

The Public Policy Pedagogy of Corporate and Alternative News Media

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Abstract This paper argues for seeing in-depth news coverage of political, social, and economic issues as “public policy pedagogy.” To develop my argument, I draw on Nancy Fraser’s democratic theory, which attends to social differences and does not assume that unity is a starting point or an end goal of public dialogue. Alongside the formation of “subaltern counterpublics” (Fraser), alternative media outlets sometimes develop. There, members of alternative publics debate their interests and strategize about how to be heard in wider, mass-mediated public arenas. I address the normative implications of this non-unitary, multiple-publics model for news journalism, analyzing how current conventions in mainstream news journalism (e.g., “balance” defined as “airing two extremes”) can restrict public debate and impoverish the public policy pedagogy on offer. I illustrate my arguments with a case study of media coverage of the creation and implementation of a social justice curriculum in British Columbia, Canada.

Keywords Democracy · Queer counterpublic · News journalism · Alternative media · Social justice curriculum

News journalism remains the primary, if imperfect, source of information for most people about the public sphere and spotlights issues for political debate and action. Further, many journalists still describe their work as central to democracy; for example, they see themselves as watchdogs against abuses of power and helping to air unorthodox viewpoints (Gardner et al. 2001). Yet the current state of concentrated and corporate ownership of media raises concerns about diversity of opinions and analyses about matters of public concern—diversity that is central to a healthy democracy. Additional concerns arise given the influence of media on the public’s sense of self and other, particularly for social groups who do not participate equally in the production and dissemination of dominant culture and are rarely seen as legitimate sources for news stories, even when those stories are about

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them (e.g., Manning 2001). To foreground journalism's role in informing the public (conceived as multiple audiences) and supporting democracy, I propose to frame in-depth news coverage of issues and events as *public policy pedagogy*. The texts and images represented in (and absent from) news media teach powerful lessons about what societal conditions get transformed into "problems," how certain "problems" get framed within policy proposals, who becomes seen as a legitimate policy actor, and what range of solutions get brought forward for consideration.

To explore and illustrate this idea, in this article I systematically examine the news coverage of social justice curriculum change in British Columbia, Canada from 1999 to 2008 and how this important set of policies has been framed in corporate-owned and alternative news outlets. I will focus specifically on: efforts by teacher-activists to fight for a social justice curriculum, including discussion of a diversity of family forms, heteronormativity, and gay and lesbian issues; the BC Ministry of Education's *Settlement Agreement* with Murray and Peter Corren (BC Human Rights Tribunal 2006); and subsequent implementation activities. I have selected social justice curriculum change as an issue because it revolves around questions of identity and belonging and the role of public schooling in defining the boundaries of citizenship and adjudicating the recognition of potentially competing rights (i.e., religious freedom versus equality rights).

Theoretical Framework

There are a number of competing models of democracy, each one carrying certain normative implications for news journalism (Stromback 2005). I draw on Nancy Fraser's (1997, 2008) democratic theory, which attends to social differences and does not assume that unity is a starting point or an end goal of public dialogue. Multiple publics exist, albeit with unequally valued cultural styles and unequal access to the material means of disseminating their ideas. Members "of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics" (Fraser 1997, p. 81). Alongside the formation of alternative publics, alternative media outlets sometimes develop. There, members debate their interests and strategize about how to be heard in wider, mass-mediated public arenas.

It is important to recognize that Fraser's (2008) theorizing draws from both agonistic and discourse ethics models of democracy and that the latter model is itself a variant within the deliberative or communicative democracy tradition. In its more agonistic register, Fraser's approach emphasizes contestation, "cultivating responsiveness to emergent exclusions" (2008, p. 419). In its more discourse ethical register, Fraser's approach "also valorizes the moment of closure, which enables political argument, collective decision making, and public action—all of which it deems indispensable for remedying injustice" (p. 420). Refusing to see agonistic and discourse ethical approaches as antithetical, she argues for "a grammar of justice that incorporates an orientation to closure, needed for political argument, but that treats every closure as *provisional*—subject to question, possible suspension, and thus to reopening" (p. 419).

What are the normative implications of this non-unitary, multiple-publics model of democracy for news journalism? As in other models, it is essential that media provide forums for political discussions and honor "the importance of factually correct information and of news journalism providing some basic information about how society and the political processes work" (Stromback 2005, p. 341). In addition, news journalism should frame politics as issues subject to debate, present societal problems as open to human

intervention and possible solution, and “mobilize the citizens’ interest, engagement, and participation in public discussions” and decision making (p. 341). An underlying assumption is that resources, institutional support, and investigative initiative exist to support quality journalism—or at least that alternative news media (as opposed to media owned and controlled only by corporations or government) exist.

This model of democracy is consonant with a critical policy studies approach (see, e.g., Levinson and Sutton 2001; Orsini and Smith 2007), which, in turn, rests on a conflict theory of society. Thus, policy can be seen as a process that is always subject to politics, each step struggled over by groups with competing interests who are unequally empowered to see their values legitimized. Government-issued or legally authorized policy texts, while important as official policy, are provisional compromises or temporary settlements. Equally important is the moment “when the formulated charter, temporarily reified as text, is circulated across the various institutional contexts, where it may be applied, interpreted, and/or contested by a multiplicity of local actors” (Levinson and Sutton 2001, p. 2). Similarly important is the period when conditions get transformed into “problems” that can be “solved” or addressed through particular policy proposals. Here, critical policy analysts have attended closely to discursive framing (Edelman 1988; Kenney 2003) and “how the frames will affect what can be thought about and how this affects possibilities for action” (Bacchi 2000, p. 50).

This model of critical policy analysis—in combination with the non-unitary, multiple-publics model of democracy—provide me with an “alternative framework of reference” (Hall 1999, p. 517) as I interpret the news as public policy pedagogy. This pedagogy writ large carries the potential for enhancing democracy but more often, in today’s media landscape, engenders exclusion. The structural bias in corporate news media toward the dominant in society can be traced to the production of news (e.g., the business model, the use of elite and official sources), its circulation (e.g., the largest online portals for news remain corporate), and consumption (e.g., the motivation to deliver audiences to advertisers encourages an image of the reader as a self-interested consumer rather than a public-minded citizen).

This structural bias, along with reporting norms and conventions and widely accepted textual practices, all work to announce the dominant frame of a news story. Of course, meaning is never fixed; any given news story is open to multiple interpretations, depending on a reader’s social location, emotional investments, and values. Nevertheless, one can speak of what Hall (1999) called the “preferred” or “dominant” reading because of the way the media text has been encoded at various stages (production, circulation, consumption). Readers may share part of the dominant ideologies encoded in a news story yet resist and modify the text’s codes in other parts; Hall refers to this as “negotiated” reading (p. 516). Still others may recognize the preferred reading but, based on an alternative perspective (such as the critical policy and radical democracy framework I sketched above), reject the dominant code in favor of an “oppositional” reading (p. 517).

Hall’s theorizing of the dynamic relationship between news production and audience, together with the work of other scholars working in the field of cultural and media studies, have informed the concept of *pedagogy* that I use in this paper. The concept acknowledges that pedagogy (like policy) is a process that, ultimately, requires attention to both teaching and learning, to both texts and how they are interpreted and used by readers (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2003, p. 396)—in short, to interactivity. The concept of *public pedagogy* underscores the recognition of sites of education beyond formal schooling; news media, for example, constitute a public pedagogy that simultaneously mediates and attempts to legitimate how readers view policy and their role as citizens in understanding and acting

upon matters of societal concern. While in this study I did not set out to research whether and how people engaged with news media, I believe my analysis of news reporting on social justice curriculum policy is nonetheless an important task. News media representations, much like Hollywood films, “shape habits of thinking by providing audiences with framing mechanisms and affective structures through which individuals fashion their identities and mediate their relationship to public life, social responsibility, and the demands of critical citizenship” (Giroux 2008, p. 7).

Background to the Corren-BC Ministry of Education Settlement Agreement

Before turning to the methodology of my study and my analysis of the news reporting, I need to outline the events and policies being reported on and to provide some context. In 1999 Murray Warren, an elementary school teacher, and Peter Cook, his partner, filed a complaint with the BC Human Rights Commission to compel the Ministry of Education to address homophobia and heterosexism. (In 2004, the two men legally married and changed their last names to Corren.) Murray Corren, in particular, was active in the Gay and Lesbian Educators of BC (started in 1990) and within the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation. He and other activist teachers drew attention to homophobia and heterosexism in the schools, which eventually led to a high-profile legal case in Surrey, BC. There, a conservative school board in 1997 decided to ban three gay-positive books—*Asha’s Moms*, *Belinda’s Bouquet*, and *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dads, Blue Dads*—after teacher James Chamberlain had read these to his elementary school class (for further discussion of this case, see Smith 2004).¹ The Correns’ disappointment in what they perceived as the BC Ministry of Education’s failure to take action in the issues raised by the Surrey book banning case contributed to their filing of the human rights complaint against the Ministry (M. Corren, personal communication, 5 May 2007).

Since the mid-1990s the Correns had lobbied the Ministry of Education about curriculum, because that is under the purview of the province rather than local school boards. They focused on curriculum documents published by the Ministry in the early 1990s that specified content and objectives for each course and grade. These curriculum documents contained a list of areas that teachers were to address when planning their lessons: gender equity, multiculturalism, anti-racism, Aboriginal issues, and special needs. The Correns requested that sexual orientation and gender identity be added to the Ministry’s list (Bolan 1999). In 2000, after the Correns had filed their human rights complaint, the Ministry decided to drop the entire list of equity issues to be addressed in the curriculum. In 2002 the Human Rights Commission found a prima facie case of discrimination and forwarded information to the Tribunal before the Commission was disbanded, in the wake of a change in provincial governments. More delays ensued, until in the spring of 2006, the Correns and the Ministry of Education finally came to a resolution.

The *Settlement Agreement* covered four interrelated dimensions of curriculum policy and has resulted in a number of tangible outcomes:

- Creation of an elective course, Social Justice 12 (see BC Ministry of Education 2008b, c)

¹ Murray Corren (then Warren) was a petitioner in *Chamberlain v. Surrey School District No. 36*, and the Correns employed the lawyer in this case.

- Development of a teachers' guide to incorporating social justice and respect for diversity throughout the K-12 curriculum, which became entitled *Making Space* (see BC Ministry of Education 2008a)
- Policy clarification and communication regarding the “limited reach” of the “Opting for Alternative Delivery Policy” (BC Human Rights Tribunal 2006, p. 2); that is, not allowing parents to remove their children from regular classes if parents deem content sensitive or objectionable, except for parts of the health curriculum that address topics of contraception and sexuality education
- Development of guidelines to help Ministry of Education staff to review draft curriculum “from the perspective of inclusion,” including “sexual orientation and other grounds of discrimination, and an over-arching concern for social justice” (BC Human Rights Tribunal 2006, p. 2)

Conservative religious groups in BC have organized against all facets of the *Settlement Agreement*, including groups with national and international ties such as the Christian Coalition of Canada and the Catholic Civil Rights League (CCRL). For example, the CCRL (a lay Catholic lobbying group founded in 1985) and its western director, Sean Murphy, have written extensive critiques of all aspects of the *Settlement* and organized letter-writing campaigns and protests. Although the *Settlement* often links equity issues under the broad umbrella of social justice, religious right-wing opposition has focused on issues related specifically to sexual orientation. For example, the CCRL has critiqued the government for agreeing to “inculcate the notion that homosexual conduct and relationships are morally acceptable” and “force children to attend classes and lessons even if parents or students find them objectionable or offensive” (CCRL, n.d.). As Miriam Smith has noted about the earlier Surrey book banning case, “Both sides politicized the heterosexual norm—lesbians and gays in order to undermine it and the Christian right in order to reinforce it” (2004, p. 142). One question at issue in the *Settlement* is whether lesbian and gay families and relationships should be taught to the next generation as “normal.” Thus, and as we shall see, news reporting about the *Settlement* necessarily participates in cultural politics—a struggle over meaning, identity, and belonging.

Research Design and Methods

I used *ethnographic content analysis* as my mode of inquiry. “Document analysis becomes ethnographic when the researcher immerses himself or herself in the materials and asks key questions about the organization, production, relationships, and consequences of the content, including how it reflects communication formats grounded in media logic” (Altheide et al. 2008, p. 135). The inquiry unfolded in two phases. In the exploratory phase, I familiarized myself with how newspapers and news organizations work and the conventions and codes of news accounts and read some news articles that would come to comprise the case study, focusing on broad themes. Two research questions informed my inquiry in this phase: How have the antecedents, the actual *Settlement Agreement*, and the subsequent implementation of its various facets been represented in corporate-owned and alternative news media outlets (print and online) in British Columbia?² In what ways has

² I regularly clipped print newspaper articles related to educating for social justice; I also downloaded original online news articles that preserved accompanying photos. City newspapers like the *Vancouver Sun* do not archive articles for long online; waiting to download via a database will, at best, produce the full text but no illustrations or layout.

the news reportage shed light on the educational policy-making process, and in what ways has it obscured it?

Based on this exploratory work, the following elements became part of the protocol that I developed to conduct a more systematic and focused analysis of the eventual corpus of news-related items:

- *Frames*: These orient audiences to particular interpretations of issues. Frames are “composed of arguments, images, and metaphors and selected and constructed from larger sets of cultural beliefs” (Kelly 2006, p. 29). News headlines, pull-quotes (drawn from the story and given prominent display), illustrations, photographs, the length and placement of a story all work in combination to announce the dominant frame of a news story.
- *Lexical labels*: These are the words used to describe actors (individuals, groups) and issues in headlines and sub-headlines and are central to the “politics of representation” (Mehan 2001).
- *Sourcing routines*: These refer to the categories of sources used by reporters (e.g., officials, advocacy groups, experts, and unaffiliated individuals such as students and parents) and patterns of usage.
- *Dimensions of the policy process*: These include the stage in the policy process (formulation, announcement, implementation) as well as the policy actor/s mentioned within the news account.

In arriving at my data sources, I used ProQuest (Canadian Newsstand Complete) as my primary database, using the following key search terms: social justice + education, Murray Warren [later: Corren], Peter Cook [later: Corren], Corren Settlement Agreement, and British Columbia Human Rights Commission [later: Tribunal]. I selected news items (spot news, feature, reporter’s blog, editorial, or opinion-editorial) aimed at BC audiences, published between January 1999 (the year the Correns filed their complaint) and April 2008. I also searched the online archives of several alternative news outlets that I knew to cover education in BC but that were not included in the Canadian Newsstand database, namely: the *Georgia Straight*, *The Tyee*, and *Xtra West* (a biweekly source for gay and lesbian news).

Ultimately, I elected to focus on the coverage from CanWest Global’s *Vancouver Sun*, because it comes closest to serving as the newspaper of record for the province and has the largest circulation of corporate-owned daily newspapers in British Columbia.³ I arrived at this decision after noting that (a) the ProQuest search yielded an average of three spot news items per news outlet (excluding the *Sun*) across 18 towns and cities in the province, (b) the outlets relied heavily on CanWest News Service and press releases, and (c) their coverage reflected frames and lexical labels broadly similar to those found in the *Sun*. In a simple count, the *Sun* published the most pieces about the *Settlement*, and its news articles were republished in CanWest outlets like the *Victoria Times Colonist*, the *Nanaimo Daily News*, and the *Kamloops Daily News*.⁴ My search yielded 18 news articles, 2 op-eds, 1 editorial,

³ According to CanWest Global (n.d.), the *Vancouver Sun* has a daily circulation of 171,559 and “provides news and information to 893,300 readers a week” (<http://www.canwestglobal.com/brands/newspapers.asp>).

⁴ At the time of the research, CanWest Global owned Vancouver’s two major local daily papers (the *Sun* and *The Province*) as well as one of the two national dailies (the *National Post*), giving it 90% of paid daily circulation in the city (Gutstein 2005).

and 20 letters to the editor. For the present analysis, which focuses on news reporting, letters to the editor were removed.⁵

I also elected to focus on *Xtra West's* coverage, because it published the second most pieces on the *Settlement* and provided a sharp contrast to the *Sun* in terms of its audience, purpose, and ownership model. (The only other alternative outlet that covered the *Settlement* during this time, the *George Straight*, published one spot news item and one profile of the Correns.) *Xtra West* is published by a not-for-profit organization, Pink Triangle Press. Pink Triangle describes itself as “born out of and committed to the struggle of lesbians and gay men for sexual liberation and human fulfillment,” and it claims a readership for *Xtra West* of 54,000 people (Xtra.ca, n.d.). *Xtra West*—whose masthead motto reads “Where queers conspire”—is an example of alternative media, that is, media not owned and controlled by corporations or government and “not subject to the most common pressures associated with the dominant, corporate form of ownership,” most notably “conforming with the perceived status quo, so as not to upset corporate advertisers and the mass audience delivered to those advertisers” (Beers 2006, p. 115). I searched *Xtra West* using a variety of terms but found that Corren, social justice, and curriculum indexed all relevant stories from 1999 onward. The search yielded 16 news articles, 3 op-eds, 0 editorials, and 5 letters to the editor.

The struggle around the *Settlement* has spanned over a decade. Press coverage was not equally spread over that period but focused on specific moments in the legal and policy process.

Findings

The *Sun*: Balance as Airing (Unequally Portrayed) Extremes

The *Vancouver Sun*, in virtually all of its reporting on this story, balanced quotes from the Correns—the only people identified as gay activists—with at least one quote from a conservative, often religious, advocacy group opposing various gay rights initiatives. Out of the 12 news articles where one or the both of the Correns was quoted, 9 followed this pattern.⁶ To the reader with no independent background knowledge, it would be unclear from the *Sun* coverage that the Correns were part of an activist network. One notable exception was Steffenhagen’s article “Angry parents send letters to Bond” (2007, February 19) in which she noted that the Correns had referred her to Glen Hansman, “an anti-homophobia consultant with the Vancouver school board,” whom indeed she contacted. The other exception came in a story about the contract that the Correns had signed with the Education Ministry. In the article, Steffenhagen (2006, June 16) concluded by noting: “The harshest criticism of the contract came from *Xtra West*, a gay and lesbian newspaper in Vancouver that accused the Correns of settling too soon for too little,” in an “editorial” by Robin Perelle.

⁵ Given my interest in Fraser’s democratic theory and debate within multiple publics, I have tracked and begun to analyze the letters to the editor and the online postings to reporters’ blogs. This analysis, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

⁶ Of the remaining three news articles that quote one or both of the Correns, two quote them without including a quote from a conservative advocacy group and one deviates from the pattern by also including a quote from *Xtra West* (implicitly identified as a gay activist).

An analysis of the *Sun's* news headlines and sub-headlines revealed that the Correns were never mentioned by name, but alone or together as a “gay teacher,” “gays,” “activists” (twice), “gay activists” (twice), “same-sex couple” (twice), “gay couple,” and (quoting a conservative parent group, the Canadian Alliance for Social Justice and Family Values Association) a “special interest group.” By contrast, conservative religious groups that had formed to oppose the *Settlement* were described in headlines simply as “parents” (twice), “angry parents,” and “petitioners.” Thus, in the initial framing using lexical labels (Mehan 2001), *Sun* readers were confronted with a battle between gay activists and (all) parents. If readers went no further than the headlines, they might be left with the impression that a group, acting in its own narrowly conceived self-interest, was confronting those with concern for the society as a whole (see Williams 1995).

Readers of the news stories in their entirety would have been exposed to the pattern of balancing quotes from the Correns (standing in for all gay activists) with quotes from diametrically opposed sources. The *Sun* reporters no doubt saw themselves as neutral conduits for up-to-date information, neutrality here implicitly understood as airing two “extremes” in the debate over the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity issues in the curriculum. And yet this formula, in some sense, matched the conservative advocacy groups’ perspective. For example, Brian Roodnick, one of the founders of Concerned Parents of British Columbia, told a reporter that “discrimination and anti-homosexual attitudes need to be addressed, ‘but the *Correns* are left as a lone voice and we don’t believe they’ll get it right. They will introduce an agenda that is way too strong if there isn’t a *parent voice to offset it*’” (Edmonds 2006, September 5, emphasis added). Omitted from this “balanced” gay-activist-versus-parent frame is the fact that the Correns themselves were parents.

Xtra West: Challenging the View from Nowhere

The coverage in *Xtra West*—while broadly supportive of the Correns’ efforts—showed the Correns to be part of a network that was simultaneously local (through the work of Gay and Lesbian Educators of BC or GALE), provincial (through the social justice work within the BC Teachers’ Federation), and national (through lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights organizations such as Egale Canada). For example, *Xtra West* only quoted the Correns in 3 of 16 news articles. A broader array of activists, located in different positions within the school system and yet linked to social justice movements, were featured in the *Xtra West* coverage: four members of GALE, three Vancouver School Board diversity consultants (later, including a teachers’ union president), a school board trustee, several students (including two leaders of Gay-Straight Alliances), and a member of a community-based arts organization working with youth in schools. In its use of educator-activist sources, *Xtra West* alerted its readers to the importance of the lesbian and gay rights movement in mediating between government elites and members of the gay community and their allies.

As a niche publication focused on gay and lesbian news, *Xtra West* makes no claim to being objective in the sense of non-ideological. By contrast to mainstream news reporters, *Xtra West* journalists did not appear to see their role as sorting through various “biased” sources and competing “agendas” to present the most balanced picture. They implicitly challenged the “view from nowhere” often espoused by mainstream news. At the same time, however, *Xtra West* reporters followed conventional methods of establishing credibility, including gathering and verifying facts, sourcing their stories well, providing

opportunities for various sides in a debate to speak, and citing relevant sources accurately and “on the record” whenever possible.

A case could be made that *Xtra West* has been more objective than the *Sun* in its reporting, if by objectivity is meant enhancing readers’ understanding of social and political issues by providing them with “reliable reporting that tells them what is true when that is knowable, and pushes as close to truth as possible when it is not” (Cunningham 2003, Para. 9). This is in line with Sandra Harding’s (1998) concept of “strong objectivity,” which delinks the assumption of value neutrality from standards of maximizing objectivity in projects of knowledge creation. To illustrate, I will explore *Xtra West*’s reporting on the Catholic Civil Rights League advocacy around the issue of opting out (a policy dating from the 1980s and meant only to apply to certain topics such as human sexuality addressed in the health and personal planning curriculum). As mentioned earlier, the *Settlement* directed the Ministry to clarify and communicate that the “Opting for Alternative Delivery” policy not be allowed to become a loophole for conservative, religious parents to avoid classes where, for example, teachers might elect to teach about the positive contributions of gay and lesbian people. The Ministry did so in the fall of 2006, by sending a letter to all school districts that made clear their duty to enforce the policy. In response, the CCRL wrote to every school board in the province, pressing them to assure the League that they would “accommodate freedom of conscience and religion” and warning them that failure to “abide by human rights law” could result in legal action (Murphy 2006, December 29).

The *Sun* was first to report on this (Steffenhagen 2007, January 8). Its 693-word story—entitled “Schools warned on ‘values’; Catholic civil rights group seeks guarantee that parents can pull children over ‘objectionable’ material”—followed the CCRL frame closely and quotes CCRL director Sean Murphy extensively. The *Sun* reported on CCRL’s objectives and quoted Murphy’s accounting of responses from districts. The reporter did not quote directly from the CCRL’s letters to school districts. She contacted three districts for official reaction quotes.⁷

Xtra West published a more in-depth (1,350-word) story that investigated CCRL’s claims and cast light on its partisanship (Barsotti 2007, May 9). Barsotti quoted directly from the actual CCRL letters to school districts, spotlighted dissent within Abbotsford school district and identified it as “a test case in a curriculum revision battle,” interviewed officials in five school districts, and alerted readers to conservative parents’ groups following a pattern of action and wording letters and school board motions that directly echoed CCRL’s letters and strategic advice available on its website. The story’s headline (“They’re asking us to teach intolerance: Quesnel chair”) and sub-headline (“Catholic Civil Rights League targets school boards”) flagged two of Barsotti’s key findings. The elected chair of the Quesnel school board, Caroline Nielsen, told *Xtra West* that the district had received “multiple letters” from the CCRL but that the board was:

not in agreement with what the group “is trying to bring forward.”

“We have replied a couple of times, and they don’t particularly get what we said, because we aren’t in 100% agreement with them.”... The Quesnel board will deal

⁷ All of the *Sun* articles that I quote from in this paper were written by Janet Steffenhagen. She is the *Sun*’s education reporter and authored 12 of the 18 articles in my sample (6 other reporters each wrote one). The balance-as-giving-both-sides perspective was reflected in the *Sun*’s sole editorial (“Contributions by queers’ is a worthy subject for debate” 2004, December 30), published in anticipation of the human rights tribunal hearing and prior to the eventual *Settlement*.

with parents' complaints, should they arise, on a case-by-case basis, Nielsen continues. But, she says, "It will never be our policy to further intolerance".

Compare this to the *Sun* article, where reporter Steffenhagen (2007, January 8) paraphrased CCRL's Murphy as saying that Quesnel was one of three boards (out of 60 in the province) that had "answered in a satisfactory way, essentially saying students will not be compelled to attend any class that they or their parents find objectionable..."

Arguably, from a particular standpoint, *Xtra West* provided its readers with a depth and nuance of reporting not found within the mainstream media and raised questions about the prominent role and unchallenged authority that the CCRL (also operating from a particular standpoint) had been granted in the *Sun*. It also reported a diversity of viewpoints within the gay and lesbian community, demonstrating the contestation and debate found within what can be seen as a queer counterpublic (Fraser 1997, chap. 3). A counterpublic is an emergent discursive entity (Asen 2000), at once a collective that recognizes exclusion from wider publics and also internally conflict ridden. For example, regular columnist Robin Perelle wrote, in the immediate aftermath of the *Settlement*, that the Correns "settled too soon and for too little" (2006, June 8). She lamented that after a 7-year struggle with the provincial government, the main achievement was an elective high school course that would "slide a few queer images in amongst the race, ethnicity and multiculturalism of social justice issues in Canada." Instead, Perelle wanted government to "add some mandatory queer content to the curriculum now." After activist teachers and letter writers objected, Perelle's column in the next issue of *Xtra West* (2006, June 22) took "A Second Look." She examined other aspects of the *Settlement*, noting "some important steps worth acknowledging in greater depth" but continuing to evince skepticism about government's intentions (a theme taken up in *Xtra West's* reporting, which I discuss in more detail below).

While Perelle's commentaries focused on political strategy, others, quoted as sources within news stories, commented on the nature of the ideologically-contested concepts underpinning the proposed curriculum. For example, Glen Hansman, president of the Vancouver Elementary School Teachers' Association, was interviewed for a news story about conservative opposition to "gay-friendly classrooms." He identified the "intention" behind the *Settlement* as fitting within liberal multiculturalism, that is, to add content affirming the identities of gays and lesbians into discussions already taking place in the classroom around diversity and identity:

This is going to be in the curriculum, so it's not going to be an in-your-face radical queer, gender-bending. It's going to be very liberal, essentialist, identity-is-fixed, because that's what's age-appropriate. It's going to be very generic for the most part. It's not subversive. (Barsotti 2007, March 15)

However obliquely, Hansman's comments reference differences within the queer counterpublic over the meaning of various identities and how fixed or fluid they are. Thus, what I might call *Xtra West's* "view from somewhere" was not monolithic.

Watch-Dogging Government Versus Channeling the Mainstream

My analysis of *Xtra West's* reporting on the *Settlement* showed it to be just as likely as the *Sun* to use government officials as sources (62.5% of its articles as compared with 66.6% of the *Sun's*), but it did so with a clearer skepticism toward provincial government claims. Prior to the *Settlement*, *Xtra West* headlines accused the provincial government of:

- obstruction through foot-dragging (“Curriculum hearing adjourned to next year: ‘Trial by ambush’”; see Mills 2005, July 21); and
- funding cuts (“Human rights triage: BC government further restricts access to human rights”; see Mills 2005, October 12).

After the *Settlement*, headlines hinted at obstacles to full implementation, such as:

- constricted consultation (“Closed-door curriculum meeting: Participants call for more consultation on Grade 12 course”; see Barsotti 2006, October 12);
- lack of follow-up (“But good intentions ‘hollow without follow up,’ warns Simons”; see Barsotti 2007, August 15); and
- lack of bureaucratic initiative to monitor progress (“Queering mandatory content ‘a work in progress’: Ministry”; see Barsotti 2007, September 26).

Xtra West writers did not hesitate to scrutinize government officials’ statements to the press or to note their repeated unavailability for comment. In addition, a variety of sources were used who did not shy away from critiquing government action or inaction or raising critical questions. For example, reporter Tamara Letkeman quoted Glen Hansman, a teachers’ union president, on the draft K-12 teachers’ guide: “Even when intentions are well-meaning, which I believe they are here, it is still always important to ask questions such as: Whose version of social justice is this, and for what purposes? Who gets left out when we speak of diversity here, and what will we do to rectify those absences?” (2007, October 10).

By contrast, the *Sun* tended to portray the provincial government as mediating a polarized general population, which went hand-in-glove with its airing-extremes frame discussed earlier. A prime example is a story headlined “Angry parents send letters to Bond” (Steffenhagen 2007, February 19). Steffenhagen describes how Sean Murphy of the Catholic Civil Rights League filed a freedom-of-information request that showed the Ministry had “received 1,000 pages of petitions and 5,000 pages of correspondence related to the Corren agreement,” which Steffenhagen confirmed with the ministry. (Left out was any mention of the role that Murphy played in helping to generate this correspondence; see the discussion above.) The reporter then interviewed Minister of Education Shirley Bond, quoting her on the purpose of the *Settlement* “to make public schools inclusive and respectful” and asking the public to be patient. Bond herself invokes the idea of “balance”: “There is certainly a group of people who have expressed concern [about the *Settlement*], but it is balanced by those who support the initiative.”

Encouraging Citizen Interest and Engagement in Public Policy

Not only did *Xtra West* take its role as watchdog against abuses of power seriously, it also attempted to encourage citizen interest and participation in the public policy process, broadly defined. It did this by:

- engaging seriously with the ideas and arguments of opponents of the *Settlement* (e.g., Perelle 2006, September 14; Barsotti 2007, March 15);
- profiling everyday people, teachers and students, as policy activists (e.g., Barsotti 2007, July 18);
- inviting its readers, through interviews with a range of public officials as well as informed educators in various positions and activists, to think about how largely symbolic policies might be made to materialize—or otherwise left to fade away (e.g., Barsotti 2007, August 15);

- spotlighting the complexities of policy as process (e.g., Mills 2005, October 12); and
- testing controversial claims through in-depth interviews and on-the-ground reporting (see my earlier discussion of Barsotti 2007, May 9).

For example, reporter Barsotti (2007, August 15) spoke with gay education activists and the opposition party's human rights critic about the draft of the Social Justice 12 curriculum, highlighting factors that would influence the successful implementation of the course: funding for elective courses, willingness of teachers to teach the course, teachers' professional autonomy, the quality of student–teacher interaction and pedagogical focus within the classroom, oversight, and community support. In short, *Xtra West* provided some tools and criteria by which readers could judge whether the new policies might make a difference and underscored the need for public vigilance to hold governments at various levels accountable.

Conclusion

Some current conventions in mainstream news journalism (notably, seeking “balance” defined as giving “both sides of the story”) can restrict public debate and discussion and impoverish the public policy pedagogy on offer. Within any one side in a debate, there is often diversity of opinion (e.g., over the meaning of social justice) that does not get aired, let alone explored, in the dichotomous rhetorical framework commonly fostered through mass media reporting. This framework also obscures possible commonalities; for example, in the case examined here, gay activists and conservative advocacy groups alike charged that the government's consultation process was elitist and overly managed. Perhaps most important, the guiding concern for what I will call “superficial balance” reinforces a model of democracy based on tallying different groups' policy preferences rather than fostering an exploration of the reasons for those preferences and a rich exchange of views. “By including multiple perspectives, and not simply two that might be in direct contention over an issue, we take a giant step toward enlarging thought...the fact that both must be accountable to differently situated others further removed from those relations can motivate each to reflect on fairness to all” (Young 2000, p. 116).

Public policy pedagogy informed by corporate-dominated mass media is largely consonant with the status quo. Mainstream journalists tend to key off immediate news pegs, a practice that does not usually result in sustained coverage of public policy issues, however broadly defined. With the for-profit sector of journalism in financial crisis, news corporations are de-emphasizing investigative or “watchdog” journalism, which is more expensive and likely to focus on a more sustained critique of the powerful in society. News organizations are investing fewer and fewer resources into reporting, cutting back specialty reporters (e.g., on higher education), and reducing coverage of local and regional news (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2008; CNW Group 2009).

By contrast, media serving subaltern counterpublics have a vested interest in more sustained and in-depth reporting of issues pertaining to their members. While reporting from within subaltern counterpublics is sometimes represented by the mainstream as “biased,” I argue—with *Xtra West* as my case in point—that this alternative publicity is crucial to nourishing journalism's democratic mission. Such alternative, “niche” media play an important role in increasing the diversity of political debate and can encourage and enhance the participation of people who in various ways have been subordinated in the wider, stratified society. Practices such as moving beyond the “view from nowhere,” while

retaining conventional journalistic methods for establishing credibility, have the potential to help democratize the public policy pedagogy on offer.

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