. 1052-1058. For additional sources on mobilization against existing political/economic structures see annotated bibliography.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Kathleen Cross and David Skinner “Organizing for Media Reform in Canada: Media Democracy Day, Open Media Day and Reimagine CBC,” In Des Freedman, Jonathan A. Obar, Cheryl Martens and Robert W. McChesney, *Strategies for Media Reform: International Perspectives*, Fordham University Press, (2016), pp. 167-180.

<sup>13</sup> See: Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK (2007).

<sup>14</sup> Actor-Network Theory (ANT) has its roots in the field of Science and Technology Studies, (STS) but it has had proponents refine and reshape it, making contributions over a much wider area including in anthropology, economics, geography, philosophy and organization studies. For the purpose of this paper, my inspiration for the use of ANT comes from the fascinating study, an ethnography of Teletreet, an Italian media movement of pirate TV channels that emerged in 2002 by Alessandra Renzi, *Hacked Transmissions: Technology and Connective Activism in Italy*, The University of Minnesota Press, (2020).

among employees? How has the campaign been managed? Was the fight limited to Tandem or did that struggle embolden people to broaden the agenda to include other issues regarding *public broadcasting* and its future. How does this case study illuminate scholarship on media activism and, maybe even more broadly, the economic model within which it operates? Put differently, what lies beyond, if at all, the confrontation about blurring of the lines between journalism and “paid content”?

To address these questions, I will first critically review the scholarly work on “paid content” and journalism. I will then explore studies on forms of activism that have emerged to address the shortcomings of the mainstream media. In light of the gap identified in the literature regarding potential for a different type of oppositional mobilization, I will use tools adapted from ANT to examine the case of the CBC’s current and former journalists and their struggle against Tandem - a department that stood in opposition to everything they believed a public broadcaster should engage with. As Talin, one of founders of the campaign wrote: “If the audience cannot tell the difference between a news report and a “look alike” report how can the integrity of the institution’s journalism be retained?”<sup>15</sup> In order to build the narrative of the emerging campaign, its characteristics, practices and its challenges, I will rely on the extensive email correspondence among the former CBC employees that have taken place since the end of September 2020 until May 2021<sup>16</sup> Among these emails are CBC management documents about Tandem and other related documents. I will also rely on conversations I had with a number of former and current CBC employees.

## Literature Review

### “Paid Content” Advertising - The Problem

“Whether we view it as a debased form of news content or an innovative form of advertising, “branded” content or “native” advertising represents a sea-change in the commercialization of news. One should not ignore the context that made its presence notable in mainstream news organizations and pervasive in news start-ups. Mosco proposes that we have reached the point whereby tech giants including Google and Facebook are having a profound impact on key elements of public life (e.g., public opinion and politics) and have left journalism space to play a marginal role in society.<sup>17</sup> From his perspective journalism failed to take advantage of the emerging digital world, missing opportunity after opportunity, until the power of the information technology corporations became so entrenched as to make it nearly impossible to have any impact. As he puts it, with Google and Facebook controlling close to fifty percent of online advertising worldwide: “the two firms comfortably operate a duopoly over the most lucrative ad markets in the world.”<sup>18</sup> In this environment, it is not surprising that news organizations over the last few years have gravitated toward “paid content” to buffer the financial losses from advertising now going to the tech giants. Old business models needed to be replaced and the new alternatives have been seen as

<sup>15</sup> Email sent on September 29, 2020 to former CBC employees by T.V. a Sunday Edition producer who retired that summer and soon afterward spearheaded the mobilization of former CBC’s staff.

<sup>16</sup> Although I am not an active participant in the network of former journalists, I have signed petitions to the CBC Board of Directors and am on lists supporting the cause.

<sup>17</sup> Vincent Mosco, “Social Media versus Journalism and Democracy,” *Journalism*, Vol. 20, No. 1, (2019), pp. 180-184.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 180.

a potential route to recovery and, perhaps even help ensure the survival of journalism outlets. Focusing on the many challenges journalism has as a practice, Zelizer refers as well to the unsustainability of what has been its traditional economic model, stating: “like the origin narratives of other institutions, much about journalism’s survival relies on conditions uncomplicated by uncertainty.”<sup>19</sup> And this fiscal uncertainty has led media outlets to invest in new “creative” income opportunities. For CBC, although a public broadcaster, it is dependent on advertising revenues that are permissible on TV as well as online platforms and, similar to commercial broadcasters, it has faced significant shortfalls. “Paid content” as a “creative” way to augment revenue, became a viable option.

Before turning to the production process of “paid content,” it is important to clarify the terminology. Glasser, Varma & Zou make the point that this type of advertising mimics editorial content in both form and positioning within the editorial space.<sup>20</sup> Journalism presupposes *judgment choices* that imagine a public purpose for the news, a purpose at odds with that of advertising. That is, “paid content” circulates as “undisciplined news, a status concealed by disguise.”<sup>21</sup>

While there are few studies about the success of “paid content” in financial terms as well as impact on audiences, some scholars have addressed the question of how “paid content” works. Serazio reminds the reader that market driven journalism has long been the norm of the vast majority of media outlets and commercial logic has underscored newsroom orientation in most cases as much as commitment to journalistic principles.<sup>22</sup> But as he demonstrates, the current “branded” content or what we have called “paid content” is market driven journalism of a very different stripe. That is, a trend that signals brands getting ever more hands-on when it comes to their ambitions for and execution of the media performance they afford. As he puts it: “in creating and subsidizing “sponsored newsrooms” they seem to be operating them in accordance with journalistic conventions and even ideals.”<sup>23</sup> Serazio refers to *corporations* that to some extent, at least, serve *directly* as news providers, however, these entities have a profit-based outlook that is set against *public interest*. Whatever the news “hook” is on any particular story it is simply a journalistic lure to subsequently “push product.” Interestingly, he does not distinguish between content creation companies, specific content creation departments within large corporations or units within media organizations.

At the same time, numerous journalists who in recent years lost their jobs in mainstream news organizations joined the ranks of those who produce “paid content,” according to Serazio.<sup>24</sup> This

<sup>19</sup> Barbie Zelizer’s “Terms of Choice: Uncertainty, Journalism and Crisis,” *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 65, (2015), pp. 895. Zelizer considers the use of the term “crisis” in journalism in which the economic model is just one aspect of what she considers an overused general concept that does not help explain an “institution in disarray” (903).

<sup>20</sup> Theodore L. Glasser, Anita Varma and Sheng Zou’s “Native Advertising and the Cultivation of Counterfeit News,” *Journalism*, Vol. 20, No. 1, (2019), pp. 150-153.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 152.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Serazio’s “How News Went Guerrilla Marketing: A History, Logic and Critic of Brand Journalism,” *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2021) 117-132 and Michael Serazio, “Making (Branded) News: The Corporate Co-optation of Online Journalism Production,” *Journalism Practice*, Vol. 14, No. 6, (2020), pp. 679-696.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 693.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Serazio, “Making (Branded) News: The Corporate Co-optation of Online Journalism Production,” *Journalism Practice*, Vol. 14, No. 6 (2020), p. 690.

type of content opened a new frontier in labor shifts allowing former journalists to do similar tasks to those they have done previously in mainstream news departments - the difference now, selling a product. In terms of the transition, he gives an example of a former *Fortune* staffer who once started working for Visa called other laid-off colleagues to stop grieving the collapse of journalistic outlets and get with the corporate program.<sup>25</sup> In other words, former journalists who gained new positions as “paid content” providers, most likely did not see a contradiction between what they used to do and what they did now and, perhaps, earning a living was more important than journalistic norms. As I will show later in this paper, this was not the case for many former CBC journalists: the integrity of the journalistic enterprise of the public broadcaster was at stake.

Carlson illustrates what happens when the lines between journalism and “paid content” are blurred.<sup>26</sup> *The Atlantic Monthly* ran an ad for the Church of Scientology on the front page of its online edition in January 2013 titled: “David Miscavige Leads Scientology to Milestone Year.” The author discusses the sweeping condemnation *The Atlantic Monthly* received for the decision to turn over a section of the front page to the Church. Most importantly, he does not mention any criticism coming from staff or freelance journalists working for the magazine. He then concludes that there is a need to formulate a broader critique of this kind of advertising.

In sum, while there is a clear recognition of the problems created by “paid content” for mainstream news outlets, there has been no attention directed to mobilization against such practices among their journalists.<sup>27</sup> As this type of advertising becomes increasingly widespread, there is even more urgency to the task of uncovering whether there is any opposition emerging against such practices and, if so, what forms it takes.

## Media Activism

When considering the mobilization of protest in the 21st century, especially around issues concerning the “politics” within media outlets - mainstream and digital journalism start-ups - scholarly work is limited with a few exceptions.<sup>28</sup> Some have focused on how digital media

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 690. Others who transitioned to “paid content” jobs included freelance journalists who needed income and repurposed employees, already in house.

<sup>26</sup> Matt Carlson’s “When News Sites Go Native: Redefining the Advertising-Editorial Divide in Response to Native Advertising,” *Journalism* Vol. 16, No. 7 (2015) pp. 849-865.

<sup>27</sup> The only article remotely connected to “paid content” on Canadian TV is Kyle Asquith & Alison Hearn, “Promotional Prime Time: “Advertainment,” Internal Network Promotion and the Future of Canadian Television,” *Canadian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 37, No. 2, (2012), pp. 241-257. The article focuses on what may be considered by some as a predecessor to “paid content:” internal network promotion which today is better known as cross promotion. That is promotion of network programs before commercial breaks or at the end of the show when credits are squeezed to the bottom of the screen and another show is promoted. The authors argue that the pervasive presence of internal promotion which entails intensification of network branding has meant that show creators and journalists are required to do the job of marketing and promotion. From my experience of twenty years at *The Fifth Estate*, CBC when we were asked to do the internal network promotion, we *wanted to do so*. It gave us more control over what was promoted and fewer editorial mistakes in promoting the documentaries.

<sup>28</sup> I am referring here to mobilization that is not associated with working conditions. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that *labor* organizing of journalists remains a critical area of research today. Recent examples of studies on efforts of freelance journalists to mobilize to improve their precarious work situation and the ongoing movement to unionize digital journalists have been the focus of Nicole Cohen’s excellent academic work. See: Nicole Cohen,

platforms have facilitated protests during the likes of the Arab Spring and in the UK in 2011. But few have directed attention to journalists organizing against the “politics” of *their own* place of employment, that is, a news organization.

Fenton is an exception. She raises a critical point that needs to be taken into account - the role that technology plays in contemporary activism.<sup>29</sup> She refers specifically to the Internet because it allows for *connectivity and participation* while at the same time it means capabilities of immediate response and less bureaucracy. Even though these links enable the transformation in the very nature and practice of politics, they “are connected indelibly to the political history of any one place or context.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, what Fenton reminds us of is that we cannot understand the nature of opposition to a particular politics if we do not reveal the political situation itself: “by ignoring actual politics, we end up depoliticizing counter politics, because we offer few suggestions as to how we can do democratic politics better.”<sup>31</sup>

Within this context, Fenton examines *Indymedia* and how it responded to the concerns of the anti-globalization movement in the early 2000s.<sup>32</sup> She argues that while there were great expectations for radical transformation at the time with the online collective of independent journalists as well as for a democratic Internet, twenty years on a more radical democratic politics has not materialized. In fact, she argues “the revolutionary potential of the Internet...has been well and captured by capitalism.”<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, she concludes that Indymedia and the anti-globalization movement are a part of the history of struggles that grows and changes over time and becomes wiser about building counter-politics. The question is: while overlooking mainstream journalists’ potential for activism, can Fenton’s framework offer insights about the oppositional *politics* of CBC journalists in their struggle against Tandem?

Another way to look at opposition to mainstream media politics is presented by McChesney, who looks at the media reform movement in the US in the early 2000s led primarily by a group he co-founded, Free Press.<sup>34</sup> Since it emerged, the organization has focused on activism and advocacy working to challenge corporations, influence policymakers and raise public awareness. It does “lobbying” work such as attempting to protect public and local broadcasting as well as making the Internet more democratic and accessible. To achieve these goals, Free Press relies among others on campaigners, lawyers, researchers and digital communicators. In other words, the author presents an interesting NGO-like model of organizing for change of the journalistic and online world - but he overlooks the option of mobilizing journalists associated with mainstream media networks.

*Freelance Journalism in a Digital Age*, McGill-Queen University Press, (2016) and Nicole S. Cohen and Greig De Peuter, *New Media Unions: Organizing Digital Journalists*, Routledge, (2020).

<sup>29</sup> Natalie Fenton, “Left Out? Digital Media, Radical Politics and Social Change,” *Information, Communication and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 3, (2016), pp. 346-361.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 347.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 358.

<sup>32</sup> Natalie Fenton “Indymedia and the Long Story of Rebellion Against Neoliberal Capitalism,” *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 42, No. 6 (2020), pp. 1052-1058.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 1054.

<sup>34</sup> Robert W. McChesney “Sharp Left Turn for the Media Reform Movement: Toward a Post-Capitalist Democracy,” *Monthly Review*, Vol. 69, No. 9, (2014), pp. 1-14.



When considering the case of Canadian activism with regards to the media, the scholarly work is extremely limited. Cross and Skinner explore the history of media reform activism in Canada and, according to them, the efforts were not successful.<sup>35</sup> They attribute the failure of the campaigns to: the regulatory process of the CRTC is difficult to access and much research is needed before engaging in that process. In addition, there is limited funding in Canada for the forms of activism they study - NGOs. Indeed, funding challenges have limited the impact of mobilizing support through online campaigns or as they put it: “revenue streams require constant tending and current reliance on supporter-based revenue has gone hand in hand with an increasing focus on Internet related issues.”<sup>36</sup> Again, like the aforementioned research, this study neglects the mobilization of journalists such as the former and current CBC ones opposed to the politics of management with regards to the journalism practices of the organization.

### Research Questions and Methodology

In recent years, scholars have come to accept that technology is conducive to political activism. Fenton recognized the significance of this link in her study of Indymedia, a grassroots alliance using technology to provide a counter narrative to the one provided by mainstream media during the Battle of Seattle and its aftermath.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, she argues that while technology in and of itself does not explain protests, it should not be ignored in the study of social movements.<sup>38</sup>

Hence, my turn to Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to help reveal the forces at play among actors - human and nonhuman - in the CBC current and former staff fight against management’s betrayal of what they consider the integrity of the institution they value.<sup>39</sup> My research question is framed by the gap in the literature on “paid content” which overlooks questions of resistance as well as the inadequate consideration in scholarly work on media activism to mobilization of journalists within mainstream news organizations. What, then, brings journalists together to resist “paid content” and how do they go about practicing their opposition?

Latour has argued that ANT is not a theory in the traditional sense but rather a guide to avoid imposing scientific paradigms or logic onto whatever “object” researchers are studying.<sup>40</sup> In this,

<sup>35</sup> Kathleen Cross and David Skinner “Organizing for Media Reform in Canada: Media Democracy Day, Open Media Day and Reimagine CBC,” in Des Freedman, Jonathan A. Obar, Cheryl Martens and Robert W. McChesney, *Strategies for Media Reform: International Perspectives*, Fordham University Press, (2016), pp. 167-180.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 174.

<sup>37</sup> Natalie Fenton “Indymedia and the Long Story of Rebellion Against Neoliberal Capitalism,” *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 42, No. 6 (2020), p. 1053.

<sup>38</sup> In her earlier writings, Fenton was optimistic about the potential of the Internet as a democratizing force but more recently, she has come to believe that “the Internet has been well and truly captured by capitalism... (and) the tech giants dominate our digital lives.” (1054).

<sup>39</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK (2007). ANT has been utilized to great effect by Alessandra Renzi. In her, *Hacked Transmissions: Technology and Connective Activism in Italy*, The University of Minnesota Press, (2020) she documents Italian media activists who transform TV from a medium that is passive, to a tool of social mobilization.

<sup>40</sup> Latour has written extensively on ANT as did others. I refer here primarily to ideas from: Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK (2007)

ANT is not bound to a specific methodology, even if it is often associated with ethnographies. That is because emphasizing practices reveals what actors - human and nonhuman - do, how they do it, and why they perform in the ways they do. Together, the researcher creates a momentary picture of a series of networks that interact and then transform into new networks. As Renzi summarizes the process of discovery in her ethnography of Teletstreet, an Italian media movement of pirate TV channels that emerged in 2002: “Neither technology nor political practices alone can make movements scalable and sustainable without careful and ongoing consideration of the interaction between these key elements and others.”<sup>41</sup>

Tracing the coming together of the current and former CBC journalists to create a network to oppose management's “paid content” plan is key since it allows us to reveal the initial stages of decision making regarding the “work” they hoped to do and how they would do it. Tracing the process of activism in its multidimensional trajectories, captures the contributions of the actors involved: the journalists, their laptops, their video cameras, as well as social media platforms and supporters. The “picture” that emerges is of media activism engaged through different means and resources and, while considering this as an episode - a moment in time - this case study adds another layer of possible research to forms of media resistance in the 21st century and, subsequently, its contribution to democratic politics.

### **Journalists United Against CBC's Tandem**

By way of introduction, the specifics of the Canadian case study should be revealed. Schudson reminds us of the need to uncover the significance of the political context of any journalistic endeavor: “the distinction between ‘market’ and ‘state’ organization of media, or between commercial or public forms of broadcasting, masks important differences within each category.”<sup>42</sup> Public broadcasting has taken different forms in countries such as Britain, Japan or the Scandinavian states.<sup>43</sup> In Canada, the public broadcaster is a quasi-independent corporation that receives the bulk of its funding from the federal government treasury. It is permitted to supplement its financial needs with advertising on all its platforms with the exception of radio. In recent years the real size of “subsidy” for CBC has declined and, similar to other mainstream media organizations -TV, radio, newspapers and magazines, the public broadcaster - has been trying to find alternative sources of revenue. At the same time, professionals associated with the CBC have mostly remained committed to public broadcasting as a pillar of Canada's public life. That is, journalists who (at one point or another) were employed by the organization have come to hold and articulate a view whereby their place of work - the public broadcaster - holds a vital place in society and, to maintain that role, must sustain a degree of autonomy from both state and *market*.

<sup>41</sup> Alessandra Renzi, *Hacked Transmissions: Technology and Connective Activism in Italy*, The University of Minnesota Press, (2020), p. 106.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Schudson, “Approaches to the Sociology of News,” In *Media and Society* (ed) James Curran and David Hesmondhalgh, (6th Edition) Bloomsbury Academic, (2019), 145.

<sup>43</sup> A very good analysis of the case of public broadcasting in Britain is provided by James Curran's “Media Politics,” pp. 187-217 in James Curran, *Media and Power*, Routledge, London and New York (2002). In particular, he looks at the shifts in public policy with respect to public broadcasting and regulation in the British media landscape. He does not discuss whether there was any input from journalists or whether journalists changed their priorities vis-a-vis broadcasters over time. My paper examines how CBC journalists - past and present - attempted to influence what they considered the changing direction of the public broadcaster.

Supporting this vision is the Canadian Media Guild (CMG), the union of employees associated with journalistic tasks at the CBC.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Actors and Creation of a Network**

On September 17, 2020, CBC’s sales arm Media Solutions announced the creation of Tandem, a business-to-business brand name for its content marketing sales group.<sup>45</sup> “Paid content” includes a wide range of customized content that is underwritten by the advertising client and is intended to sell or promote services or products. CBC had plans to place such content on all its platforms and expected its journalists to be involved in production and narration.<sup>46</sup> It was only after current and former CBC journalists mobilized against the plan and went public with their concerns that management modified its “vision.”

Immediately after CBC’s announcement, the CMG, the union representing CBC journalists, started receiving complaints from its members. The first public expression of dissatisfaction with Tandem came from the union three days after CBC’s announcement:

*We are disappointed that we were not advised, nor consulted about the new service given the ongoing concerns many Canadians and journalists have about the blurring of lines between advertising and product promotion, and news. In these critical times when fake news and misinformation are a global threat, we believe the national public broadcaster is uniquely placed to be a leader in safeguarding trust and reliability in our news services, on all platforms.<sup>47</sup>*

Beyond the public statement, however, there was little the union could do.

Among those who approached the union were Gillian, one of the hosts at *The Fifth Estate*, Carolyn, a reporter at *The National*, and Raj, the executive producer of *The Current*. T.V., who left the CBC a month before the Tandem announcement, worked for years as a producer at *The Sunday Edition*. Now as a former CBCer, she was appalled by the Tandem decision and contacted the others who, while still at CBC, were now mostly working from home due to the pandemic. They all agreed on a core principle: that the reputation of CBC, a bastion of journalistic integrity, was at stake and they, together with other current and former journalists at the public broadcaster, have worked hard to build and sustain the trust of the public. They decided that there was a need for current and former employees to join forces to actively campaign against management’s plan. The union, the CMG, was able to help by providing the contact lists of its current CBC members.

<sup>44</sup> CBC staff associated with administrative tasks are represented collectively by The Association of Professionals and Supervisors of CBC/Radio-Canada (APS).

<sup>45</sup> The information on Tandem comes from a letter submitted to the CRTC by CBC on November 24, 2020. It was written in response to a request by the Forum for Research and Policy in Communications (FRPC) to have the issue of Tandem raised during the CRTC license renewal hearings for CBC in January 2021. Radio-Canada, the French sister of CBC was also involved with Tandem but in this paper, I will mostly be referring to CBC.

<sup>46</sup> In 2020, CBC created paid content features for the Shaw Festival, Government of Ontario, National Gallery of Canada, and Prince Edward Island Tourism, among others.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.cmg.ca/en/2020/09/21/cmg-requests-answers-from-cbc-management-regarding-branded-content/>

T.V. was in charge of enlisting the support of former CBC journalists and she reached out to friends, colleagues, anyone who had connections with the corporation in the past. Her years as a producer helped her “chase down” people: from former presidents of CBC to managers to high profile reporters to producers to editors, to camera technicians to sound technicians and other technicians. Email addresses, phone numbers, electronic contact lists were an integral part of her professional life and, not surprisingly, they remained so when her post CBC-life began.<sup>48</sup> Within a week, she already had the commitment of a few hundred former CBCer’s to what was now referred to as the anti-Tandem campaign. Among the current staff, Gillian, Carolyn and Raj with the help of others were able to gain the commitment of a few hundred journalists as well.

When considering the role of social actors as ANT suggests, it is evident who they are in this context - current and former journalists - but there is more: some had pre-existing ties, others did not, some were older, others were younger, some were pensioners, others had no job-security at the CBC. And what about nonhuman actors? For all of the journalists - now becoming media activists - communication technologies became a “second skin” during the pandemic where there were no in person meetings. Given that they were primarily reporters, producers and the like, they were also familiar with the tools of the profession: laptops, video equipment, audio technologies, editing facilities and, of course, video conferencing. Interestingly enough, two former presidents of CBC, numerous former managers of radio and TV also joined the ranks of the campaign. Some of them would eventually write press releases, petitions and letters to MPs.

What they all shared was a commitment to public broadcasting and to what they considered journalistic integrity. As stated in an opinion piece written by one of the former CBC journalists for *The Toronto Star*, a month into the anti-Tandem campaign: “It’s a long-standing convention for reporters to avoid advocating in public on any issue. And journalists don’t tend to write about themselves. But when the issue is the integrity of journalism itself, who will investigate and inform Canadians about what is potentially being lost? ...Journalists have worked hard to build the reputation of the CBC - a reputation that is now apparently for sale.”<sup>49</sup>

This was the first in a series of articles written by former CBCers as a part of a campaign to bring public attention to the issues at stake with Tandem.<sup>50</sup>

Where does this commitment to CBC and its journalistic reputation come from? Moreover, why would CBC journalists - former or current - fight for what they considered journalistic integrity whereas journalists in other mainstream news outlets did not? The narrative here takes us back to

<sup>48</sup> I had a few conversations with T.V. over the months since she became involved in the campaign against Tandem. I did not know her at CBC, and Gillian who met her when she was guest hosting *The Sunday Edition* introduced me to her electronically early on in the process. Gillian and I worked together often at *The Fifth Estate* and we remained friends. We have talked quite often about Tandem and the activities of the core group of “insiders.”

<sup>49</sup> Kelly Crowe was the author of *The Star* article. <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2020/11/02/whats-really-being-offered-for-sale-at-the-cbc.html> This article was distributed to all activists on November 2, 2020 with a thank you note by T.V.

<sup>50</sup> For example, see the column of Tony Burman, former head of CBC News in *The Toronto Star* <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2020/11/20/why-the-cbc-needs-to-heed-barack-obamas-warning-about-the-blurring-of-news-and-entertainment-and-the-threat-to-democracy.html> and Linden MacIntyre’s opinion piece for *The Globe and Mail*: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-a-civil-war-is-erupting-over-the-soul-of-the-cbc/>

August 25, 2005, to what I consider a critical moment for CBC journalists when they were locked out by management after negotiations for a new contract broke down.<sup>51</sup> The critical issue to remember is that for the first time in CBC’s history there was a clear divide between management and journalists not only over wages and job security but also about the direction of the public broadcaster. At the time, the head of English Television was Richard Stursberg, a man who was considered an outsider, first, because he came from the “privates” and, second, he was the first person in the position from an entertainment background. Within months he managed to alienate most journalists in news and current affairs by comments that reflected an apparent lack of knowledge or understanding of what they did or why. With the lock out less than a year into his tenure and 5000 journalists walking the picket lines every day for six weeks, there was ample time and opportunity to rethink priorities about CBC and journalism. And indeed, once employees were back at work attitudes changed: the commitment to CBC became more clearly focused on its role as a public broadcaster and journalists function within that framework. Since then, the ethos among journalists has become precisely that: “The credibility of ‘our network’ is embedded in ‘our’ journalism.”<sup>52</sup>

So far, ANT helps reveal the scope of the emerging network of actors and their relationships that constitute the anti-Tandem activism. The question that remains is: how does the approach help capture their practices at work? I will focus on the first few months of activism in the lead up to the CBC license renewal hearings of the CRTC in January 2021.

### Actor-Network in Practice

By late September, 2020, two weeks into the mobilizing effort, there were over five hundred current and former CBC journalists supporting the campaign against Tandem. These numbers reflect those who signed a letter to Catherine Tait, the president and CEO as well as the board of directors. The letter was written by the core group of organizers behind the mobilization effort: Gillian, Carolyn and Raj, current CBCer’s and T.V, J.D. and K.W., former CBCer’s. The letter acknowledges that while CBC is under financial pressures with a changing media landscape, decreasing advertising revenues amidst a global pandemic,

*This new venture is short-sighted and threatens the very core of CBCs mission: integrity and trust...even more outrageous is the endorsement that “we will leverage the credibility of our network” The credibility that generations of journalists have given so much to build... is not anything to be leveraged. It will be compromised beyond repair if measures aren’t taken to forestall this plan.”<sup>53</sup>*

The letter concluded that if CBC decides to continue with Tandem, it should approach the government for a new mandate and funding model since it is betraying the integrity of what the public broadcaster represents. Days after the letter was sent, Tait and senior management asked to meet with the representatives of the insider group of journalists. In the aftermath of the meeting, senior management agreed to modify the plan: Tandem’s content would be solely on online

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/cbc-to-lock-out-5-500-employees-union-1.554131> (retrieved April 21, 2021)

<sup>52</sup> Linden MacIntyre in <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-a-civil-war-is-erupting-over-the-soul-of-the-cbc/>

<sup>53</sup> The letter from October 5, 2020 was shared among current and former journalists after input to earlier drafts.

platforms and CBC journalists would not be used to produce or narrate content. An achievement for the media activists indeed, but nonetheless insufficient: the sentiment was that there was no frank discussion with staff at CBC or the Canadian public about the plan.

At the same time, current and former journalists started discussing what to call the campaign against Tandem since they rejected the corporation's terminology: "branded content." Hundreds of emails were exchanged under the thread: *Owning the Language of the Tandem fight*, with phrases that activists hoped would encapsulate the content, perhaps "fake advertising" or "disguised advertising" or "selling the CBC brand?"<sup>54</sup> A former executive producer wrote: "My two cents - not sure the public will care about camouflaged commercials or disguised ads. It's not about the ads, it's about the news. Suggest focus be on terms like news for hire, or news as ads, or some other, better phrase that someone can come up with (absolutely avoiding the term fake news)." Later in the thread, A.C., suggested: "I like NEWS FOR HIRE... simple..." To bring some levity to the process, T.B. joked: "This sounds like a story meeting at *The National* or *The Journal*. It brings back memories!"<sup>55</sup> Soon afterward, K.C introduced a new idea: "I like PAID CONTENT because it's easily grasped and it allows expansion into many areas of concern." By the end of October, a consensus emerged among the current and former journalists around the simple and direct phrasing of "paid content."

With encouragement from the core group, the media activists were also writing letters to MPs, Senators and the Heritage Minister.<sup>56</sup> Former journalists dug up and renewed their contacts from their CBC days with politicians, newspapers and anyone they felt could help with the campaign.<sup>57</sup> Networks were also established through collaboration with *Friends of Canadian Broadcasting* and the *Forum for Research and Policy in Communications* (FRPC). *Friends* immediately appealed for public support with a petition: "Tandem must be Canceled" and due to the overwhelming response the Tandem page on the website crashed in the first 24 hours.<sup>58</sup> With FRCB, the media activists encountered a partner that could help open new doors: the *Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission*, the CRTC hearings to renew the license of CBC to be held in January 2021.<sup>59</sup> Specifically, the FRCB asked the CRTC to add information about the CBC's

<sup>54</sup> Email thread carried through from October 3 to October 15, 2020.

<sup>55</sup> *The National* is the nightly network TV news program and *The Journal* was a current affairs program running five nights a week after *The National* between 1982-1992.

<sup>56</sup> For example, on November 16, one activist, a former CBCer, shared the letter she wrote to her MP, Marco Mendicino, the Federal Minister for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship with the former CBC journalists to help the creation of a model for writing to politicians. On November 22, another former CBCer shared the letter to her MP, Mr Arif Virani.

<sup>57</sup> Current CBC employees were silent partners on this endeavor due to Journalistic Standards and Practices (JSP) which prevented them from engaging in political action. They were reminded by management about this restriction which according to T.V. in an email to the former journalists on November 18: "This is a bit rich, given the very existence of Tandem violates the basic principles of the CBC's JSP."

<sup>58</sup> <https://friends.ca/campaigns/tandem-must-be-cancelled/> On November 19, after the website crash, T.V. sent out a note to the former journalists: "They restored it quickly and, as of this morning, they had more than 3,000 signatures. We need to boost that number...Please share the link with your family and friends to ask them to sign on too."

<sup>59</sup> K.W. was a former special advisor of planning at CBC and is currently with FRCB. As a member of the core group of former CBC journalists, she played a critical role in liaising with FRCB.

“Tandem initiative” which meant that tough questions could be asked of CBC management’s representatives.

There was much work to be done before the hearings though and, most critically, the media activists were committing time and effort to increase the campaign profile on the Internet and social media. While a number of former journalists were working on the website, producing video testimonies and writing content, others were recruited to maintain the Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, J.S., a former CBC journalist in Montreal, successfully bridged the divide with French colleagues, current and former journalists, from Radio-Canada (SRC) and, by the end of 2020, they too had hundreds involved in the anti-Tandem campaign.

The CRTC hearings were held over a period of ten days in January 2021 - virtually. Media activists volunteered to observe and take notes of the proceedings. CBC management was asked questions about Tandem and responded by emphasizing “the guardrails” that would protect its journalism. The “guardrails” according to Catherine Tait were agreed to as a potential solution in the aftermath of “a thorough consultative process.”<sup>61</sup> But that was not how those involved in the anti-Tandem campaign saw it. As D.S. summarized the situation in an email:

*Guardrails, labels and banners are all about making this content, which is disguised to look like CBC journalism, seem so every slightly less so. A bit like a married person, on the make in a singles bar, pointing out that “well, I am wearing my wedding ring.” If it really isn’t meant to deceive and appear to be CBC journalism, why camouflage it at all?<sup>62</sup>*

### **Timeline of Events in Campaign Against Tandem**

- September 17, 2020. CBC unveils to the advertising community its new marketing campaign - Tandem.
- September 21, 2020. After the union representing CBC journalists, the Canadian Media Guild (CMG) began receiving a growing number of complaints about the new campaign, it filed a public complaint against management and put the issue on the agenda of the September National Joint Committee Meeting between the union and management.
- October 1, 2020. Letter to the CBC’s Board of Directors signing campaign begins.
- October 5, 2020. With the signatures of 265 current and former CBC journalists, the letter is sent to the Board of Directors. Even after the submission, people can still sign the letter and within a few weeks the number increases to over 500. Among those who sign a large number are publicly well-known including Peter Mansbridge, Brian Stewart, Linden MacIntyre, Adrienne Clarkson, Bob McKeown and Tony Burman.

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.stoppaidcontentoncbc.ca/>, <https://twitter.com/StopCBCTandem>, <https://www.facebook.com/Stop-Paid-Content-on-CBC-104383031544296/>, [https://www.instagram.com/stop\\_paid\\_content\\_on\\_cbc/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/stop_paid_content_on_cbc/?hl=en)

<sup>61</sup> CBC management had two meetings with the core group of current CBC journalists. It was in the aftermath of the first meeting in October that they decided to have “paid content” solely on online platforms. The second meeting took place in early December whereas the core group “listened” to new proposals of CBC management with regards to Tandem. According to Gillian, these were not consultations.

<sup>62</sup> January 28, 2021.

- *October 6, 2020. CBC's VP Barbara Williams announces a "brief pause" on all future "paid content" contracts. She pledges to revisit the concept and to develop "firewalls" between advertising and content for future attempts at sponsored content.*
- *October-November 2022. A letter campaign to MPs is initiated and pursued by former CBC journalists.*
- *November-December 2020. Numerous prominent former CBC journalists have opinion pieces published in various newspapers including The Globe and Mail and The Star. The articles focus on explaining the "uprising" of CBC journalists to the public.*
- *CRTC hearings.*
- *December 4, 2020. The CBC has issued new guidelines it says will "further strengthen and clarify the boundaries" between its journalistic content and advertising. Among them were restricting branded content exclusively to digital platforms, using the label "paid content" rather than "sponsored content," and making the source of the content apparent.*
- *January 18, 2021. CRTC hearings into license renewal of CBC begin. Tandem becomes a topic of discussion on the second day of the 10 days of hearings. On the third day, the Tandem controversy becomes a central issue of discussion.*
- *January 28, 2021. CRTC wraps up its hearings into CBC's license renewal application, with senior executives again responding to concerns about issues ranging from accountability to paid online content.*
- *June 23, 2022. In its decision to renew the CBC's (and SRC's) broadcasting license until 2027, the CRTC ruled that it would not limit the activities of the public broadcaster's paid content division-Tandem*

### **Practical Implications and Conclusions**

"Paid content" has been helping various mainstream media outlets survive in the current environment where advertisers have gravitated to tech giants like Facebook and Google. So, it is not surprising that scholars have explored the process and aftermath of the transition to "paid content": what it entails, how it is done and (perhaps) the consequences for the audience. But what happens when the journalists resist blurring the lines between fact and fiction, in particular in a public broadcasting environment where the workforce is unionized? This question has not been asked so far by scholars. By exploring the anti-Tandem campaign of current and former CBC employees, my paper offers a glimpse into a conflict that transcends traditional labor-management issues.

It also aimed at including a dimension of media activism neglected by academics looking into recent resistance to the mainstream media model. The protest against CBC management's Tandem initiative revealed that important struggles can and do occur *within* the mainstream news institutions themselves. Granted, the fact that the CBC is a unionized public broadcaster may partially explain the activism. But the key ingredient bringing journalists together is their commitment to public service journalism where facts and accuracy cannot and should not be blurred by commercial interests. Notwithstanding, the reality of CBC as a mainstream media outlet with declining revenues, for those involved in the campaign there were lines that the public broadcaster should not cross. Other solutions that did not compromise the journalism needed to be found.



To be sure, ANT offered a useful set of tools to examine the campaign against Tandem. With ANT as a framework, my paper has identified email, Google, and the phone among other non-human actors as integrated into current and former journalists' practices and use of their pre-existing skills, creativity and speed with these technologies became an integral part of reformulated networks.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, because of the role of the Internet for current and previous CBC journalists in information-gathering, fact-checking, source-finding, story idea generation, news distribution, and increasing audience reach, these actors were able to be efficient in organizing against CBC management and Tandem. Exploring these practices with ANT, in brief, allowed for the capturing of a moment in time. In fact, perhaps this approach or method is useful in that it invites the researcher to reconsider the importance and the meaning of protest mobilization in a wider context to understand how such campaigns *order* or *anchor* other practices.<sup>64</sup>

Tied to this last point is a critical question: what were the intentions of the CBC media activists beyond the Tandem campaign, if any? Were they interested in a broader critique of neoliberalism and capitalism? Fenton suggests that any research into 21st century counter politics should consider this question.<sup>65</sup> For most former CBC journalists involved in the anti-Tandem campaign, the bigger issue that required attention is an ad-free CBC.<sup>66</sup> Throughout the months of activism in late 2020, the issue of Tandem was framed in the context of the need for a new model of funding for the public broadcaster: a commercial free one. Former journalists were not necessarily nostalgic for something they believed CBC once was, rather they were looking forward toward what they thought it could be: a “PBS North” where programming would be considered and decided not on the basis of advertising revenue but on the basis of Canadian produced content. Hence, one may consider the anti-Tandem activism as a “moderate” form of critique of capitalism in that the public had a right to a television network that was based on something other than profit. It was with this new model, the activists believed, that journalists could inform the public without prejudice and, as a result, would allow for a more democratic politics.

Notwithstanding the significance of the mobilization of CBC current and former journalists, the question remains: has the CRTC reached a decision with respect to Tandem and the CBC? On June 22, 2022, the CRTC released its findings stating that CBC can keep its controversial advertising model - Tandem - ruling that it “remains pertinent” for the federally funded organization’s budget

<sup>63</sup> A good example of a study that focuses on the “basic” technologies in use and in a relationship with journalists is; Ursula Plesner, “An Actor-Network Perspective on Changing Work Practices,” *Journalism*, Vol. 10, No. 5 (2009), pp. 604-626.

<sup>64</sup> See: David Domingo, Pere Masip and Irene Costera Meijer, “Tracing Digital News Networks: Towards an Integrated Framework of the Dynamics of News Production, Circulation and Use,” *Digital Journalism*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2015), p. 61.

<sup>65</sup> Natalie Fenton, “Left Out? Digital Media, Radical Politics and Social Change,” *Information, Communication and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 3, (2016), p. 357.

<sup>66</sup> After the CRTC hearings one former journalist sent a note to say that he felt the group did what it could and now was the time to move on. He was the only activist who withdrew from the e-mailing list. As far as the current CBC journalists are concerned, the discussion around the “bigger issues” was less of a priority. On December 10, 2020, T.V., the former CBC journalist who spearheaded the mobilization of the media activists expressed her frustration with the current CBC journalists by sending them an email (and then sharing it with the former group) because she felt they should be pressuring their bosses in the news department to report on the Tandem campaign and create a “louder” public debate.

despite serious concerns expressed by advocacy groups and, most importantly, a large segment of its own current and former journalists.<sup>67</sup> As the report puts it:

*The revenue-generating activities of the Tandem initiative are onside with the general approach that has been taken with the CBC in the past and consistent with the context in which the CBC currently finances its operations. This overall approach remains pertinent, particularly in light of the CBC's funding model...As such, the Commission finds that it should not limit the CBC's commercial activities any further than they already are.*<sup>68</sup>

And yet, remember, the CRTC's decision took place despite its own admission that it heard significant concerns from a host of people including journalists about the public broadcaster producing its own paid content during the ten days of hearings in January 2021. In fact, the only groups to express support for CBC's Tandem were the Association of Canadian Advertisers and the public broadcaster itself, according to the ruling.<sup>69</sup>

What does the anti-Tandem campaign illuminate with respect to scholarship on media activism? Perhaps the struggles within mainstream news organizations that go beyond labor organizing attract less attention in the current academic environment where journalism start-ups have become a growth industry with challenges that are more engaging intellectually. Or maybe issues surrounding questions such as what is journalism today and who it represents are more pertinent. Notwithstanding these important areas of intellectual engagement, one should also consider struggles and campaigns occurring with the mainstream media - whether they achieve their goals or not. The mobilization of former and current CBC journalists is a case in point. Much is to be said for the initiative they took, the commitment they had and the potential for other campaigns in the future. Indeed, the email chain among former CBCers has remained active on Tandem and beyond, albeit less intense than during the height of the campaign. And CBC insiders are not discouraged either: fulfilling the role of a guardrail preventing further erosion of journalistic integrity.

<sup>67</sup> See: <https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/archive/2022/2022-165.htm>

<sup>68</sup> The CRTC decision was made in the context of renewing the CBC and its sister the French-language SRC's broadcasting license until 2027.

<sup>69</sup> In the aftermath of the CRTC decision numerous complaints were filed to the Canadian Heritage Minister including in August 22 The *Canadian Media Producers Association* (CMPA), the *Canadian Association of Broadcasters* (CAB), and *Friends of Canadian Broadcasting*. They argued that they had "deep concerns" about the elimination of a licence condition requiring the CBC to work with independent media producers in the production of Canadian programming.



### Reference List

- Asquith, Kyle & Hearn, Alison. "Promotional Prime Time: "Advertainment," Internal Network Promotion and the Future of Canadian Television." *Canadian Journal of Communication*. 2012. Vol. 37. No. 2, pp. 241-257.
- Block, Anders & Jensen, Torben. *Bruno Latour: Hybrid Thoughts in a Hybrid World*, Routledge. 2012. Chapter 1. On the Trails of Bruno Latour's Hybrid World, pp. 1-25 and Chapter 5. *Sociology of Associations*, pp. 102-129.
- Burman, Tony. "Why the CBC needs to heed Barack Obama's warning about the blurring of news and entertainment — and the threat to democracy." *The Toronto Star*. November 20, 2020. (Retrieved April 21, 2021.)
- Callison, Candis & Mary Lynn Young. *Reckoning: Journalism's Limits and Possibilities*. Oxford University Press. 2020.
- Carlson, Matt. "When News Sites Go Native: Redefining the Advertising-Editorial Divide in Response to Native Advertising." *Journalism* (2015). Vol. 16. No. 7, pp. 849-865.
- Cohen, Nicole S. and Greig De Peuter. *New Media Unions: Organizing Digital Journalists*, Routledge. (2020).
- Cohen, Nicole S. *Freelance Journalism in a Digital Age*. McGill-Queen University Press. (2016).
- Cross, Kathleen and Skinner, David. "Organizing for Media Reform in Canada: Media Democracy Day, Open Media Day and Reimagine CBC." in Freedman, Des. Obar, Jonathan A. Martens, Cheryl and McChesney, Robert W. *Strategies for Media Reform: International Perspectives*, Fordham University Press. 2016, pp. 167-180.
- Crow, Kelly. "What's Really Being Offered for Sale at CBC." *The Toronto Star*. November 2, 2020.
- Curran, James. *Media and Power*. Routledge, Londond and New York (2002).
- Domingo, David. Masip, Pere and Costera Meijer, Irene. "Tracing Digital News Networks: Towards an Integrated Framework of the Dynamics of News Production, Circulation and Use." *Digital Journalism*. (2015) Vol. 3. No. 1. pp. 53-67.
- Deuze, Mark and Tamara Witschge. *Beyond Journalism*. Cambridge, UK; Polity Press. 2020.
- Deuze, Mark. "What Journalism is (Not)." *Social Media + Society*. July-September 2019, pp.1-4.
- DiManno, Rosie. "Shame on the Globe and Mail for running Chinese government Propaganda," *The Toronto Star*; September 24, 2020 (Retrieved March 11, 2021).
- Fenton, Natalie. "Indymedia and the Long Story of Rebellion Against Neoliberal Capitalism." *Media, Culture & Society*. 2020. Vol. 42. No. 6, pp. 1052-1058.
- Fenton, Natalie. "Left Out? Digital Media, Radical Politics and Social Change." *Information, Communication and Society*. 2016. Vol. 19. No. 3, pp. 346-361.
- Glasser, Theodore, Varma, L. Anita and Zou, Sheng. "Native Advertising and the Cultivation of Counterfeit News." *Journalism*. 2019. Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 150-153.
- Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK. 2007.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Mass. 1993.
- MacIntyre, Linden. "A Civil War is Erupting Over the Soul of CBC." *The Globe & Mail*. December 9, 2020. (Retrieved April 21, 2021).

- McChesney, Robert W. "Sharp left Turn for the Media Reform Movement: Toward a Post-Capitalist Democracy." *Monthly Review*. 2014. Vol. 69. No. 9, pp. 1-14.
- Mosco, Vincent. "Social Media versus Journalism and Democracy." *Journalism*. 2019. Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 180-184.
- Plesner, Ursula. "An Actor-Network Perspective on Changing Work Practices." *Journalism*, 2009. Vol. 10. No. 5. pp. 604-626.
- Renzi, Alessandra. *Hacked Transmissions: Technology and Connective Activism in Italy*, The University of Minnesota Press, 2020.
- Schudson, Michael. "Approaches to the Sociology of News." *Media and Society*. (ed) James Curran and David Hesmondhalgh. (6th Edition) Bloomsbury Academic. London, UK. (2019). Pp. 139-165.
- Serazio, Michael. "How News Went Guerrilla Marketing: A History, Logic and Critique of Brand Journalism." *Media, Culture & Society*. 2021. Vol. 43, No. 1, 117-132.
- Serazio, Michael. "Making (Branded) News: The Corporate Co-optation of Online Journalism Production." *Journalism Practice*. 2020. Vol. 14. No. 6, pp. 679-696.
- Zelizer, Barbie. "Why Journalism is About More than Digital Technology." *Digital Journalism*. 2019. Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 343-350.
- Zelizer, Barbie. "Terms of Choice: Uncertainty, Journalism and Crisis." *Journal of Communication*, 2015. Vol. 65, pp. 888-908.

---

*Tamar Weinstein* (tamar.weinstein.tw@gmail.com) is a director, producer, and researcher based in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.