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## Sacrificing the Spotlight

**In his play “As You Like it,” William Shakespeare claimed, “All the world’s a stage.”**

Though Shakespeare probably did not have North America in mind when he penned this famous statement, truer words have never been written about the interactions between the United States and Canada.

Many Canadians will be quick to say that America steals the hypothetical spotlight from its often overlooked, seemingly invisible neighbor. It seems that while every nation in the world is aware of what happens in the self-proclaimed “land of the free”, Canadian news remains relatively disregarded and unexamined by those living outside of the country. Most foreigners identify Canada as a place simply filled with beer swilling, maple syrup consuming, hockey loving Canucks and not as a country occupied by intelligent and powerful innovators. While the U.S. is repeatedly given a leading role in the figurative dramatic world play, Canada is relegated to being a mere supporting cast member again and again. The question is, why?

On one hand, it is no wonder that the people who live in the United States are able to consistently attract a large audience to view and analyze the goings-on in their country. After all, every event in America is treated like a spectacle. Take the recent American federal election, for example. Approximately seven billion dollars were spent on this year’s American election while only \$291 million went into funding the 2011 Canadian federal election.

Believe that the United States does not always spend such an extravagant amount of money on their elections? Think again. The production value of a typical American election is much more than that of a typical Canadian election; while the cost of the 2008 Canadian federal election was an ostensibly high \$290 million, this value is miniscule compared to the whopping \$5.3 billion spent on the American federal election that took place during the same year - approximately 17 times the Canadian cost. Much of the money used to fund these American elections went towards paying for flashy and hateful attack ads instead of travel fees and staff members- components of a campaign that would not necessarily attract more attention but would ultimately prove to make each candidate's campaign more effective. In addition, any move that that any political candidate makes is overly highlighted and exploited by media outlets to the point where these moves become globally acknowledged incidents; anything that occurs during an election season is scrutinized, showcased, and exaggerated by news anchors and *Saturday Night Live* comedians alike. As a result of this overexposure, many people knew more about the fact that Mitt Romney made a questionable comment about Sesame Street character Big Bird than they do about any of his actual policies or campaign promises. American media outlets make a conscious effort to treat every national election like a show meant to entertain the citizens of their country instead of an event meant to educate or inform.

With this idea in mind, it would be easy for any Canadian to claim that the reason why America repeatedly earns a lead role in the metaphorical world play is that the American media shamelessly over-analyzes and over-exposes anything that occurs in their country. It is,

however, important to take account of the fact that the Canadian media is not exactly ignoring what happens in the United States. Several weeks ago, the news that Barack Obama was reelected in the United States presidential race and would resume his position as president for four more years made headlines throughout America – *and* throughout Canada.

When I woke up the morning after the election, I was surprised to find that no less than six entire pages of the *Toronto Star* newspaper were dedicated to news about and analysis of the outcome of the American election. In some ways, this amount of coverage is understandable – after all, America is Canada's closest neighbor as well as our country's strong trade partner and military ally. The changes that occur within the American governmental system will affect some of the judgments that the Canadian government makes. *The Toronto Star's* decision to include such a significant amount of American news in their publication, however, is still questionable. Their choice would be more excusable if the articles about the American election included some content regarding how the election results would affect our country; however, none of the election articles in the *Toronto Star* – and very few articles from other Canadian news publications printed the day after the election – concerned Canada to any significant extent.

On one level it is reasonable that an event as noteworthy as the American election would garner such an extensive amount of coverage the morning after the election results were announced. A few days *after* the election, however, I visited the *Toronto Star* website and was surprised to find that the United States was still receiving a significant amount of

attention from this publication. The story that was highlighted on the main news section of the website was about Barack Obama – not about any of the numerous Canadian hot topics such as Justin Trudeau’s possible role as the new leader of the Liberal Party of Canada or the status of the new omnibus budget bill.

Canadian news publications are not the only entities making questionable decisions; those in charge of choosing programming for Canadian media outlets, specifically national broadcasting stations such as CTV, Global, and CBC are not completely above suspicion. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) is the organization that regulates Canadian broadcasting and telecommunications systems – that is, Canadian television and radio. One of the main responsibilities of the CRTC is to ensure that Canadian radio and television stations are broadcasting a specified amount of Canadian content or “CanCon.” In 2000, the CRTC released a public notice that stated that “the largest multi-station ownership groups” – CTV Television Network, Global Television Network, Western International Communications (WIC) and TVA – “will be required to broadcast, over the broadcast year, on average at least eight hours per week of priority Canadian programs during the 7-11 p.m. viewing period.” This is not asking a lot of those in charge of selecting programs for Canadian television stations; eight hours a week between the hours of seven and eleven is less than a quarter of the total peak viewing time period and only adds up to just over an hour a day of Canadian programming. Furthermore, it makes sense for the members of the CRTC to try to ensure that Canadian broadcasters are airing a substantial amount of Canadian content. As it says on the CRTC website, Canadians have a

desire to see their country represented on television. I cannot speak for all Canadians, but I wholeheartedly admit that I experience a level of excitement and pride when I watch a television show with the knowledge that the show takes place in Canada, was created by Canadians, and features Canadian characters. The CRTC also admits that it is important to ensure that there is a sufficient amount of Canadian programming because there is a “high proportion of U.S. entertainment in the peak time schedules of private broadcasters.” (That is, the broadcasting stations that are owned by one of the multi-station ownership groups mentioned above.)

The CRTC is certainly correct in this assessment of the amount of U.S. television programs that are aired by Canadian broadcasters. According to the CRTC, a television program cannot be considered Canadian unless a Canadian produces it. With that in mind, one could visit the website of CTV, one of Canada’s three main television networks, and do some online research in order to determine how many of the programs on CTV’s current schedule are Canadian. CTV does, in fact, meet the required eight hours a week of priority Canadian programming on its primetime schedule – albeit barely. According to the CRTC, Canadian drama programs are given a 150% time credit, meaning that a one-hour drama amounts to one and a half hours of CanCon. Accounting for this time credit and considering the fact that Canadian news programs are not counted as “priority programs” by the CRTC (and thus do not factor in to the required average of eight hours), CTV is airing six and a half hours of Canadian programming a week from seven to eleven p.m. during the fall to spring television season and eleven hours of Canadian programming per week during the summer

season. When combining these two totals, the result comes to an average of 8.75 hours.

Despite the fact that CTV is obeying the rules outlined by the Commission, it is still painfully obvious that those in charge of CTV programming continue to prioritize content from the ever theatrical, stage-ready America over content from the less showy Canada; out of the fifty-four total programs that CTV airs, only eight of those programs are Canadian. It is also important to note that CTV includes more Canadian programming in their schedule during the summer – a time during which people are more likely to spend time outdoors than watch television because of the warmer weather. Thus, while CTV could argue that the concentration of Canadian programming aired on their network *does* increase during part of the year, it is important to keep in mind that it increases during a part of the year when most individuals will likely not be exposed to this programming.

A click over to the website of Global TV, another widely viewed Canadian television network, would reveal results similar to that of CTV. Canadian programming makes up 25% of Global's prime and non-prime time schedule– not as pathetic as CTV's measly 15%. Global, however, still scarcely meets the CTBC broadcasting requirement. During the fall-to-summer season, Global TV airs seven and a half hours of Canadian programming per week between the hours of seven and eleven p.m. and in the summer they air nine hours per week during the same time period. Thus, Global's average amount of CanCon per week is 8.25 hours – just above the required amount and even lower than CTV's average.

The final stop on this quest for information is the website of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, more commonly known as the CBC. Though the CBC has its own

radio station], it is best to focus on the content that is found on its television network.

Factoring in the amount of Canadian content that is broadcasted on CBC's radio station would not give anyone an accurate idea of the total quantity of CanCon to which Canadians are being exposed. The significance of radio and its impact on the average consumer has decreased significantly over the past decade, as listening to music on iPods and other portable music players has become more popular than listening to music or talk shows on the radio.

CBC is widely considered to be the quintessential source for Canadian media content and news, and after visiting the CBC website one would find that this assessment is incredibly accurate; without even factoring in the 150% time credit given to drama programs, during the 2012-2013 television season CBC is airing a substantial ten and a half hours of Canadian television programs per week. Furthermore, without including the news and sports programs that are aired on CBC TV, 50% of all television shows included in the current CBC schedule are Canadian.

On the surface, this data seems promising; Canadian programming is being aired on three separate major television networks, one of which makes a point of having Canadian programs make up half of their entire show list. With this in mind, how can one claim that Canadian citizens are not being exposed to enough Canadian television content and that the media is allowing America to overshadow Canada on the world stage? The truth is that while Canadian television networks have a convincing façade, behind the curtains everything is not as it seems. According to the website of BBM Canada – which measures the number of

people who tune in to certain television and radio programs each week – not many Canadian television viewers choose to take advantage of the smorgasbord of CanCon that is available to them. During the week of October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012, only two out of the thirty most-watched television programs in Canada – *Flashpoint* and *Dragon's Den* – were produced by Canadians. Only one of these two programs, *Dragon's Den*, airs on the foremost source of Canadian programming, CBC. The number of people who tune into CBC has decreased even more this year, since *Hockey Night in Canada* – arguably CBC's most popular program – is cancelled until further notice due to the NHL lockout.

This decline in viewership has forced CBC executives to make extreme budget cuts and let go of many of their staff members – a troubling sign for the future of CBC and thus Canadian-based television content as a whole. Luckily, organizations such as Friends of Canadian Broadcasting make it their goal to try to preserve Canadian programming. Ian Morrison, the spokesperson for Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, says that there is still some level of a demand for Canadian programming within the Canadian public. He, however, also admits that the current Harper government takes a “marketplace stance” with every issue, meaning that every government decision is made in hopes of financial gain. Morrison goes on to say that if there were not any organizations demanding that Canada be represented in the media, the government would probably choose to cut off funding for CBC altogether. Most Canadian fictional television programs, particularly dramas, are expensive to produce while American programs can be purchased for a lesser amount of money; this helps to explain why the majority of the programs aired on Canada's major television networks are



American. It does not, however, excuse Canadian broadcasting executives from trying to incorporate CanCon into Canadian television schedules. Furthermore, there has to be a reason why Canadians are not watching the Canadian television programs that *are* being funded. The reason is possibly that CBC, as well as Global and CTV, are not making enough of an effort to advertise their Canadian programs. I frequently see advertisements for American television shows such as *Glee*, *Criminal Minds*, and *The Big Bang Theory* on television channels, posters, and in newspapers and magazines. Rarely, however, do I see advertisements for Canadian television programs. In addition, the only time that I see advertisements for CBC programs is when I am watching another program on CBC. This advertising strategy is not very effective, as those who already watch CBC will likely already be aware of and have at least some knowledge of the network's programming schedule.

Furthermore, CBC is not doing enough to advertise their television network and programs to a younger audience. Members of the forty and above age group have likely been exposed to more Canadian content on television because twenty years ago there were not as many options of imported American programs for Canadian networks to put in their TV schedules. Contrarily, those who are younger have much more American programming available to them. Of ten grade twelve students that I surveyed, not one could name one of CBC's television programs. This is problematic; if people are not exposed to Canadian news and television programming at a young age, it is likely that they will not care about Canadian news and programming when they get older, and programs like *Dragon's Den* will eventually no longer have an audience. As Morrison explains, a child who is twelve years of

age will watch about 12,000 hours of television a year, much of which is produced by Americans. As they grow up, they will know a lot more about – and thus be more interested in – what is happening in Miami and Los Angeles than in Edmonton and Halifax. What will happen then? If an increasingly high number of Canadians begin to believe that exposure to Canadian news and content is unimportant, then the media will likely start giving American news and content even more attention than they do already.

That is when the metaphorical global performance will begin. America and Canada will both step out from behind the curtains, each thinking that they have earned their role on the world stage and each thinking that they deserve recognition and admiration from the audience that observes and scrutinizes their every move. Canada will step forward tentatively, prepared to give a powerful and gut-wrenching monologue that will both impress and emotionally move the spectators when, suddenly, an intensely bright spotlight will be shone from the bleachers and onto America. America will not hesitate to grin dazzlingly and bow with an air of theatricality, as if this turn of events was entirely expected. The audience will immediately go wild, standing up from their cushiony theatre seats to stomp their feet, clap their hands and holler words of praise and encouragement to America, now the star of this production. Meanwhile, Canada will shrink back towards the curtains and become enveloped in darkness once again, upset that America is receiving so much attention; Canada will speak up about this mistreatment but will be too afraid to try to prevent this sort of occurrence from happening again.

Yes, many Canadians believe that it is unfair that America is often given a standing ovation while our country is forced to stand behind the curtain, even when we do something or make a statement that is meaningful and important. What Canadians do not consider, however, is that America is not taking the spotlight away from us. Rather, we are handing the spotlight over to them through American-based news coverage, American-based television programming, and lack of advertising for Canadian-based television content. While many Canadians claim that it is important to try to disconnect ourselves from the United States in order to increase our sense of national pride and identity, we are constantly pulled in by American media and personalities and do not hesitate to give American news and television programming a lot of attention - even more attention than we give news and television programs that are created in our country. If we as Canadians want our country to have as a greater, better-known global presence, we have to give ourselves attention before we can expect others give attention to us. Then, who knows? Perhaps we will be able to attract the full house that we've always wanted and finally put on an amazing production of *Score: A Hockey Musical*. . . or, you know, something else.