



**Beyond  
The  
Headlines**

**POLICY, POLITICS & MEDIA:  
The Intersection of Government  
Action & Public Opinion**

March 13, 2019



## About Beyond The Headlines (BTH)

Beyond the Headlines is a weekly one-hour current affairs talk radio show and podcast aimed at providing a greater understanding and thoughtful discussion of the various policy issues in our daily news headlines. BTH aims to take listeners beyond the immediacy of our daily news through in-depth interviews.

The show is produced and hosted by the Master students at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. BTH operates, records, and broadcasts out of CIUT 89.5FM at the University of Toronto.

BTH airs live on Mondays at 11AM on CIUT89.5FM. All our episodes are available on our website and iTunes!

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**“ Taking policy  
discussions  
out of the hallways  
&  
on to the airwaves ”**

## Policy, Politics & Media: The Intersection of Government Action & Public Opinion

Beyond The Headlines hosted a panel discussion on the evening of March 13 to explore the intersection of government action and public opinion. As the Federal Election approaches, our diverse panel examined the ever-evolving role of the media and public interest on the policy process. The discussion touched on a host of current issues that are salient in the minds of voters, examining how recent government action will influence public opinion leading up to the 2019 election

We would like to thank our panelists and moderator: Amanda Lang, Andrew Parkin, Adam Radwanski, Sean Simpson, and Steve Paikin. We were delighted for the range of expert perspectives and the dynamic conversation shared by our panelists and the moderator.

**Nuri Kim**  
2018-19 Executive Director


**Dimitri Treheles**  
2018-19 Executive Director



# Introducing Our Panelists & Moderator




**Amanda Lang**  
Anchor of BNN  
Bloomberg &  
Senior Fellow at the  
Munk School of Global  
Affairs and Public Policy

 @AmandaLang



**Adam Radwanski**  
Political Feature  
Writer at The Globe  
and Mail


 @aradwanski



**Sean Simpson**  
Vice-President of  
IPSOS




**Andrew Parkin**  
Director of the Mowat  
Centre & Associate  
Professor at the Munk  
School of Global Affairs  
and Public Policy

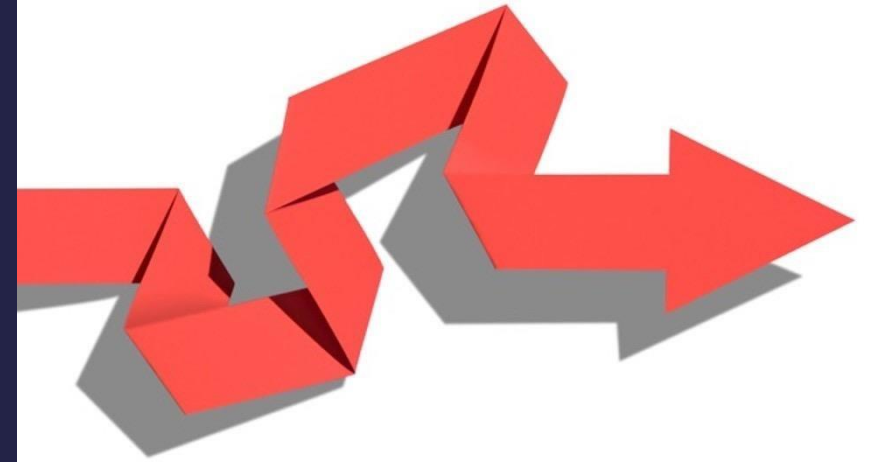
 @parkinac



**Steve Paikin**  
Panel Moderator &  
Host of TVO's The  
Agenda

 @spaikin





## HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE DISCUSSIONS

Throughout the evening, the moderator, Steve Paikin, sought to explore various topics pertaining to the interplay between government action, public opinion, and the media. The following pages provides snippets of the key messages from each of the panelists.



## When governments are trying to come up with policy ideas, how much do they take into account how they feel the media will play it versus how they think the public will react to it?



They don't consider the media quite as much as I think they do... But they still do care, certainly in terms of driving policy. There's still a role for [the media] but not as much there once was



One of the interesting developments is the degree to which the second guessing that goes on. There may be seconding guessing among political parties and policy makers ... I would prefer policy makers not be too reactive based on public opinion and to be a little bit ivory-towerish than 'what does Twitter think of this?'. Let's care less about public opinions and more about public values.



The influence of columnists and others who can be viewed as mainstream media is declining. [IPSOS] poll suggests that public's trust in the media, in general, are declining. When asked whose source the public trusts the most, they say their friends, who are spreading their version of the news on social media.



There's a paradoxical situation in that, on the polling side the tools that are available to track how issues are playing out in the public are better than ever... So if you're a political decision maker and you want to track how issues are playing out that's fantastic. That is why pollsters are gaining influence over the media. The paradoxical side is that the more information of that kind we get, the less we really know what's going on in the level of values.





“ The game part of politics – who’s winning, who’s losing – is indispensable tool in political life. But I would say there is whole swath of things going on that we don’t really understand right now about what’s happening in our society, whether it’s around economic anxiety, values surrounding immigration and so on. **The more detailed data we get, the more we lose the picture of what’s really going on. In a funny way, the media, who used to be able to try and channel some of the fundamental shift in society, that voice is getting lost** ”

- **Andrew Parkin**, Director of the Mowat Centre





**A recent study out of the Munk school observed a trend that individual media consumers in Canada are more responsive to, and are increasingly seeking out, opinion based pieces over those that are characterized as traditional reporting – if this is the case, how do you think this trend will influence future media coverage of government decision?**



The echo chamber phenomenon is alive and well. It is a challenge for the traditional media in the sense that our organizations have to pay the bills and make profit. So clickbait headlines that will grab attention. This leaves us clinging to our beliefs in why we're doing what we're doing... While trust may be eroding, one of the reasons why traditional media still have a little bit of an edge on other sources is that it's staffed by people who are there for a singular reason, which is that they believe in it. I hope where we get is that the traditional media becomes the certified stamp of 'you can trust us'. Traditional media has work to do to reclaim that, we've strayed from where we need to be.



I came across a survey [IPSOS] did for a media organization. Over 68% said they can tell the difference between news story and opinion, meaning one-third aren't able to differentiate what's opinion and what's new. One in three admit that they want their news in their social media to simply reflect their own political views. The net effect is that people aren't trusting what they're getting from mainstream media, they're seeking out opinions that reinforce and match their own, and people are less swayed by opposing points of view





“ Worthy policy pieces do not get read. It has to be compelling... When you get into policy, you have to explain why they’re promoting that policy... We don’t get too many windows in how the leaders will perform, how they would perform and how they would approach decisions especially if they haven’t been prime ministers before. **So we have to say – here is what we’re learning about this person during the campaign, or the state of this party, and where the parties are at right now. Because you can’t just pretend that whatever the platform is now will shape the government’s mandate.** ”

- **Adam Radwanski**, Political Feature Writer  
at *The Globe and Mail*



**There are tons of people that can't tell the difference between [opinion pieces] and what straight news copy is. How big a problem is it?**



It's a big problem, and I see it in commentary e-mails saying – “what kinds of reporter are you, this is too biased?” Well no, it's a column, it's marketed as such...There's a broader point here that traditional media need to step up our game, and concerns about polarization and silos. What concerns me is that [traditional media] is moving to a model where we're catering to pretty informed segment of the public. Those people might ultimately be better informed in news than they have been before but that may be a small sliver of people



I would say that traditional media has done a disservice by blending opinion and news. It's a relatively new. That columnists appear on the front page makes total sense from business point of view, it's why we read the paper. There's a reason we're drawn to certain voices so putting them up front makes sense. But it can be confusing. And I think we can do a better job of delineating, and I do think opinion sneaks in to news stories more than we care to admit.



I would go further. I don't think it's just the dividing line between what's fact-based news reporting and what's opinion. I think actually the roles are becoming blurred and the dividing line between the media and the political stage is blurred... From the public's point of view, what is the political voice and what is the media's voice is hard to distinguish





“ We typically do a big election poll and time and time again, when asked what the most important thing was in influencing your vote today, it's the leader – not the local candidate, not the party stance on the issues.... **People want to hear the horse-race, that's what's exciting, that's what you can measure against actual outcome** ”

- *Sean Simpson, Vice-President of IPSOS*



**In a few months from now, there'll be lot of reportage on the upcoming federal campaign. There's going to be horse race stories, policy stories, and personality stories of the candidates. What do you see as your obligation to get the balance among those three right?**



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Because of the niche that I occupy, business and politics only from point of view of policy, I wouldn't catch personality or horse-race stories. To me one of the frustrations is that the most important policy topics are frankly boring to our readers and our viewers. What's interesting to me about the SNC-Lavalin story, couple of things. One is, the Globe and Mail broke the story in good old fashioned style, they had sources and trusted them and ran the story. And then the Prime Minister said it was a lie. And we had this short vacuum where we didn't know. And that's terrible that we didn't know the answer to that with any certainty, until we did. And then we started to see that it was more complicated.





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- **Amanda Lang**, Anchor of BNN Bloomberg



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We typically do a big election poll and time and time again, when asked what the most important thing was in influencing your vote today, it's the leader – not the local candidate, not the party stance on the issues. [Horse-race stories gets the clicks on media] In part, media is simply responding to what the people want. The people want to hear the horse-race, that's what's exciting, that's what you can measure against actual outcome.

At the moment, Liberals are about 9 points behind the Tories. But all on these leadership attributes – who you trust the most? Has a vision you can support? Values close to you? etc. – on every single one of them, Prime Minister [Justin Trudeau] still leads. Part of that is lower level of awareness for the other two leaders, half of Canadians can't pick them out of a line-up, we've done the polls. The underlying figures for Trudeau are still not bad. He may very well recover from this.



The whole point that we have political parties in the first place is that we can't have 338 different policy discussions. You've got to have symbols and leaders to organize them. But here's what I think is new – there's a certain authority that some voices had. What's different now is that the openness of discourse. There's policy people underneath the discussions of trust and leadership that say, 'by the way here's some facts, here's how the Canada Child Benefit works'. For every one of that, there's a hundred people who's sharing information that is totally incorrect... What's really changed is the multiplicity of voices, which has a certain democratic advantage and yet has some real challenges.





“ No matter how hard we try to cover policy on our program, the reality is that there’s only so much of that that is relevant or useful. It may actually be more relevant and useful to focus on how trustworthy these leaders seem. Do they seem like they are forming? Do they seem like they’re in my corner? This isn’t the ‘would I feel fun going to have beer with them?’ This is whether they represent my values and interests or whether I feel if they do. Which may be of more relevant than what their position is on subsidized housing ”

- *Steve Paikin, Host of The Agenda*





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to all our 2018-19 Beyond The Headline producers for their help in organizing the panel. We would also like to thank our faculty advisor for Beyond The Headlines, Sean Speer, for all his strong support and advice.

Photo Credits: Robert Giannetta, 2020 MPP Candidate 

