

The Death of Consortium Network TV debates in Canada's 42nd General Election

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On Monday, Canadians will head to the polls to conclude one of the most exciting national election campaigns in recent history. Apart from its extraordinary length (78 days versus the usual 36 days), a notable change in the 2015 campaign was the cancellation of the two customary candidates debates organized by a consortium of the country's national television networks. After the consortium failed to confirm the attendance of the three federal party leaders, the parties agreed to attend five alternative debates hosted by Macleans Magazine, the Globe and Mail newspaper, the Munk School of Global Affairs, the consortium of French language media and TVA, a private French broadcaster.

When the governing Conservative Party announced that its leader – Prime Minister Stephen Harper would not participate in the traditional debates, both the consortium and the country's leading political pundits cried foul. Sensational headlines condemned the decision as a “boycott” that betrayed Canadian democratic traditions.



The consortium claimed that their debates could reach the largest number of Canadians. In their view, only their nationally televised debates could provide Canadians with the information they would need to make informed decisions about the direction of the country. Curiously, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC – Canada's public broadcaster) undercut this argument when in an apparent fit of pique, it turned down an option to carry feed

for all but one debate for free. As a steward of public funds, with a supposed mandate to specifically provide Canadian content that “informs and enlightens”, the CBC had a responsibility to air these debates.

In their frantic effort to preserve their role as sponsors of the traditional network debates, members of the consortium, including the CBC, went as far as to claim that Canadians would not tune into debates if they were sponsored by their new competitors. Their fear-mongering included a warning that the entire election would not garner the usual level of public attention. Voter turnout was sure to suffer.



Reality is different. Elections Canada has reported a 71% increase in voter turnout during advance voting last week relative to figures registered at advance polls in the last election. The consortium and its supporters grossly underestimated the level of Canadians’ engagement in the political process and their willingness to seek news from sources outside the consortium to inform their decisions.

The election has featured five informative debates that should make Canadians proud of their democracy. They certainly compared favourably to the recent network-sponsored debates our neighbours to the south had to endure. In the world’s putative “greatest democracy”, networks served up a veritable gong show in a recent Republican debate dominated by TV reality television star, Donald Trump. In contrast, the Canadian debates focused in depth on single issues such as the economy and foreign policy rather than a large range of topics in a short time frame. These debates were praised by Canadians of all political stripes for their quality. They gave the party leaders time to clearly present their values in a forum that created a level of discourse beyond the usual talking points.

Canadians are increasingly diversifying their news sources and the 2015 debates are further proof that power is no longer concentrated in the hands of the old media monopoly. After the campaign concludes, they will have the opportunity to reflect on what occurred and improve upon the outdated debate model they’ve been using since the mid-1960s. There is undoubtedly still a big role for the consortium to play in our democracy but must continue to adapt the way it covers politics in the new media landscape.

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