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Ashley Schram, Arne Rückert, Ronald Labonté & Benjamin Miller

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RESISTANCE AND DISSENT

Media and neoliberal hegemony: Canadian newspaper coverage of the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement

Ashley Schrama, Arne Ruckert, Ronald Labonte and Benjamin Miller

ABSTRACT
This article presents findings from a media analysis of mainstream newspaper coverage of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP). We conducted a broad search of articles published from January 2010 through to June 2014 in the major English-language Canadian daily newspapers, analyzing a total of 404 articles. We found limited substantive discussions about this comprehensive trade and investment treaty, and explain this lack of attention to the TPP by invoking Gramscian political economy theory and the role of media in the production of neoliberal hegemony.

KEYWORDS
Media analysis; neoliberal hegemony; Trans-Pacific Partnership

Introduction
The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement has been described by some as “the dirtiest, most dangerous trade deal you’ve probably never heard of.” But whether people have heard about the treaty—which is now in the process of ratification—might be less significant than what they have been hearing. In this article, we explore Canadian media coverage of the TPP through a critical political economy lens, asking who is reporting on the TPP, whose opinions are given weight, and how this drives issues selection and presentation of trade negotiation coverage.

Critical scholars have long studied the role of media in the production of social consensus, drawing on Gramscian theoretical concepts, in particular the notion of hegemony. Our interest in interrogating the role of media coverage of the TPP is to determine whether, and to what extent, mainstream print news media outlets have limited substantive discussions surrounding one of the most comprehensive trade and investment treaties ever negotiated. In doing so, we are interested in providing empirical grounding for the claim that mainstream media play a central role in insulating neoliberal policy proposals, such as the TPP, from thorough scrutiny and meaningful discussion, and contribute to engendering hegemony surrounding neoliberal policies as unquestioned “common sense.” We also turn our attention to the counterhegemonic elements in news coverage, to determine if there are openings for critical engagement.
with neoliberal policy proposals in mainstream print media. Thus, we address a central lacuna of much critical political economy scholarship: the lack of proper engagement with the role of the news media in the construction of neoliberal hegemony, despite the clear relevance to, and negative influence of, the corporate media complex on progressive social struggles.\(^3\)

This article begins with a theoretical discussion outlining the role of the media in the reproduction of a hegemonic neoliberal world order. We then transition into a short contextual discussion of the TPP to familiarize the reader with its content, and connect the emergence of trade treaties to the idea of neoliberal constitutionalism—another prominent concept used by Gramscian political economists. Next, we outline our methodological approach before moving to an empirical content analysis of mainstream media coverage of the TPP in Canadian newspapers. Here, we focus on both the main voices in the media coverage and their institutional affiliations, and the thematic areas of coverage of the TPP. Finally, we highlight important absences in TPP media coverage, including areas where the agreement has the potential to promote corporate interests at the expense of public welfare and to ‘lock in’ future public policy choices. We conclude by linking these empirical findings back to our theoretical starting point, discussing some theoretical implications of our findings, and proposing additional questions for future study arising from our empirical analysis.

**Theoretical background**

The role of mainstream media in creating hegemony surrounding neoliberal economic policies has long been a prominent topic of study in the field of communication. While hegemony can have multiple meanings, for the purpose of this article we define hegemony as consensual and ideological domination, that is, political rule through consent by way of establishing a widely shared common-sensical, or natural, understanding of the world.\(^4\) The concept of hegemony emphasizes the significance of cultural production in society and links this cultural production to the interest of dominant classes in society.\(^5\)

There are numerous institutions involved in the politics of hegemony production, including, but not limited to, the school system, civil society organizations, religious organizations, academia, government, and the private sector. Often, however, mass media have been given a prominent role in Gramscian discussions of hegemony for a number of reasons. First, mass media exercise significant influence in shaping the overall policy discourse in society, especially through their ability to set the overall agenda and frame policy discussions. “Agenda-setting” denotes a strong relationship between the emphasis and the importance that news media put on certain topics (for example, based on the relative amount and spatial placement of coverage), which, in turn, influences the importance attributed by the wider audiences to such topics.\(^6\) Hence, agenda-setting addresses the question of how story selection by news media functions as a determinant of public perceptions of issue importance.\(^7\) Framing is based on the assumption that how an issue is presented in the media can have a formative effect on how an issue is understood, an idea first developed in Goffman’s sociologically grounded scholarship on how individuals require interpretive schemas or frameworks.
to allow them to classify information and give it meaning. Framing essentially limits the interpretive field in which the issue is located.

For political economists, agenda-setting and framing are also seen as important elements in legitimating and reinforcing the existing social order, and insulating that order from systemic criticisms and alternatives. A distinction can be made between media bias based on commission—that is, the misreporting of facts—and media bias based on omission—that is, ignoring or underplaying issues. Media bias can be seen, for example, in the way in which news media cover alternative social movements, or how managerial and capital interests are often privileged in news coverage of strikes and labour strife, which can lead to misreporting and bias by commission. But bias can also be detected in the lack of substantive discussions surrounding key policy proposals, leading to the omission of media coverage of key policy issues. This was the case for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), when the media was complicit in limiting discussions of the treaty. One Washington Post journalist admitted that he “found it very difficult to oppose NAFTA,” and another noted that “almost all the columnists…and almost all the editorial pages in the country were for NAFTA.”

Although some have suggested that the pervasive role of news media in today’s world has led to a strong ideological consensus and a consistent and well-integrated world view that supports neoliberalism, our own perspective is more in line with the idea that hegemony is always contested and in a constant state of flux. This implies that there are ideological inconsistencies and contradictions within news reporting and competing counterhegemonic narratives that, at times, challenge dominant meanings and values. The widespread, and at times balanced, news coverage of the Occupy Wall Street movement is an example, despite the deep divide between mainstream and alternative news media in how Occupy was reported.

There are a number of different mechanisms at work in the production of hegemony. The role of authoritative voices in the media landscape is considered a crucial element because individuals or groups of individuals that influence the media coverage of an issue successfully generally originate from powerful positions within dominant institutions in society. Institutional location is thus an important criterion in analyzing hegemony production because individuals, as official representatives, generally represent the position of the institution; this, in turn, forms the basis of their credibility (for example, government or business representatives). Heavy reliance on such authoritative voices reinforces bias in media reporting, as does a large degree of centralization of news coverage in the hands of a limited number of journalists in relation to a specific topic. Second, the role of economic forces and patterns of ownership of news media are considered important because they can lead to ideological closure in news texts, and reinforce more monochromatic forms of media coverage of news stories. Third, this reliance on a limited number of trusted news sources can lead to homogenous news reporting across most mainstream news media, with convergence of discussion around certain kinds of issues related to a news story. This can lead to absences in the coverage of specific issues, as we discuss in our empirical discussion of TPP coverage in Canada.
Contextual background

In 2005, TPP negotiations began between Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, and Singapore, four countries that wanted to attract new members from the Asia-Pacific region. In September 2008, the United States announced full participation in the negotiations, and was followed by Australia, Peru, and Vietnam. Malaysia joined in October 2010, Canada and Mexico in June 2012, and Japan in April 2013. TPP negotiations concluded in October 2015, and member countries are now undergoing the process of ratification. As with most recent trade treaties, TPP negotiations were conducted in secret, although several of the most controversial chapters (for example, investment, intellectual property, and regulatory coherence) were leaked online throughout the negotiations. The full text of the agreement was released in November 2015. The agreement is suggested to be the most economically significant preferential trade and investment agreement in history, representing a market of 792 million people and 40 percent of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Preferential trade agreements are permitted under the multilateral World Trade Organization (WTO). WTO members participating in these preferential agreements are able to offer greater trade and investment liberalization to each other, which are not available to other WTO members. Wealthier nations see such agreements as a way to break through deadlocked WTO negotiations to their advantage. Developing nations see them as a means to gain greater access to rich country markets than their competitors.

That said, TPP member countries are vastly diverse in terms of their economies, with GDP per capita ranging from roughly US $3,500 in Vietnam to $60,000 in Singapore. The TPP has been characterized as a “twenty-first century trade agreement” in which efforts to reduce tariffs and quantitative restrictions on imported goods (the dominant concerns of the second half of the last century) are being eclipsed in importance by provisions aimed at reducing “behind the border” regulatory measures that could pose a barrier to trade in goods, services, or investment. ‘Behind the border’ measures are traditionally not covered by older generation trade agreements, and include domestic requirements like business registration, intellectual property, and safety standards, which apply to goods or services once they are in the domestic market, that is, after they have crossed the border.

The TPP has chapters on intellectual property rights, investment protection, technical barriers to trade, financial services, government procurement, regulatory coherence, state-owned enterprises, and more. The TPP seeks greater market access for goods and services, increased rights for foreign investors, and furthers the increasing trend of the internationalization of regulation and the harmonization of standards. The agreement includes not only novel chapters (for example, regulatory coherence), but pushes the limits of what has been agreed to in the past, notably around intellectual property rights (IPRs). Given the breadth of stipulations in the TPP and their potentially serious policy implications, including a loss of governmental policy space—that is, the freedom, scope, and mechanisms that governments have to choose, design, and implement public policies—Gramscian scholars have theorized the TPP and similar agreements as a new form of neoliberal constitutionalism. According to a progenitor of the concept, new constitutionalism confers privileged rights of citizenship and representation to corporate capital and large investors by penalizing the introduction of...
regulatory policies that are not in line with internationally negotiated treaties, such as the TPP, if such regulation harms the bottom line of corporate investors. Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) rules anchored in the TPP are one example of this. They allow private investors to sue governments over new policies if they feel these policies might negatively impact future profits. Civil society groups have been actively campaigning around some of the more controversial TPP provisions—such as ISDS protections for investors and IPRs that reduce the affordability of medicines—to garner greater world media attention to the implications of these and other TPP stipulations. Is this call for attention reflected in the Canadian media? Do we see an emerging debate surrounding the TPP that reflects its breadth and scope, or questions its widespread future policy implications?

Methods

We conducted our search using FACTIVA®, one of the leading databases for searching newspaper sources. Our goal was to review all mainstream media coverage of the TPP, therefore our search terms were very broad and covered the variety of ways that the agreement is referred to: “Trans-Pacific Partnership”; “Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement”; “Trans Pacific Partnership”; “Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement”; “TPP”; and “TPPA.” We searched all articles published from January 2010 through to June 2014 in the major English-language Canadian daily newspapers, including Calgary Herald, The Edmonton Journal, The Gazette, The Globe and Mail, National Post, Ottawa Citizen, The Province, The Star Phoenix, Times Colonist, Toronto Star, The Vancouver Sun, The Windsor Star, and Winnipeg Free Press. Our search results returned 1,024 articles. We excluded 92 articles that made no mention of the TPP, but were picked up due to an alternative usage of the ‘TPP’ acronym—the Trans Pacific Pipeline (TPP). We excluded another 528 articles that made only passing reference to the TPP agreement. A total of 404 articles were kept for further analysis.

We used a mix of deductive and inductive coding, beginning with themes we expected to be reported based on experience with trade and investment agreements, but we added new codes as they emerged from the media analysis. We documented whether a theme was present in the articles, and, if so, how it was presented; a summary of the article thesis; the level of TPP coverage; the position on the TPP; whether the author took a position for or against the TPP agreement or remained neutral; what sources were used; and the institutional affiliation of those sources, if available.

Results

Of the 404 articles included in our analysis, the TPP is the focal issue in 176 articles (44%). It receives moderate coverage in 36 articles (9%), that is, the TPP is covered in a substantive way but as only one part of the article. There is minimal coverage in 143 articles (35%), that is, the TPP is mentioned in more than name only, but briefly, and is merely the focusing issue for a discussion about supply management in 49 articles (12%). The National Post, The Globe and Mail, The Vancouver Sun, and the Ottawa Citizen covered the TPP most frequently, together contributing 55% of all news
coverage. There were no observable patterns among different news outlets providing different levels of coverage.

The level of centralization of news coverage can be an important indicator of the depth and breadth of media discussions. A larger degree of centralization of news in the hands of a few journalists generally leads to less balanced media coverage and a less diverse marketplace of ideas. As based on the number of contributions made by each journalist, we found that just over half of all articles (209, 52%) were authored by journalists who wrote five or fewer articles on the TPP (148, 37%) or were listed without an author (61, 15%). The remaining articles (195) were accounted for by 16 male journalists providing approximately 48% of the coverage of the TPP in Canada’s most read dailies during the time period of our study. This suggests that a relatively small group of journalists represents a large share of the overall media coverage of the TPP.

Besides the level of centralization of media coverage, origins and institutional affiliation of individuals cited by authors are important determinants of bias in media coverage. Within the articles reviewed, there is a total of 291 references to expert opinions, stakeholders, and actors. Of these, 140 (43%) are to government sources, 49 (15%) are to lobby groups, 44 (13%) are to former trade negotiators, and 10 (3%) are to civil society (excluding think tanks). The most frequently cited individuals are Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Canadian Minister for Trade, Ed Fast. It is widely held that reporting based largely on government sources tends to lead to media bias because it allows the government to define the parameters of the debate. The Canadian government failed to finalize a number of trade agreements, despite being strongly invested in expanding trade access globally, so it is not surprising that it would present a very positive assessment of the TPP, and that this in turn would influence the way in which the TPP is presented by the media. At the same time, lack of representation of voices from civil society suggests that some of the criticisms of the TPP raised by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including investor-state dispute mechanisms and corporate influence, did not receive fair representation in the Canadian news coverage of the TPP for the period studied. This lack of civil society representation reflects a limited engagement with critical voices of the TPP in general (as discussed in more depth below).

Expert opinion from think tanks is cited 37 times (9%), suggesting they do not have an unreasonable level of influence; however, the think tanks cited are almost exclusively the “conservative-leaning” Asia-Pacific Foundation, C.D. Howe Institute, Montreal Economic Institute, Macdonald-Laurier Institute, and Conference Board of Canada. Brian Lee Crowley, one of the more prolific journalists within the literature, is the Managing Director of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute. Crowley has written for both The Globe and Mail and Postmedia publications (e.g. the National Post, the Ottawa Citizen, etc.), allowing his voice to transcend some of the traditional organizational limits of professional journalists. This finding is not surprising because research indicates that conservative think tanks have been generally more successful than liberal or progressive ones in influencing media discourse since the neoliberal turn in the 1980s, and are part of the overall explanation of why neoliberal policies remain hegemonic in mainstream news reporting.

Overall, 175 (43%) articles reviewed present clear support for Canada becoming a member of and signing the TPP. Another 196 (49%) are neutral in their position, either not weighing in, or providing a more balanced opinion of the deal. Only 33
are against the TPP openly. Among opinion pieces specifically (111), which include articles appearing in editorials, columns, and other equivalent sections, stances taken on the TPP are far less balanced than in the overall sample. A total of 72 (65%) are in favour of the TPP, 27 (24%) are ostensibly neutral towards the TPP, and 12 (10.8%) are against the TPP. One would expect less neutrality among the opinion pieces, but the direction of the bias is revealing.

As noted previously, concentration of media ownership is another important aspect of the establishment and maintenance of neoliberal hegemony. There has been a trend towards greater monopolization of media ownership globally, including in Canada. One Canadian company, Postmedia, owns the National Post, Vancouver Sun, the Ottawa Citizen, the Edmonton Journal, Calgary Herald, the Gazette, the Star Phoenix, Windsor Star, and the Province, accounting for 51% of all newspaper circulation online and in print averaged out on any given week. Along with the Star Media Group, which publishes the Toronto Star, and Woodbridge, which publishes the Globe and Mail, these top three companies account for over 90% of the Canadian newspaper market. We discovered notable difference among which news outlets would publish an article critical of the TPP. Publications from the “big three” media companies had fairly consistent low frequencies of articles articulating positions against the TPP; specifically, between 11 and 14% of the coverage in the Star Phoenix, the Ottawa Citizen and the Gazette; between four and eight percent in the Globe and Mail, National Post, Toronto Star, and Vancouver Sun; and no such articles in the Edmonton Journal, Calgary Herald, Windsor Star, and the Province. Only two newspapers included in our analysis fall outside of these conglomerates: the Times-Colonist and the Winnipeg Free Press. The Times-Colonist, with only six articles published on the TPP, stayed neutral on the agreement with the exception of one article opposing it, while the Winnipeg Free Press published the largest number of articles opposing the TPP (9), which represents 75% of their TPP coverage and 27% of all media articles in our sample critical of the treaty. However, with only six percent of national circulation, the Winnipeg Free Press’s critical engagement with TPP issues is unlikely to shift the balance in pro-TPP media coverage by the “big three” on a national scale.

From personal and institutional affiliation to content analysis

From the 404 articles that met our inclusion criteria for the study, only 284 articles present original content, that is, some articles, as part of a newswire, were printed in two or more news outlets with identical content but variable headings. The vast majority of content in these 284 articles focuses on three areas of subject matter: supply management (245), economic growth (218), and Canada joining the agreement (218). The extent to which these individual issues have remained insulated from substantive criticisms is discussed below.

TPP: putting an end to the “indefensible racket” called supply management?

Supply management is the most frequently addressed issue, and is mentioned in 245 articles. Supply management describes a set of Canadian policies created to control the
price of milk, cheese, eggs, and poultry through marketing boards. It restricts the supply of such products by setting production quota and limiting imports through high tariffs. Pressure on Canada to eliminate these policies is one of the contentious issues in TPP negotiations. Supply management is discussed primarily as being detrimental to consumers through higher prices \((n = 10)\), and to those involved in agricultural sectors not covered by supply management \((n = 4)\). The vast majority of commentary is disparaging, referring to supply management as an “anachronistic, bloated, unfair, and regressive system”\(^{24} \) , as “costly, trade distorting, job-killing, productivity-depressing and consumer-robbing”\(^{25} \); and as “a racket—an indefensible, anti-competitive cartel.”\(^{26} \) Rhetoric against supply management appeals to emotion, suggesting that “one of the most disturbing aspects of supply management is that low-income families disproportionately bear the additional costs.”\(^{27} \) Another example says “try explaining to a single mom with kids to feed why she should pay twice as much for milk as moms around the globe.”\(^{28} \)

It is highlighted that the TPP created the opportunity for a coordinated attack on supply management \((n = 2)\). Supply management is framed as a political contamination of the free market \((n = 5)\), that Canada would be a dairy and agricultural products export powerhouse if supply management were not in place \((n = 2)\), but that the government “has failed to summon the moral fibre”\(^{29} \) or the political will to end it \((n = 4)\). Not only is supply management framed as a politically protected disservice to Canada’s economic performance in global agriculture, but it is presented by many articles \((n = 37)\) as the central reason that Canada would be unable to enter or finalize the TPP agreement. Several articles \((n = 13)\) highlight that Australia, New Zealand, and the United States of America would support Canada’s entry into the TPP only if it considered altering its current supply management system. Once Canada entered the TPP, the discourse shifted to predictions that the TPP will result in a partial \((n = 6)\) or full \((n = 3)\) dismantling of supply management, but also speculation that, for political reasons, the government will maintain some or all of its current level of protection \((n = 1)\).

The framing of supply management as integral to Canada’s participation in the TPP offers a revelation about the operation of hegemony in mainstream media coverage of the agreement. The TPP was used instrumentally by a number of actors (including journalists and various sources that journalists drew on) to suggest that Canada could participate in the TPP only if it committed to abolishing its agricultural supply management practices. Yet there is no empirical evidence to support such an assertion, and historical experiences of Canada negotiating and completing agreements with supply management intact suggest otherwise (e.g. CETA and NAFTA). This otherwise unsubstantiated argument, we think, betrays the underlying project at work. Supply management is in essence a form of price control to guarantee dairy and poultry farmers a certain level of income. This form of government regulation of the market economy directly contradicts the basic tenets of neoliberal economic thinking. The TPP as a media topic thus functioned, at least in part, as a Trojan horse to promote the application of competitive markets to the remaining Canadian agriculture sectors still under supply management, a system ideologically opposed by many neoliberal pundits in Canada.
TPP: trade and economic growth, inseparable constructs?

Arguments critical of supply management are set alongside an almost universal narrative of the imperative of international trade and investment, and consequently the need for the TPP, to promote or sustain economic growth. Trade in general is suggested to be essential for, or equated to, economic growth \((n=18)\), and Canada’s economic future is considered to be dependent upon it \((n=4)\). The TPP is presented as vital to the Canadian economy by 10 articles, one even suggesting that it will be a “20 trillion dollar payday,” \(^{30}\) while 22 articles note that it is key to better economic relations with Asia specifically, which would be essential for Canada’s future economic success. Emerging and developing economies in the Asia-Pacific region are highlighted as key areas for economic growth, both as a site for Canadian investment and as a source for investment in Canada. This emphasis on trade and investment expansion partly reflects Canadian export dependence on the US market, and the Canadian government’s expressed desire to diversify its trade relations geographically. These media accounts are likely related to the prominent role of government sources in TPP coverage and the Canadian federal government’s desire to present the TPP as the solution to its present skewed export dependence. This argument is not unique to the Canadian government, however. It has also found support among many think tanks, and even some civil society organizations, representing a widely shared economic narrative in Canadian society.

Such arguments, however, are contradicted by recent calculations that the TPP will contribute relatively little to the Canadian economy, with mainstream econometric impact analysis suggesting a 0.2% boost to Canadian GDP per year, \(^{31}\) and another study predicting overall a 0.13% rise of GDP for participating countries by 2025, with the median wage earners expected to lose income as a result of the agreement. \(^{32}\) An alternative study, using the United Nations Global Policy Model database, predicts mild economic losses for developed TPP economies \((-0.04\%\) average annual GDP change\) and insignificant growth for developing economies \((+0.22\%\) average annual GDP change\), but expects the loss of a total of 650,000 jobs for all TPP countries. For Canada, it expects negligible GDP changes \((+0.03\%\) annually\), but also predicts a loss of 58,000 jobs due to the TPP. The study also shows that income and wealth inequality is likely to increase as the share of GDP going to capital will rise and the share going to labour will decline further. \(^{33}\) The universal emphasis on trade agreements as important engines of economic growth and the omission of alternative findings that would question this link represent important mechanisms through which hegemony surrounding neoliberal economic policies is solidified in the media. Some more balanced perspectives can be found in individual articles. Such perspectives include the sentiments that trade is welcome if it does not compromise domestic rights, and that the TPP is both more and less than advertised—more about setting twenty-first-century trade and investment standards, but less economically significant. A few isolated critiques of the economic growth rationale appear \((n=3)\), commenting that the TPP will have limited or little benefit, or that Canada will not see the economic benefits that other states will. These also note that Canada nonetheless seemed willing to give up nearly anything to join TPP negotiations. These critiques suggest that there
is some space for counterhegemonic narratives about the link between the TPP and economic growth, but these narratives remain at the margins of TPP coverage and are highly concentrated among a few independent publications.

Largely absent from the economic discussion in the media is the widely supported idea, both in academia and among civil society organizations, that not everybody will be affected equally by the TPP. Arguably, this represents the biggest omission in media discourse. The differential impacts of trade agreements, creating winners and losers, are well entrenched in the political economy literature. On one hand, trade liberalization might reduce the incomes of some workers in sectors serving the domestic market because of increased competition, or shift workers into the informal economy, thereby affecting social stratification and differential vulnerability. On the other hand, some workers might benefit from the reduced cost of imported luxury goods or access to new export markets. In other words, the effects of the TPP will differ depending on the individual position of workers and consumers in the productive economy, with highly educated professionals generally assumed to benefit more from free trade agreements than low-skilled manual workers. Although the academic literature largely supports the notion that overall social inequalities are likely to increase with the implementation of new free trade agreements, the distributional effects of trade treaties (except between sectors) were not raised in any media coverage of the TPP.

**TPP: openings for critical engagement?**

Intellectual property rights, arguably one of the most ambitious chapters in the TPP, are mentioned in 28% of all articles, with a focus on patents, copyright laws, and digital freedoms. A few articles raise concern that the TPP would be bad for internet users because it would increase internet policing and encroach on internet freedoms ($n = 13$). One article comments that the agreement would criminalize everyday internet activity, while another suggests that the TPP would "turn the internet into an electronic minefield." Two articles question why, if the TPP would have such alarming consequences for internet infringement, so little attention was being paid to it. A number of authors also raise concerns about the TPP creating pressure for harmful copyright reform or that it was simply a wish list for Hollywood ($n = 4$). Finally, a handful of articles raise concerns about what the TPP might mean for pharmaceutical patents, suggesting that if Canada were to sign on to the agreement, we would be complicit in the injustice of depriving low-income countries access to medicines, and that "this can mean the difference between life and death for people in the developing world." Only four articles note that the TPP would decrease access to medicines in developing countries, and only two articles raise the issue of what rising pharmaceutical prices under the new TPP IPR regime might mean for the Canadian health care system.

Ultimately, while 28% of articles might have mentioned intellectual property rights, a much smaller subset actually provides substantive discussion of the issue. Yet IPR issues have been central for NGOs and other civil society actors concerned about the impact of the TPP. Specifically, such concerns relate to how the TPP will affect access to affordable medicines if the entry of generics into the market is delayed through patent term extension, data exclusivity, and lowering the bar for patentability, as well as challenges to affordable care from new forms of IPR enforcement and even the
The enormous cost implications of these new regulations are hard to predict, but a recent health impact assessment of the TPP conducted in Australia notes that:

The TPP risks increasing the cost of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), which is likely to flow on to the Australian public in terms of increased co-payments (out-of-pocket expenses) for medicines. This may result in medical non-adherence for prescription use and prioritising health costs over other necessities (food, housing, etc.) by vulnerable groups.39

An analysis of the signed, but not yet ratified, Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) suggests that new IPR provisions under CETA, which are similar to those in the TPP, will increase drug costs in Canada by anywhere between $CAD 850 million and $CAD 1.6 billion.40

The highly secretive nature of the TPP negotiations drew some attention in the media, with a number of articles simply informing people that they were happening in secret (n = 9), while individual contributions note that the federal government was secretly trying to push this deal through, that it is not subject to parliamentary approval, that it is antidemocratic, and that it excludes elected officials and civil society. An article by Ed Fast, former Minister for Trade, suggests that the government was consulting widely on the TPP and that it will be subject to parliamentary approval, further suggesting that any idea that the agreement was being negotiated in secret was merely rumours spread by the New Democratic Party (the official opposition party at the time of writing). A few authors propose that, notwithstanding other concerns with the TPP, this lack of transparency is the most urgent issue and something about which Canadians should be more alarmed (n = 7). Two articles draw attention to the extent of corporate involvement in the negotiation process, stating that “Canada does not need to be party to another corporate rights charter.”41 This focus on the lack of transparency and privileged corporate involvement in the negotiation process could be seen as another counterhegemonic element in the news coverage of the TPP because it has raised serious questions among Canadians about the nature of the agreement, including why these agreements need to be negotiated in total secrecy with no parliamentary oversight.

While the secrecy and lack of transparency of the negotiations of the TPP agreement are acknowledged in a relatively small number of articles, calls for examination of the role of private industry in the negotiation process are remarkably absent. Most media seem to accept corporate involvement in the trade negotiating committees of TPP countries as obvious: the TPP is, after all, a commercial agreement. But for many NGOs and academics attempting to access, review, and critique the TPP, the lack of transparency during the negotiating process and the privileged role of more than 600 American corporate actors playing an advisory role at that time are primary concerns.42 These concerns have been raised in a small number of media accounts in other TPP countries (notably in the United States, New Zealand, and Australia), but there has been a complete failure for Canadian media to generate similar discussion about the legitimacy of private economic actors having access to and shaping negotiating details withheld from elected parliamentary officials, and the inevitable question of whose interests are being best represented in such deals.
Increased investment protection, challenges to national sovereignty, and the overall lack of coverage of such an important agreement are given several mentions, but there is no critical discussion of the TPP’s potential policy effects. Three articles make the connection between investment protection, its investor-state dispute settlement enforcement measures, and increasing corporate sovereignty (the new neoliberal constitutionalism referenced in this article’s theoretical section), although one article suggests that some loss of sovereignty is acceptable to build investor confidence.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the global finance crisis and the 2008 collapse of the world economy, many believed that neoliberal policies of liberalization and deregulation were on their way out. Yet the austerity response to the global banking crisis, rooted in the deregulation of the financial industry, demonstrates the longevity and thus hegemony of neoliberalism. What role do the mainstream media play in this apparent endurance?

An opinion poll during the TPP negotiations found that almost half of Canadians knew so little about the proposed deal that they did not have an opinion about it. Our empirical analysis confirms that mainstream news outlets in Canada have largely failed to reproduce the volume and variety of critical scrutiny around the TPP exposed in academic and civil society reports. A number of issues alluded to throughout this paper have failed to attract any real critical discourse in Canadian media coverage, where they could reach a broader audience and spark a national dialogue about such a comprehensive agreement with long-term, far-reaching consequences. The “economic growth” foundation upon which trade agreements are sold to the public is increasingly fragile, as free trade (at least in terms of goods) is approaching its ceiling given the comprehensive reductions in tariffs executed in past decades. Yet the question of actual economic gains is notably absent from the media discussion, let alone the societal distribution of such gains. Critical analyses have suggested that the financial elite stand to gain the most from such an agreement, while the median wage earner might actually experience economic declines. Trade has historically entrenched economic inequality, an increasingly insurmountable challenge exacerbated by neoliberal policymaking; and again this remained largely outside of the TPP discourse. Our analysis also shows that there is only limited room for counterhegemonic narratives, mostly at the margins of TPP coverage, including acknowledgement of the undemocratic nature of the TPP negotiation process, and the deep implications of changes to IPRs for ensuring access to medications. As our analysis concluded in June 2014, it does not include coverage of the TPP close to or after the time of its signing. Future studies should engage in a similar exploration of the media coverage of the TPP during this period.

What do these empirical findings imply for critical scholarship on the media hegemony thesis? Some of the most heated debates in this area of study have revolved around the degree to which neoliberal hegemony can be considered complete and impervious to ideological critiques. Our media analysis confirms the notion that in capitalist societies with liberal political institutions, hegemony is never complete. Neoliberalism is a social formation in which there is a dominant world view (that is, neoliberalism) that nevertheless displays some fractures within its ideological structure, and allows for alternative perspectives to gain some ground. Ironically, intellectual
resistance to neoliberalism can make hegemonic arguments stronger, as arguments that position themselves in relation to other (critical) arguments are more likely to achieve hegemonic status. On the other hand, if such criticism develops into a coherent and cohesive counterdiscourse, it could be the basis for a true counterhegemony. Concerns with IPRs are a good example of how counterhegemonic arguments receiving media coverage might destabilize the neoliberal message surrounding the TPP, as arguments that link intellectual property protection to drug innovation are increasingly discredited by NGOs, and instead arguments about the harmful impact of IPR expansion (in terms of undermining access to essential medicines) are gaining momentum.

Our empirical findings support the view that hegemony is in a continual process of articulation without ever reaching a state of completion. By abandoning totalistic and mechanistic conceptions of both hegemony and neoliberal ideology, political economists can explore news texts as sites of struggle between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives and meanings. Such an approach needs to devote attention to a number of issues and questions that have been at the heart of our own empirical investigation, but deserve much more empirical scrutiny. These include how topics and discussions about such topics within news texts are framed or defined; what is the relative prominence granted to particular discourses and meanings, and how does this align with the wider societal discourse? What alternative narratives and meanings are excluded from news texts, and with what social and ideological effects? At what point do counterhegemonic positions start to undermine the hegemonic media discourse? Addressing these questions will require more theoretically informed, but empirically grounded scholarship that conceptualizes news texts as sites of complex social struggles over contending meanings and values.

Notes
3. Hacket, “Taking Back the Media.”
10. Glasgow University Media Group, Bad News.
11. Hernandez, “Covering NAFTA.”
16. Canadian Agri-Food Trade Alliance (CAFTA), 2014.
26. Ivison, “It’s Time to Break a Few Eggs.”
27. Clemens and Wilson, “Free Market for Groceries Is Better for the Poor.”
30. The Windsor Star, “Pacific Trade.”
31. Bertram and Terry, “Economic Gains and Costs from the TPP.”
32. Rosnick, “Gains from Trade?”
35. Labonte, Shrecker, Packer, and Runnels, “Globalization and Health.”
38. Cornish, “Canada’s Role in ‘Getting to Zero’ on HIV.”
40. Lexchin and Gagnon, “CETA and Pharmaceuticals.”
43. Angus Reid Institute, “Canadians Open to Bigger Trade Relationships, but Uncertainty Lingers Over Trans-Pacific.”
44. Rosnick, “Gains From Trade?”
46. Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity.”

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About the authors
Ashley Schram is a PhD Candidate in the interdisciplinary Population Health doctoral program at the University of Ottawa in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.
Arne Rückert is a Senior Research Associate in the School of Epidemiology, Public Health, and Preventive Medicine at the University of Ottawa in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.
Ronald Labonté holds a Canada Research Chair in Globalization and Health Equity and teaches in the School of Epidemiology, Public Health, and Preventive Medicine at the University of Ottawa in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.
Benjamin Miller is an MA candidate in Political Theory at the University of Ottawa in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

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