

Konieczna, Magda, University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Out of Our Pocket: Canadians debate the merits of public broadcasting, 1928-1932"

The global economic crisis has brought to the forefront deep and permanent changes in the news industry. Each element in the traditional funding triumvirate – readers, corporate advertisers and, in the case of newspapers, classified advertisements – is being eroded by changes in technology and in civic participation. Many scholars argue that the traditional funding model cannot survive and alternative models are needed. These alternatives include nonprofits, government or endowment funded news, and a return to pre-internet subscription models.

I examine the discussion around one of these models – government funded news – in Canada. In the 1930s, the Canadian government started a taxpayer-funded public radio network, which later became the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. In the prior decade, Canadians participated in an intense discussion about whether taxpayers should play a role in funding media. My paper analyzes the public's appetite for government-funded news by examining those conversations through newspaper articles, commission notes and government reports. What did Canadians believe such a broadcaster would achieve that commercial stations, which already existed at the time, could not? What opposing arguments were advanced?

My analysis reveals that in Canada in the 1920s and 1930s, questions of quality of journalism were rarely raised. Instead, those who argued for a government-funded news corporation were interested primarily in ensuring each Canadian had access to radio coverage, and blocking out American broadcasts that were seen as diluting Canadian culture. In short, government involvement in radio was seen as a mode of forging national identity or building a national community, and not of ensuring good journalism. This finding, that the publicly-perceived purpose of public broadcasting was to promote group cohesion and culture, supports the case for government funding of news media.

Magda Konieczna is a first-year PhD student at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research interests include political economy and media economics, and it is from this perspective that she studies government-funded news. Prior to coming to UW, she worked as a print journalist in Canada for five years.