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BANG FOR OUR BUCK

Comparing public service broadcasting funding in 19 countries,
including Canada

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Summary

Given the Conservative Party of Canada's stated intention to make public broadcast funding a federal election issue—with its “defund the CBC” slogan—it's important to examine public funding within a broader context. This analysis looks at how much governments fund public service broadcasters in 18 comparable countries compared to Canada's support of CBC/Radio-Canada.

The findings include:

Canadian funding is lower than most: CBC/Radio-Canada receives much less revenue from government, on a per capita basis, than most of the countries in the international sample. For example, the average per capita public funding of public service broadcasters in the other 18 countries in the survey was \$78.76 in 2022. Public funding in Canada for CBC/Radio-Canada was \$32.43—just 41 per cent of the international average.

Fourth lowest per capita: Of the 19 countries in the survey, only the U.S., New Zealand, and Portugal had lower per capita public spending than Canada. Given the requirement to address local, regional and national issues—in English and French, in a huge country with low population density—the ability of CBC to provide such excellent programming at a per capita cost of 10 cents per day is remarkable,

Less total public spending: The percentage of total public spending that goes to fund CBC/Radio-Canada is much lower than that of other countries. The average funding for public broadcasting among the 19 countries in the survey represented 0.242 per cent of total public expenditures. In Canada, public funding for CBC/Radio Canada amounted to 0.12 per cent of total government expenditures—50 per cent of the international average. Of the 19 countries in the survey, only the U.S. and

New Zealand devoted a lower percentage of their total public spending to support their public service broadcasters.

Greater reliance on commercial sources of funding: CBC/Radio Canada relies more on revenue from commercial sources than most public broadcasters in other countries in this study. Only three public broadcasters in the sample—Ireland, Italy, and New Zealand—relied on advertising and sponsorship revenues more than CBC/Radio Canada.

The public trusts public broadcasting: Among Francophones in Canada, Radio Canada is the most trusted news source, with 78 per cent of respondents reporting they find it “trustworthy”. TVA comes a close second, with 69 per cent reporting they find it “trustworthy”. Among Anglophones, CBC is the most trusted news source, with 67 per cent of respondents reporting they find it “trustworthy”. CTV comes a close second, with 62 per cent reporting they find it “trustworthy”. CBC is the most watched network, with 64 per cent reporting they watch it regularly or occasionally.

Overall, the findings of this analysis suggest Canadians are getting a lot of bang for their buck in terms of government support for its public service broadcasters. CBC/Radio Canada receive far less government support than almost all other countries in this analysis. Yet they remain the most watched/listened to and the most trusted news source.

Introduction

In the fiscal year ending on March 31, 2024, the CBC/Radio-Canada received \$1,436,652,000 in financial support from the Government of Canada. With a population of 39 million, this funding represents the equivalent of 10 cents per day per person.

Supporters and opponents of public broadcasting will have contrasting views concerning the use of public funds to finance the operations of CBC/Radio-Canada. Despite polls indicating the CBC/Radio Canada is the most trusted source of news and information,¹ a sizable minority of the population favours reducing or ceasing government funding for Canada's national public service broadcaster.²

The debate in Canada about the amount of public funding for public broadcasting often occurs in a vacuum, with little discussion of the benefits of a national public service broadcaster in a country as diverse—both geographically and culturally—as Canada.

It's not easy to quantify the importance of the CBC/Radio Canada in providing factual news coverage of domestic and international events and providing information that promotes understanding and tolerance in a nation bordering three oceans, spanning five time zones and with two national languages.

Critics of public support for CBC/Radio Canada often ignore these important, yet unquantifiable, benefits and focus solely on the amount of public funding.

To put the amount of public funding going to CBC/Radio Canada into context, it is useful to compare the Canadian experience with respect to public funding its public service broadcaster with that of other countries. This analysis does so, comparing Canadian public broadcasting funding to 18 other countries.

Methodology

There are two methods that can be used to develop meaningful comparisons between countries that have enormous differences in size, populations and spending priorities. Expressing public financial support of public service broadcasters on a per capita basis enables comparisons between countries with different sizes of populations. Comparing the amount of funding as a percentage of overall government spending provides a perspective on the funding of public service broadcasters in the context of overall government expenditures and priorities.

Comparisons of public funding for public service broadcasters, including on a per capita basis and share of overall funding, have been regularly conducted by the Nordicity consulting firm.³ The results of its most recent report are found in Table 1.

An international comparison of the amount of public funding for public service broadcasters is a useful tool to put the financial contribution of the Canadian government to CBC/Radio Canada into perspective. However, it does nothing to reveal the quality of the services public service broadcasters provide.

Other measures, such as the proportion of the population that views or listens to their national public service broadcasters, and the level of trust that they place in them, can serve as indicators of the quality of services as perceived by the public.

In addition to comparing public funding of public service broadcasters, this paper will examine them from the perspective of viewership and trust.

It is important to note that a comparison of the amount of financial support from government does not necessarily constitute a comparison of the total income of most of the national public broadcasters in the survey.

Public broadcasters can also receive income from advertising from both public and private sector sources. Other sources of revenue can include private and corporate donations, rental of real estate assets, content sales, leasing of space at transmission sites, retransmission royalties and sponsorships.

Advertising revenue derived from any level of government is included as advertising in Table 1.

Per capita cost of public broadcasting

How Canada compares

The consulting firm Nordicity periodically publishes reports that provide comparisons of public sectors broadcasters from several perspectives, including the amount of public funding they receive.

As seen in Table 1, CBC/Radio-Canada receives much less revenue from government, on a per capita basis, than most of the countries in the international sample.

For example, the average per capita public funding of public service broadcasters in the other 18 countries in the survey was \$78.76 in 2022. Public funding in Canada for CBC/Radio-Canada was \$32.43—just 41 per cent of the international average. Of the 19 countries in the survey only the U.S., New Zealand, and Portugal had lower per capita public spending than Canada.

Also, the percentage of total public spending that goes to fund CBC/Radio-Canada is much lower than that of other countries. The average funding for public broadcasting among the 19 countries in the survey represented 0.242 per cent of total public expenditures. In Canada, public funding for CBC/Radio Canada amounted to 0.12 per cent of total government expenditures—50 per cent of the international average. Of the 19 countries in the survey, only the U.S. and New Zealand devoted a lower percentage of their total public spending to support their public service broadcasters.

Table 1 / Public and advertising funding of public broadcasters, 2022

Country	Population	Total public funding for national PSB in CAD\$	Per capita public funding for PSB in CAD\$	Public funding to PSB as % of total government spending	Advertising/sponsorship revenue as share of all revenue
Switzerland	8.78M	\$1.7B	191.16	0.48%	11% (SRG)
Norway	5.46M	\$824.71M	151.13	0.28%	0% (NRK)
Germany	83.80M	\$11.9B	141.99	0.45%	8% (ARD)
Finland	5.56M	\$693.35M	124.79	0.35%	0% (YLE)
Denmark	5.90M	\$685.63M	116.15	0.20%	0% (DR)
Sweden	10.49M	\$1.1B	105.51	0.32%	0% (SVT)
Austria	9.04M	\$909.41M	100.58	0.28%	21% (ORF)
UK	66.97M	\$6.4B	95.84	0.38%	6% (BBC)
Belgium	11.69M	\$865.44M	74.06	0.21%	16% (RTBF)
Netherlands	17.70M	\$1.3B	71.24	0.22%	0% (NPO)
Ireland	5.13M	\$323.74M	63.14	0.22%	31% (RTE)
Spain	47.78M	\$2.9B	61.48	0.34%	3% (RTVE)
Japan	125.12M	\$6.8B	54.15	0.27%	0% (NHK)
Australia	26.01M	\$1.2B	47.94	0.14%	0% (ABC)
Italy	58.94M	\$2.6B	43.32	0.17%	23% (RAI)
Canada	38.24M	\$1.2B	32.43	0.12%	22%
Portugal	10.41M	\$253.47M	24.35	0.17%	9% (RPT)
New Zealand	5.12M	\$21.32M	4.16	0.02%	94% (TVNZ)
USA	333.29M	\$658.25M	1.98	0.01%	N/A

Sources Nordicity, *International Funding for Public Service Broadcasting*, Nordicity: *The Case for Advertising on CBC/Radio-Canada 2024*

CBC/Radio Canada also relies more on revenue from commercial sources than most public broadcasters in other countries. Only three public broadcasters in the sample—Ireland, Italy, and New Zealand—relied on advertising and sponsorship revenues more than CBC/Radio Canada.

Greater reliance on commercially generated revenues and less on financial support from government has been a longstanding characteristic of CBC/Radio Canada and has been confirmed by other international reviews.⁴

The Econstar report, *Public Service Broadcasting in an International Comparison*, used data from a 2013 Nordicity report and found that 16 of the 19 countries reported per capita rates of government funding for public broadcasting that were significantly higher than Canada.

Viewership and trust of public broadcasters

How does Canada rate?

As seen above, Canadians contribute much less of their tax money towards their public broadcasting service than citizens of most other major western nations. But what about the quality of the services that they can access? Do they go to their public broadcaster for their news? Do they trust CBC/Radio Canada to tell them the truth? Do Canadians use and trust the CBC/Radio Canada more or less than people in other countries use and trust their public broadcasters?

All broadcasters face major challenges maintaining their market share in the face of the growth of competition from digital news and entertainment sources. Likewise, in many countries, there has been a steady decline in public trust in institutions and the media.

The 2024 *Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report*⁵ surveyed 1,150 people in each of 28 countries asking how much, on a scale, did they trust the media. It found that, on average, in the nine EU countries included in the survey, 40 per cent responded that they had trust in the media. Compared to the previous year, both the U.S. and the UK experienced significant reductions in public trust, falling to 39 per cent and 31 per cent, respectively. In Canada, the level of public trust—51 per cent—increased

Table 2 / Public broadcasters: Viewer and trust, 2024

Bolded values indicate highest or second highest rankings for public trust and weekly reach

Country	Edelman Trust in Media	Reuters: Trust Most News Most of the Time	Reuters Public Broadcaster Trust	Reuters: PBS Weekly Reach TV or Radio	Reuters: PBS Weekly Reach Online	Average trust
Finland		69%	85%	65%	42%	65.3%
Denmark		57%	84%	60%	47%	62.0%
Norway		55%	80%	53%	48%	59.0%
Netherlands	56%	54%	82%	57%	32%	56.2%
Sweden	40%	50%	77%	55%	36%	51.6%
Switzerland		41%	72%	61%	26%	50.0%
Ireland	37%	46%	72%	54%	35%	48.8%
Austria		35%	60%	63%	30%	47.0%
Canada (FR) Radio Canada*	51%	39%	74%	41%	26%	46.2%
Portugal		56%	79%	33%	13%	45.3%
UK	31%	36%	62%	48%	44%	44.2%
Belgium		44%	65%	39%	24%	43.0%
Germany	46%	43%	64%	40%	17%	42.0%
Australia	40%	40%	64%	36%	24%	40.8%
Canada (ENG-CBC)*	51%	39%	63%	24%	21%	39.6%
Italy	48%	34%	58%	40%	11%	38.2%
Japan	33%	43%	59%	43%	10%	37.6%
France	40%	31%	60%	36%	10%	35.4%
Spain	40%	33%	53%	26%	9%	32.2%
USA	39%	32%	47%		8%	31.5%

* Values in the second column indicate the total combined reported trust for both the CBC and Radio-Canada

Sources Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report, Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2024

by one per cent over the previous year. So while public trust in public broadcasters is declining in the U.S. and the UK, it is holding fairly steady in Canada.

The Reuters Institute produces its annual *Digital News Report*,⁶ a comprehensive analysis of international media that also examines public trust of the media, both at a national level and for specific broadcasters. This report surveys 2,150 people in each of 46 countries. Concerning trust of their national media the survey asks: “Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? I think you can trust most news most of the time.” For their trust of specific news broadcasters, people were asked to rate on a scale: “How trustworthy would you say news from the following brands is?”

In a world where growing numbers of people distrust what they perceive to be “fake news” and “alternative truths”, public service broadcasters continue to be the most trusted sources for news. As seen in Table 2, in almost all countries, public broadcasters are ranked as most trusted sources of news. In every country, the trust level for public broadcasters is significantly higher than the general measure of trust for the media. In Canada, francophone respondents rate Radio-Canada as one of the most trusted public service broadcasters.

In two-thirds of the countries in the Reuters survey, public broadcasters have the highest market share of viewers, as measured by self-reported weekly usage. Increasingly public broadcasters are also expanding their online services. For example, in Canada, the English CBC websites are now the most visited source for on-line news.

A more thorough look at Canada

The sample sizes for Canada in the Edelman and Reuters surveys were 1,150 and 2,150, respectively. In the Reuters survey, the results for Canada were separated into English and Francophone populations, so the results were based on smaller sample sizes. Pollara Strategic Insights conducted a more recent and in-depth survey of 3,500 Canadians, including 700 Quebecers. The results of the Pollara survey were largely consistent with both the Edelman and Reuters reports.

For Francophones:

- Radio Canada is the most trusted news source, with 78 per cent of respondents reporting they find it “trustworthy” and only 15 per cent finding it “untrustworthy”.
- TVA comes a close second, with 69 per cent reporting they find it “trustworthy” and 28 per cent finding it “untrustworthy”.
- TVA is the most watched network, with 80 per cent reporting they watch it regularly or occasionally.
- Radio Canada comes a close second, with 78 per cent reporting they watch it regularly or occasionally.

For Anglophones:

- CBC is the most trusted news source, with 67 per cent of respondents reporting they find it “trustworthy” and only 21 per cent finding it “untrustworthy”.

- CTV comes a close second, with 62 per cent reporting they find it “trustworthy” and 17 per cent finding it “untrustworthy”.
- CBC is the most watched network, with 64 per cent reporting they watch it regularly or occasionally.
- CTV comes a close second, with 57 per cent reporting they watch it regularly or occasionally.

Another recent survey of Canadians, conducted by the Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy,⁷ found similar results with respect to trust and viewership. This survey of 2,055 Canadian adults, conducted from August 28, 2024 to September 6, 2024, also found that, when asked what they would do with the CBC/Radio-Canada’s budget, 57 per cent of respondents would either increase (24 per cent) or maintain (33 per cent) funding. The survey also found that, when asked about the importance of public service media given the rise of social media, 79 percent of respondents said it was either equally or more important than before.

Conclusion

Canada's national public broadcaster, CBC/Radio-Canada, is a valued and trusted source of information and entertainment for Canadians—despite its funding disadvantage compared to other countries. CBC/Radio-Canada receives considerably less than the vast majority of public service broadcasters in other comparable countries. On a per capita basis, the funding of CBC/Radio-Canada amounts to 41 per cent of the international average. As a share of overall government expenditures, the funding of CBC/Radio-Canada represents only 0.12 per cent of total government expenditures, less than 50 per cent of the international average.

Public service broadcasting in Canada is a great deal for Canadians and viewers and listeners respond by regularly tuning in to a service they know and trust.

Notes

- 1 Pollara Strategic Insights 2024 polling found CBC and Radio Canada to be most trusted by Canadians.
- 2 Mainstreet Research polling in 2022 and 2024 found a large minority of Canadians supporting either defunding or reducing funding for the CBC.
- 3 Nordicity Ltd., *International Comparison of Public Funding for Public Service Broadcasting 2022*, September 12, 2024.
- 4 Rövekamp, Ingmar, *Public Service Broadcasting in an International Comparison*, CESifo DICE Report, ISSN 1613-6373, ifo Institut—Leibniz-Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung an der Universität München, München, 2014 Vol. 12, Iss. 3, pp. 51-53.
- 5 Edelman Trust Institute, *Edelman Trust Barometer Report, Global Report*, page 43, 2024.
- 6 Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, *Reuters Digital News Report*, 2024.
- 7 Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy, *Do We Need the CBC? "A national survey of Canadians on public service media,"* 2024.

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