

Major Project Final Essay/Article (30%)

Due: April 7 at 11:30 am on eclass

For the final paper, you may choose between two genres:

- a.) formal academic essay
- b.) media commentary (non-academic writing for the public)

A.) Formal Academic Essay

Length: 8-9 page maximum double-spaced in 12 point Times New Roman font with 1-inch margins

Format: Please use MLA in-text citations and works cited page. Check out the [OWL Purdue website](#) for advice on how to cite newspapers and online sources.

If you choose the genre of the formal academic essay, you must revise and add to your research report as you develop a persuasive essay that answers your research question. The format of the formal academic essay should include:

- introduction that establishes context for your research question and background; it must include your thesis (your answer to the research question and your statement of significance)
- research method (your news sources, scope of research, and main patterns)
- integrate primary and secondary research as you critically compare at least three key patterns in your news sources
- discussion of how your research contributes to scholarship in news studies
- conclusion

OR

B.) Media Commentary Article

Length: 1500-2000 words double-spaced in 12 point Times New Roman font with 1-inch margins (please provide the word count at the end of your submission)

Format: Use journalistic standards to cite sources within your paper. Although published media commentaries do not typically include a works cited page, please provide an MLA formatted works cited page.

As we have seen in this course, media commentary articles offer and explain a journalist's informed and critical evaluation of a controversial issue in the news media. Unlike traditional news reporting that seeks to offer objective and accurate details about a news event, commentary and opinion articles are explicitly subjective: they clearly outline the journalist's argument/assessment and seek to persuade readers to agree with that assessment.

Using revised material from your proposal and research report (including your primary and secondary research) and adding any additional content that you believe would strengthen your argument, write a media commentary article that critically compares how your chosen news event is covered in your two news sources. Your commentary must be organized around a clear argument/thesis and be written in the style and tone of published media commentaries.

The media commentary article should contain the following:

- Headline and by-line
- Hook and lede
- Motive (why your research question matters today)
- Thesis/Argument
- Evidence of patterns from primary research (you may add a third pattern)
- Use of secondary research as experts to help advance your argument
- Counterargument and response
- Options for Change

Media Coverage of The Billionaire Space Race:
The Case of the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* and *Democracy Now!*

Introduction

In the summer months of 2021, Amazon owner Jeff Bezos and Virgin Group founder Richard Branson competed in a multi-billion-dollar race to reach space. Featuring famous individuals, high-stakes competition, and *astronomical* expenses, this ‘billionaire space race’ exemplified news values like entertainment, drama, conflict, magnitude, celebrity, and the power elite (Harcup and O’Neill 1482). Consequently, the race received a great deal of media attention; however, its mainstream and alternative news coverage differed. The following paper examines this difference using articles, videos, and photos posted from June to July 2021 by the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* (CBC) and *Democracy Now!* (DN). The CBC is a public broadcaster entrusted with providing a national broadcasting service for Canada (Smith 139). It is a mainstream news organization. DN is an independent, non-profit broadcaster in the United States (DN, “About”). It is an alternative news organization.

This paper argues that CBC and DN news coverage of the billionaire space race reveals a symbiotic relationship between the media and power elites that is an implicit part of the media’s neoliberal structure. The first part of this paper will situate the billionaire space race and news delivery within the current neoliberal context; the second will compare the CBC and DN’s coverage of the race; and the third will consider the implications of this coverage.

Neoliberalism, Commercial Space Exploration, and Canadian News Delivery

Neoliberalism is a political ideology that supports fiscal austerity and economic deregulation (Kotz 65). Consequently, neoliberal states, like Canada and the US, seek to privatize

public enterprises (Kotz 65). The billionaire space race reflects the privatization of space exploration. Once spearheaded by government organizations like NASA, space exploration is now dominated by private companies such as Bezos' Blue Origin and Branson's Virgin Galactic (Impey 2-4). These companies are attempting to capitalize on the variety of profitable opportunities that space offers, like space tourism (Impey 4).

Neoliberalism has also promoted several structural changes in the Canadian media. In the late-twentieth century, neoliberal restructuring forced traditionally public news organizations, like the CBC, to adopt the commercial media model (Kozolanka et al. 5). This has been problematic because commercialization pits news organizations' business interests against their public service principles (Kozolanka et al. 5). For example, the CBC might select and tailor their treatment of stories based on what they believe will generate the most ad revenue rather than what is important (Harcup and O'Neill 1473, 1483). Similarly, if an advertiser controls a substantial portion of a news organization's revenue, they can exert pressure over what becomes news and what does not (McManus 320). Such commercial pressures operate alongside 1) practical pressures, like limited resources, and 2) professional pressures on journalists to defer to 'authoritative' and objective' sources (Hall et al. 245). This mix of factors produces a systematic preference given in the media to powerful individuals and institutions (Hall et al. 247). Therefore, the neoliberal structure of contemporary media is key to understanding who defines the news, what makes the news, and why. These considerations underline the following comparison between the CBC and DN's coverage of the billionaire space race.

Comparing the CBC and DN's Coverage of the Billionaire Space Race

From June to July 2021, the CBC posted over 15 articles about the billionaire space race. During that period, DN posted 4. Primary analysis of these articles reveals three key discrepancies between the CBC and DN's coverage, including differences in tone, framing, and visuals.

I. Tone

The CBC and DN's differ in the tone they take when discussing the billionaire space race. The CBC's tone is largely positive. This is evidenced by its use of uplifting language to describe the race, its participants, and the technology involved. For example, CBC authors describe the race as "meaningful",¹ "splashy",² "magical",² and the "dawn"² of a new "era",³ they positively label the billionaires as "swashbuckling"² and 'thrill-seeking'¹ 'showmen'² and 'daredevils';¹ and they glorify the spaceships with descriptions like "gleaming"² and "state-of-the-art".⁴ The CBC also employs abstract, value-laden, and culture-bound terms - or 'ideographs' (Potter 231) - to subtly justify the race. For example, CBC authors frequently use the term 'dream'⁵—a linguistic juggernaut in North America that has become synonymous with optimism, individualism, and capitalist expansion (e.g., the 'American Dream'; Maines 88-89; Anderson 1081). The CBC's repeated use of this word represents an attempt to garner support for the race by invoking these values. They do so by constructing the billionaires' excursions as pursuits that embody the North American entrepreneurial spirit and that should, therefore, serve as an example for the everyday

¹ "Jeff Bezos to Fly into Space on Blue Origin Rocket's 1st Crew Flight." *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, 7 June 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/amazon-jeff-bezos-space-flight-1.6055848>.

² "It Was Just Magical: Billionaire Richard Branson Flies to Space Aboard His Own Ship | CBC News." *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, 12 July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/space-race-tourism-virgin-galactic-launch-1.6098393>.

³ *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1920430147823>.

⁴ *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1924074051911>.

⁵ "Last Day on the Job for Jeff Bezos as Amazon CEO ." *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, 5 July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/jeff-bezos-last-day-ceo-1.6090123>; "It Was Just Magical": Billionaire Richard Branson Flies to Space Aboard His Own Ship | CBC News." *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, 12 July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/space-race-tourism-virgin-galactic-launch-1.6098393>

citizen. In sum, the CBC's encouraging tone reinforces the billionaire space race as an admirable initiative led by daring world leaders and role models.

Conversely, DN's tone towards the race is overwhelmingly negative. This is demonstrated by coded language such as "privatize"⁶, "monopolize"⁶, and "hobbies"⁷ that provoke negative emotions (Steuter and Wills 69) or minimize the potential benefits of commercial space exploration. For example, 'monopoly' is "surrounded by a miasma of connotations" (Fisher 671), likely due to its reputation as an enemy of democracy and threat to individual freedom (Van Horn 142, 228). Consequently, DN's use of this word represents an appeal to the same cultural values that the CBC invokes, namely individualism, freedom, and optimism. However, the DN constructs the billionaire space race as a threat to these values. The word 'hobby' has a similarly disparaging effect. Hobbies are private, leisurely activities that are relatively inconsequential (Roberts 16). By describing the billionaire space race in this manner, DN constructs the event as 1) an *exclusive* pastime that ordinary people can never enjoy and 2) a diversion with no benefit other than the billionaires' *personal* satisfaction. Counter to the CBC's unifying portrayal, these strategies make for a condescending tone that demonizes the race and highlights the power imbalance between the billionaires and everyday citizens.

II. Framing

Frames are powerful rhetorical entities that influence the public's worldview (Cloud 61). News organizations construct frames by selecting some aspects of a story and making them more salient, which allows them to promote a particular problem definition, cause, moral judgement,

⁶ "Billionaires Race to Privatize & Monopolize Space as Earth Burns & Workers Organize." *Democracy Now!*, 22 July 2021, https://www.democracynow.org/2021/7/22/billionaires_in_space.

⁷ "Jeff Bezos Thanks Amazon Workers and Customers for Paying for His 10-Minute Suborbital Flight." *Democracy Now!*, 21 July 2021, https://www.democracynow.org/2021/7/21/headlines/jeff_bezos_thanks_amazon_workers_and_customers_for_paying_for_his_10_minute_suborbital_flight.

and remedy (Entman 52-53). This process is called ‘framing’ (Entman 52). Cloud’s frame-checking system offers a way to analyze the CBC and DN’s framing of the billionaire space race.

The first step in Cloud’s frame-checking system is to identify the central issue, or stasis, and recognize how it helps frame the billionaire space race (Cloud 63). The CBC and DN operate at the same two stases, namely definition (i.e., ‘How can the billionaire space race be defined?’) and quality (i.e., ‘Is the event good or bad?’; Cloud 59-60). However, they differ in how they define and characterize the race. For instance, the CBC attempts to define Branson’s trip as a simple “up-and-down flight”⁸ and – again - a dream come true.⁸ They also attempt to assign the trip a positive quality by parroting congratulations posted online and terms like “accomplishment”⁸. Conversely, DN defines the launches as harmful ‘hobbies’**Error! Bookmark not defined.** and ‘tax-free holidays’**Error! Bookmark not defined.**. They also reinforce their negative characterization by drawing attention to issues like the “200 to 300 tons of carbon dioxide [emitted] per rider”**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

The second step of Cloud’s frame-checking process is to recognize what a particular frame contains and what it omits, including sources and content (Cloud 63). The CBC and DN’s frames emphasize and omit different parts of the race. The CBC regularly sources tweets from Bezos and Branson⁹ while omitting potentially critical views. They also dedicate an overwhelming majority of space and airtime to the race’s ‘positive’ attributes, including numerous world records¹⁰, related

⁸ “‘It Was Just Magical’: Billionaire Richard Branson Flies to Space Aboard His Own Ship | CBC News.” *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, 12 July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/space-race-tourism-virgin-galactic-launch-1.6098393>.

⁹ “Jeff Bezos to Fly into Space on Blue Origin Rocket’s 1st Crew Flight.” *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, 7 June 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/amazon-jeff-bezos-space-flight-1.6055848>; “‘It Was Just Magical’: Billionaire Richard Branson Flies to Space Aboard His Own Ship” *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, 12 July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/space-race-tourism-virgin-galactic-launch-1.6098393>; “Last Day on the Job for Jeff Bezos as Amazon CEO .” *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, 5 July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/jeff-bezos-last-day-ceo-1.6090123>.

charity efforts¹⁰, and potential benefits *for all of mankind*, like entertainment and research¹¹. However, the CBC avoids mentioning the *private* financial incentive behind the race or lesser-known downsides like space junk (Spector and Higham 5). To appear neutral, they instead address well-established concerns like the race's environmental impact or alternative uses for the money being invested into rockets. However, these concessions are usually placed in disruptive locations that encourage readers to skip them⁹ or near the end of videos/articles before being readily dismissed¹². Additionally, these critiques are framed as the marginal concerns of other people¹¹ as opposed to facts. Therefore, the CBC frames the billionaire space race as a solution while diverting attention away from its associated problems.

Conversely, DN repeatedly sources critical politicians, employees, and activists who problematize the race's rationale, media coverage, and economic/environmental costs.¹³ For example, they source tweets from US Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, who suggests that "If Amazon paid its workers fairly and did not fight unionization, workers would not be funding the expensive hobbies of billionaires"¹⁴ and that "Yes, it's time to tax the rich".¹⁴ Jayapal's tweets are also one of several stark contrasts that DN makes between the billionaire space race and the

¹⁰ "Jeff Bezos to Fly into Space on Blue Origin Rocket's 1st Crew Flight." *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, 7 June 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/amazon-jeff-bezos-space-flight-1.6055848>; "It Was Just Magical: Billionaire Richard Branson Flies to Space Aboard His Own Ship | CBC News." *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, 12 July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/space-race-tourism-virgin-galactic-launch-1.6098393>; "Last Day on the Job for Jeff Bezos as Amazon CEO." *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, 5 July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/jeff-bezos-last-day-ceo-1.6090123>; *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1924074051911>; *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1920430147823>.

¹¹ "Did Richard Branson Really Make It to Space? Technically, It Depends Who You Ask | CBC Radio." *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, 13 July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-the-monday-edition-1.6099336/did-richard-branson-really-make-it-to-space-technically-it-depends-who-you-ask-1.6099854>.

¹² *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1920430147823>; "Did Richard Branson Really Make It to Space? Technically, It Depends Who You Ask | CBC Radio." *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, 13 July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-the-monday-edition-1.6099336/did-richard-branson-really-make-it-to-space-technically-it-depends-who-you-ask-1.6099854>.

¹³ "Jeff Bezos Thanks Amazon Workers and Customers for Paying for His 10-Minute Suborbital Flight." *Democracy Now!*, 21 July 2021, <https://www.democracynow.org/2021/7/21/headlines/jeff-bezos-thanks-amazon-workers-and-customers-for-paying-for-his-10-minute-suborbital-flight>; "In the West Texas Desert, Billionaires Rocket above as Migrants Die Below." *Democracy Now!*, 22 July 2021, <https://www.democracynow.org/2021/7/22/in-the-west-texas-desert-billionaires>; "'All We Can Save': As Climate Disasters Wreck Our Planet, Women Leaders Are Key to Solving the Crisis." *Democracy Now!*, 22 July 2021, <https://www.democracynow.org/2021/7/22/climate-disasters-wake-up-call>; "Billionaires Race to Privatize & Monopolize Space as Earth Burns & Workers Organize." *Democracy Now!*, 22 July 2021, <https://www.democracynow.org/2021/7/22/billionaires-in-space>.

¹⁴ "Billionaires Race to Privatize & Monopolize Space as Earth Burns & Workers Organize." *Democracy Now!*, 22 July 2021, <https://www.democracynow.org/2021/7/22/billionaires-in-space>.

maltreatment of Amazon workers, migrants, and the environment¹³. Unlike the CBC, these issues are regularly featured in DN headlines and are centralized in their work. Therefore, while the CBC attempts to frame the billionaire space race as a solution, DN frames it as the problem.

III. Visuals

Images can shape the public's understanding of critical events and power relationships (Andén-Papadopoulos 755). They do so by conveying connotative meanings through technical codes of composition, such as who an image is emphasizing, their body language, their clothing choice, and the camera angle (Ruddy, "The Ethics of Visuals"). The CBC and DN employ these codes differently and, therefore, their visuals evoke different imagery. The CBC primarily uses choreographed photos from the billionaires' companies and social media. Two examples are a photo of Branson posing with his space-crew¹⁵ and another of Jeff Bezos giving a speech.¹⁶ Both images are taken at upward angles, centre the billionaires, and feature powerful, welcoming body language, with Branson's team embracing each other and Bezos triumphantly raising his fist to an audience. These images evoke positive emotions, the most prominent of which is unity. Consequently, they reinforce the CBC's construction of the billionaires as capable *leaders*.

Conversely, DN's coverage of the race usually consists of videos that depict climate disasters like wildfires, floods, and air pollution¹⁷. These videos are typically close-ups that are meant to invoke a sense of proximity and visceral immediacy (Andén-Papadopoulos 761) in viewers who could not otherwise understand the race's latent harms. In conjunction with DN's critical reporting, these images also evoke negative emotions, like anger, fear, and disgust. Being

¹⁵ "It Was Just Magical!: Billionaire Richard Branson Flies to Space Aboard His Own Ship | CBC News." *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, 12 July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/space-race-tourism-virgin-galactic-launch-1.6098393>.

¹⁶ "Last Day on the Job for Jeff Bezos as Amazon CEO ." CBC News, CBC/Radio Canada, 5 July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/jeff-bezos-last-day-ceo-1.6090123>.

¹⁷ "All We Can Save": As Climate Disasters Wreck Our Planet, Women Leaders Are Key to Solving the Crisis." Democracy Now!, 22 July 2021, https://www.democracynow.org/2021/7/22/climate_disasters_wake_up_call.

linked to the global class conflict, however, these emotions gain additional significance because they become ‘political emotions’ (Andén-Papadopoulos 761). Therefore, like the CBC, DN’s visuals represent an attempt to promote a sense of unity among their audience; however, they are a political ‘call to action’ against the race rather than an invitation to admire it.

Discussion

The differences between the CBC and DN’s coverage of the billionaire space race reveal the symbiotic relationship between power elites and the media. This is evidenced by their roles as primary and secondary definers, respectively. Primary definers are individuals/institutions who have greater access to the media (Hall et al. 240, 247). Secondary definers reproduce the narratives of primary definers (Hall 246). In the CBC’s case, Bezos and Branson are primary definers and the CBC is a secondary definer. The mix of pressures on the CBC force them to defer to the billionaires because they are accessible and ‘authoritative’ sources (Hall et al. 244). However, this gives the billionaires significant control over the narratives that the CBC perpetuates—the most prominent of which is the idea that the space race is a unified and universally beneficial initiative. This is embedded within the CBC’s celebratory tone, their framing of the race as a solution, and visuals that reinforce the billionaires’ image as world leaders. However, the discourse of ‘benefits for all’ specifically profits the billionaires because it 1) reinforces the hegemonic idea that capitalist expansion is necessary and 2) encourages the public to adopt an undifferentiated view of humankind (Spector and Higham 4). Therefore, the CBC reproduces the dominant neoliberal ideology that 1) equates economic growth with human well-being and 2) discounts social and economic inequalities (Donnan 586, 592). This benefits both the CBC, whose stories remain competitive, and the billionaires, whose expansionist efforts are justified, advertised, and left unchecked.

DN engages in similar strategies as the CBC, like provoking emotional responses, invoking cultural values, and relying on powerful individuals to substantiate their claims (e.g., politicians). However, DN's effort to establish a condescending tone towards the race, frame it as a problem, and unify their audience against it offers a challenge to the dominant narratives reproduced by mainstream media. Unlike the CBC's 'neutral' stance, this challenge reprioritizes the public sphere over the market, thus increasing the public space that allows for diverse opinions, debate, and participation (Kozolanka et al. 3, 9). This suggests that alternative news sources, like DN, can be invaluable correctives to the structured power relations in traditional news.

Conclusion

The CBC and DN's coverage of the billionaire space race reveals three key differences: first, where the CBC adopts an encouraging tone towards the race, DN's tone is condescending; second, where the CBC frames the race as a solution, DN frames it as a problem; and third, where the CBC uses visuals to unify their audience in admiration of the race, DN uses visuals to call their audience into action against it. These discrepancies reveal how commercial pressures to generate ad revenue, practical pressures to allocate limited resources, and professional pressures to remain 'neutral' can influence the selection and treatment of news stories in ways that benefit the power elite. However, as DN demonstrates, alternative news organizations reprioritize the public sphere over the market and can, therefore, offer invaluable challenges to these narratives. While this is not the structural remedy needed to establish a more democratic media system (Kozolanka et al. 1), alternative media is still a critical response to the structures and power relations behind the rhetoric of the press.

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