

Media Coverage of Federal Spending Announcements on Child Care, Pharma Care, and Dental Care

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Executive Summary

- The federal government has introduced three new social programs since 2021, increasing permanent spending.
- This analysis investigates if the media questioned whether the government's new programs observed its own fiscal principles.
- A machine content analysis of CBC and CTV network television and cable public affairs programs was conducted to assess media coverage of the new social programs.
- A separate machine content analysis of government press releases and announcements of the programs was also conducted.
- The cost of the programs was mentioned in only 0.6% of the government press releases and 4% of the television coverage (CTV 4.1% and CBC 3.7%).
- Budget and fiscal issues more broadly were covered in 3.5% of the press releases, and in 15.3% of CTV's and 9.4% of CBC's news coverage.
- There were only five mentions on CBC and two on CTV that talked about how the programs created new permanent spending. This was a significant lack of criticism of a key component of the Finance Minister's mandate letter, which instructs her to "avoid creating new permanent spending."
- The most common theme in the press releases was the programs themselves, which accounted for 53.9% of the content. This was discussed in 14.8% of CTV's coverage and 7.2% of CBC's coverage.
- Features of the program that purported to provide benefits to Canadians represented 17.9% of the press releases, but only 6.4% of CTV's and 10.2% of CBC's coverage.
- Critical questions regarding how programs might be funded were ignored in favour of the politicians' political strategies and process questions on how the minority government would remain in power.

Media Coverage of Federal Spending Announcements on Child Care, Pharma Care, and Dental Care

Introduction

Since 2021, the federal government has introduced three new national social programs that have increased permanent spending, at a time when budget deficits were already high following the COVID-19 pandemic (child care, pharma care, and dental care).

The first major non-COVID spending initiative was the national child care program, announced in *Budget 2021*. This was the first budget released since the 2019 fall federal election, and the first under Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland. On December 11, 2023, the roll-out for the dental care program was announced. It was a phased approach over several months. The pharma care program was formally announced on February 29, 2024, by Mark Holland, minister of health, following negotiations with the NDP.

None of these programs were listed as priorities in the department of finance mandate letters, yet all were spearheaded by Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland. When Freeland replaced Bill Morneau as finance minister, the prime minister instructed her to maintain the priorities of the 2019 mandate letters, as well as other tasks. The top priorities in 2019 for Morneau were to maintain four key principles for the implementation of the fiscal plan:

1. Continue to reduce the Government's debt as a function of our economy;
2. Continue to build confidence in Canada's economy by preserving our AAA credit rating;
3. Continue to invest in people and in the things that give people a better quality of life; and
4. Preserve fiscal firepower in the event that we need to respond to an economic downturn (Trudeau, 2019).

In addition to these commitments, in her first mandate letter, Freeland was instructed to:

Preserve Canada's fiscal advantage and continue to be guided by values of sustainability and prudence by presenting a plan to regrow the economy and presenting a new fiscal anchor to guide this work (Trudeau, 2021a).

By the end of 2021, Trudeau had issued a supplemental mandate letter to Freeland, which mentioned child care policy for the first time: “you will work to make life more affordable for middle class Canadians and their families, including building off our sustained investment in early learning and child care and taking significant action on housing affordability, while maintaining our sound fiscal trajectory” (Trudeau, 2021b).

In none of the finance minister's mandate letters were pharma care or dental care mentioned.

When the Trudeau government first came into office in 2015, the media lauded the new, open approach and the release of the mandate letters. The commitment from the government was that it would be “open by default,” and the mandate letters signalled this promise. In the *Guelph Mercury*, Geoffrey Stevens praised the move, stating: “This is a triumph for open government, for transparency and accountability—for real change, if you will” (Stevens, 2015). On the CBC, Althia Raj went so far as to claim that it would be a way for journalists to hold the government to account: “And that is something that we, the media, will be able to use to, you know, hold them accountable six months later and say, you didn't do the job that the prime minister said you were going to do” (CBC *At Issue*, 2015).

During the government's first mandate, the media often referred to the mandate letters to question government policy. Given the fiscal challenges the country already faced, with these latest programs it is worth investigating whether the media asked how the government could create new permanent spending and still maintain the principles of the fiscal plan.

Role of television

When assessing media coverage, sometimes the absence of information reveals more than what is covered. Governments are adept at managing the media with their announcements and election platforms. One of the strongest arguments in favour of the media is that they hold government to account on behalf of the public. Despite the growth in online news sources and the decline in newspaper

Media Coverage of Federal Spending Announcements on Child Care, Pharma Care, and Dental Care

readership, 67% of Canadians still rely on television to follow news and current affairs, and among those older than 55 it is 88% (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Television news is easily accessible, and the visuals enrich the experience. As such, it is a powerful mechanism for providing information. But how well served are Canadians when it comes to examining new programs delivered by the federal government?

Method

To answer this question, a machine content analysis of CBC and CTV network television and cable public affairs programs was conducted to examine how these three new social programs were covered. The programs were the flagship national newscasts of the networks (CBC's *The National* [CBC, n.d.-a] and CTV News [CTV, n.d.-a]), as well as the public affairs programs on the networks (CBC's *Power and Politics* [CBC, n.d.-b] and CTV's *Powerplay*, [n.d.-b] and *Question Period* [n.d.-c]). The format of the programs differs slightly: the CBC's programs are longer (a one-hour national newscast, compared to 30 minutes on the private broadcaster). In addition, the public broadcaster has a two-hour cable program, compared with a one-hour program on CTV. As such, there was more content on CBC than CTV for each of the policy areas (table 1).

Text searches were done using Eureka (a database of television newscasts), and the following terms were searched (childcare or "child care" as a text search). This resulted in stories that were not just about child care, as it was a large component of *Budget 2022*. In addition, there was

duplication of stories in the searches, as some also discussed pharma care and dental care.

To isolate stories only on pharma care and dental care, subsequent searches only included stories with the terms in the headlines and front matter to ensure that the new policies were the focus. The stories were then analyzed using the machine coding software Wordstat (n.d.), which generates lists of the most common phrases and individual word counts. Wordstat has the capacity to group words that appear most frequently together; for example, it creates a topic category such as "cost of living," to which "cost; gas; living; oil; interest; rates; prices; inflation; rising; tax; carbon; heating; price; low; income" are most commonly associated. From there the most common phrases with at least two frequencies are tabulated and manually coded from the topic list. For ambiguous statements, keywords in context were examined to assess meaning.

To gauge how closely the government's announcements on the policies were covered, an additional search was conducted on the government's website or press releases and speeches on the three policy areas (Canada, n.d.). This website does not allow for searches by topic but instead by ministry. To isolate the most relevant releases, the ministries selected were finance and health, given that the policy areas impacted budgets, and the most relevant department for dental care and pharma care was the health portfolio.

As can be seen in table 1, both the government and media emphasized the child care program. This is, in part, because the government made announcements every time negotiations with the provinces resulted in an agreement for cost-sharing. It was also the program with the largest

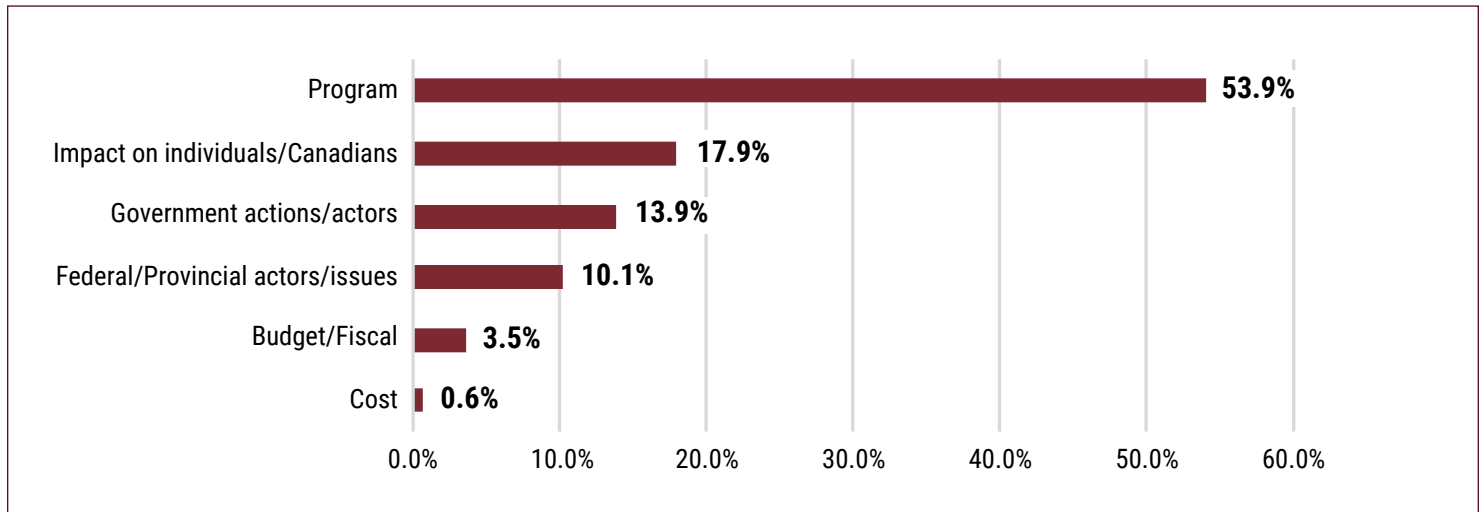
Table 1: Number of stories per topic

Policy	Dates searched	Government press releases/ speeches	CBC broadcasts	CTV broadcasts
Child care	Feb. 1, 2021–Dec. 30, 2023	15	121	79
Pharma care	Jan. 1, 2023–May 30, 2024	4	12	11
Dental care	Jan. 1, 2023–Apr. 30, 2024	7	24	20
Total		26	157	110

Sources: Author's calculations, based on government and media sources, 2021–2024.

Media Coverage of Federal Spending Announcements on Child Care, Pharma Care, and Dental Care

Figure 1: Government Press Releases: Child Care, Pharma Care, and Dental Care Programs



Sources: Author's calculations, based on government sources, 2021–2024.

spending commitment and was central to the government's policy platform. Both the pharma care and dental care programs were less of a priority for the government, but they were part of the supply and confidence agreement with the NDP to keep the government in power until 2025.

Overall coverage

For all three policy areas, the press releases and statements issued by the government focused on the original funding announcement, and subsequent press releases announced deals it made with the provinces. The most common theme emerging from the press releases dealt with the programs themselves (53.9%). Specific features of the programs that impacted individual Canadians represented 17.9% of the releases. Mentions of the government actions, the cabinet, and the politicians involved garnered 13.9%, and mentions of provincial partners and federal-provincial relations comprised 10.1% of the total content. Mentions of budget or fiscal updates or fiscal capacity were only 3.5% of the content, while the cost of the programs was mentioned only 0.6% of the time, and that was primarily in reference to the child care program (figure 1).

Television news coverage

An examination of television news coverage of the child care program highlighted some notable differences and

similarities between the TV coverage of the policy and the government's releases. Crucially, roughly one-quarter of both CTV's and CBC's television coverage focused on opposition parties (14.4% and 13.9%) and political strategy (12.5% and 12.2%). It is unsurprising that these categories were not present in the government press releases, but it does show the nature of television news, especially the cable news channels. Unlike the government press releases, the news media have an obligation to obtain comment and reaction from opposition parties, and television also questions political actors on how policies impact their political strategies.

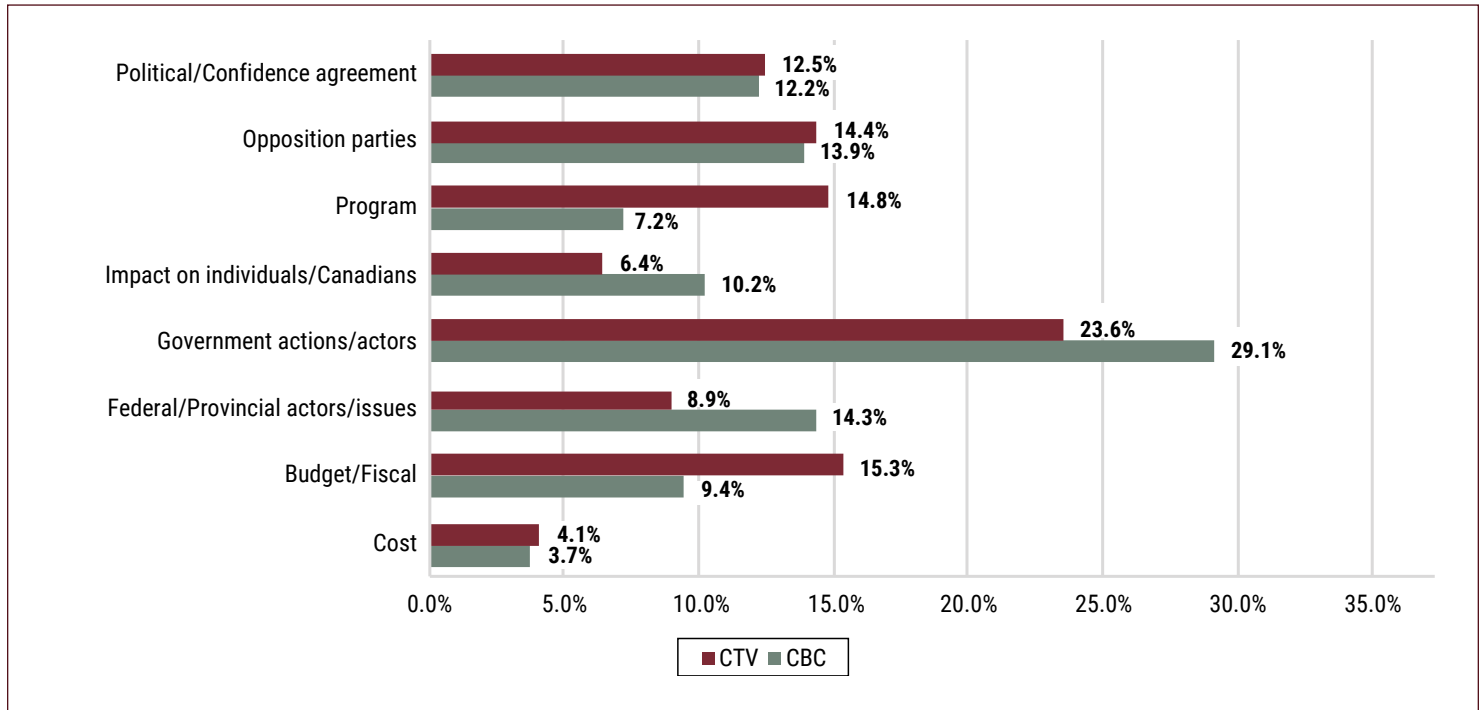
While the focus of the government press releases was on the programs themselves, on television the programs comprised only 7.2% of CBC's and 14.8% of CTV's overall coverage.

In contrast, the largest proportion of television's attention was drawn to the actions of government officials; for example, their promises, federal-provincial relations, decisions, and political actors; this represented 29.1% of CBC's and 23.6% of CTV's coverage. A large component of this category was cabinet ministers' comments about what the government was going to do.

Neither the government nor television news emphasized the cost of the programs to any meaningful extent. This aspect was neglected in the television coverage; there was passing mention of the programs' cost in 4.1% of CTV's coverage

Media Coverage of Federal Spending Announcements on Child Care, Pharma Care, and Dental Care

Figure 2: TV News Coverage of Child Care, Pharma Care, and Dental Care Programs



Sources: Author's calculations, based on media sources, 2021–2024.

and in 3.7% of CBC network's coverage. These phrases would include any references to the billions in spending on or investment in the programs.

In the government releases, phrases associated with fiscal matters were in relation to the federal budget, economic policy, growing the middle class, and promises of strong economic growth. On CBC television, there was a slightly higher emphasis on these matters than in the government press releases, at 9.4%. CTV was an outlier as it emphasized these programs in discussions of the budget and fiscal updates at 15.3%. For CTV, there was extensive coverage on the budgets, and they contacted the parliamentary budget officer for his analysis on the spending programs more frequently than did the CBC.

Within this TV coverage, there were a few instances where programs criticized the fiscal policy in the context of how the deficit was increasing, and concerns that the government had introduced large and increasing spending budgets. However, even within this coverage, there were only five mentions on CBC and two on CTV that talked about how the programs created new permanent spending. This

was a significant lack of criticism of a key component of the Finance Minister's mandate letter, which instructed her to "avoid creating new permanent spending" (Trudeau, 2021).

Also lacking was discussion of how the programs would be paid for. For example, while there were few mentions of taxes, they were in relation to NDP policies calling for increased corporate taxes and taxes on the wealthy, not in relation to the link between government policy and increased taxes.

On the rare occasion where a journalist specifically asked about how the program would be funded, the response was that it would come from economic growth. For example, CTV's Lisa LaFlamme, in an interview with Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, asked:

As far as promises go, I wonder if you aren't worried that those children from the child care program that could eventually benefit from it, are going to be the same ones who will, when they grow up, still be paying for this deficit. I mean, how is that looking out for the future? (CTV, 2021)

Media Coverage of Federal Spending Announcements on Child Care, Pharma Care, and Dental Care

Freeland's response was that it would be made up for by a growing economy: "This is a policy, that once we build it—and it's going to take a little bit of time—is going to do more for Canada's economy and for our growth, than any economic policy of any Canadian government since NAFTA."

Apart from this brief exchange, there was extraordinarily little attention paid to or critical evaluation of how the programs would be funded. Examining the phrases associated with stories on the new programs illustrates how effective the government was in focusing media attention on the programs and their benefits, rather than on how to fund them.

Summary

It has been well documented that journalists tend to focus on strategy and process and not the details of a policy. They often ask how a particular policy will appeal to voters and whether it is a good strategy to pursue.

Given that the Liberal government has put significant resources into key policies such as early child care and learning, and forged ahead with limited national pharma

care and dental care programs, it is not unreasonable for the public to expect that Canadian journalists critically evaluate these programs, particularly with respect to how they will be sustainably paid for by taxpayers.

Unfortunately, there is an ever-decreasing pool of journalists, and those who are left often simply repeat the government's talking points. Critical questions regarding how programs will be funded are ignored; emphasis is placed instead on the political strategies of politicians and the broader process questions on how this minority government will remain in power. The focus on new programs is on the process of getting deals made. For example, on child care, there was significant discussion on which provinces would sign onto the deal, who the holdouts were, and the ultimate national strategy in the deal. On pharma care and dental care, the emphasis was on whether the Liberal government would agree to the terms of the supply and confidence agreement with the NDP to ensure their political survival. Much was made of the looming deadline for the pharma care deal and the NDP support, rather than how the new permanent spending would be financed.

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Media Coverage of Federal Spending Announcements on Child Care, Pharma Care, and Dental Care

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