Immigration, Housing and Foreign Buyers in Vancouver:
Examining News Coverage of Racialized Issues

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral
Affairs in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of

Master of Journalism

in

Journalism

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Ottawa, Ontario

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Abstract

The Vancouver housing and affordability crisis of the mid-2010 decade was marked by fervent discussions of the impact of foreign buyers and offshore money putting upwards pressure on housing prices, driving them out of reach for most locals. Throughout the news coverage of this issue, there appeared to be an outsized focus on the ethnicity of these wealthy foreign buyers, specifically the buyers of ethnic Chinese descent, giving an impression of a bias against this particular group. This raises the question: was the local news coverage of the housing crisis biased in a negative way against the Chinese community, or did it appear that way due to other circumstances? This thesis will aim to prove the presence of bias, should there be any to be found, through an examination of newspaper coverage in Vancouver from 2013 to 2018, as well as other academic disciplines, like urban studies.

Acknowledgments

When I first embarked on this academic endeavour, my goal was to explore an issue that I had been curious about for a few years prior to my first semester at Carleton University. As a journalist and a Vancouverite, it was interesting to see how people's feelings and views on matters as nuanced and complicated as immigration and foreign investment in the local economy converged on the topic of housing. Similarly, I was also interested in why it felt like the conversation started to become more and more about race, rather than a plethora of factors, such as all levels of government historically courting investment from overseas, for why housing was becoming more and more out of reach for those who called Vancouver home. I am extremely grateful to have been given a chance to explore one of my greatest journalistic passions and interests and, hopefully, I have also been able to produce a body of work worthy of guiding the continued conversation.

First, I'd like to thank the Carleton University School of Journalism for giving me the chance to pursue one of my passions, as well as for the financial support, which made it possible for me to complete my studies without have to worry about funding. I'd especially like to thank my supervisor Professor Paul Adams. The level of faith in me that he demonstrated from the start was greatly encouraging to a student who was, quite frankly, intimidated by the prospect of taking on an academic thesis. His advice, critiques and guidance were to the point, straightforward and no-nonsense, and encouraged me to make my work better every step of the way. Truly, this thesis would not have been possible without his support and mentorship throughout the entire process.

Thanks also go to Professor Christopher Dornan, the previous Graduate Supervisor at the School of Journalism, currently on sabbatical. Not only did he set me on the path to writing a thesis, but was the first to tell me that mine was a topic worth exploring in such a way.

Further thanks also go to the esteemed journalists I interviewed for this thesis: Rob Shaw of *The Vancouver Sun*, Christopher Cheung of *The Tyee*, journalism instructor and freelancer for *The Globe and Mail* Frances Bula, Ian Young of the *South China Morning Post*, as well as Mark Hume and Wyng Chow, both former reporters for *The Vancouver Sun*, and one final journalist who wished to remain anonymous. These reporters all come from different backgrounds and areas of expertise, but all of have covered the housing crisis and were gracious enough to take time out of their busy schedules to share with some of their experiences and personal perspectives on the coverage of the housing crisis. Though Mark and Wyng are both retired, their experiences as journalists in a newsroom covering a housing crisis that occurred decades before the one I wrote about were greatly helpful in guiding my writing of Chapter 3.

Last, but certainly not least, I'd like to thank my parents. From beginning to end, all the highs and lows, they were there for me, supporting me any way they could. It was a great reminder to know that, at the end of the day, family is forever, and we'll always be there for each other when it matters most.

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Introduction

In recent years, the housing and affordability crisis has been a contentious frequent feature in the media coverage of the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. From arguments over supply and demand to the debate over the influence of overseas money and capital flow distorting the market, it was a keystone issue of public discourse within Canada's westernmost province, and became a central focus of a highly heated provincial election in 2017. In keeping with the way this crisis was often referred to, the housing crisis in Vancouver and its surrounding areas was defined by the rising unaffordability of housing of any kind; no form of residential housing, be it a single detached home, a townhouse, or a condominium was spared from the spikes in price. What made this crisis such a daunting matter was that there was very little agreement on what was causing those rises in cost. Vancouver has historically been a more expensive place to live, especially in comparison to the rest of Canada. In the summer of 2009, it was reported to be the city with the highest average monthly rent in the entire country.¹ The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation reported, based on data it had compiled, the average rent in the Metro Vancouver region was \$1,154 a month, taking the number one spot out of five municipalities in Canada where the average rent per month had exceeded \$1000.² The other four cities with fairly high rents were reported to be Toronto, Calgary, Victoria and Edmonton.³

¹ Carlito Pablo, "Metro Vancouver has highest rent in Canada." *The Georgia Straight*, 10 Jun., 2009. <https://www.straight.com/article-229579/metro-vancouver-has-highest-rent-canada>. Accessed 16 Jan., 2020.

² Pablo, "Highest rent."

³ Pablo, "Highest rent."

However, it is easy to disregard history when one is faced with the struggles of the present. Without very much consensus or true empirical evidence of the cause of the sudden shift in the city towards the unaffordable, the question turned to what exactly was at the root of this issue. With several possible answers, there was one possibility that captured the most attention as the situation worsened and generated the most controversy and debate: foreign buyers. What the phrase specifically entails is a person who is not a citizen of Canada nor a permanent resident, who does not pay Canadian taxes, using money acquired from overseas to purchase property on Canadian soil. Most notably, the one specific group of people that seemed to hold more of the public's attention than most, was those from China or of Chinese descent. Vancouver's housing crisis is by no means an isolated or new phenomenon. Large cities around the world, such as New York, Seattle, Toronto, London, England and Sydney, Australia, have all experienced surges in housing prices, though, at least in Canada, Vancouver has been the hotbed for housing unaffordability and the debate surrounding foreign buyers. Vancouver also experienced a similar situation in the 1980's and 1990's, with newcomers from Hong Kong, in the years leading up to the 1997 handover of Hong Kong back to Chinese sovereignty. This earlier housing crisis will be explored more thoroughly in Chapter 3.

In the first year of the time period of interest for this thesis, 2013, due to some anecdotal evidence surfacing, the media was reporting that there was a chance that money coming in from overseas was distorting the market. However, it was also reported that the evidence that such a thing was happening was largely anecdotal, and that any real evidence of having a real and quantifiable effect on the market in Vancouver was "scant"

at best.⁴ Similarly, the then-chief economist for the British Columbia Real Estate Association was quoted as saying that the idea that there were “hordes of investors coming to Vancouver and driving up prices” was little more than a myth.⁵ However, the year 2016 brought about a marked change in the direction that the news coverage seemed to be taking when covering this issue. As the crisis continued featuring prominently in media, more and more of the coverage leaned more towards a focus that foreign buyers were the primary cause of Vancouver’s housing woes. The coverage was also quite explicit in how it described the perceived culprits in this case. Oftentimes, the language within the coverage could be quite targeted, such as a 2015 report from *The Province* which described Chinese businessman Mailin Chen, who had just purchased a residential property worth more than \$50 million, as representative of “a phenomenal surge of investment from Mainland China driving homes out of reach for locals.”⁶ However, it should also be mentioned that figures published by local news agencies indicated as many as 90 percent of foreign buyers involved in transactions from June 10 to August 1 were Chinese nationals, according to data released by British Columbia’s Ministry of Finance after the introduction of the foreign-buyers tax, though before it took effect August 2 of 2016, though these numbers are specifically for the City of Richmond.⁷

Though some existing government data suggests that foreign buyers of Chinese descent did have a sizeable influence on housing prices in Vancouver, the outsized focus

⁴ Andrea Woo, “Scant evidence behind myth of Vancouver real estate's foreign buyers.” *The Globe and Mail*, 23 Feb., 2013. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/scant-evidence-behind-myth-of-vancouver-real-estates-foreign-buyers/article9000860/>. Accessed 18 Nov. 2019.

⁵ Woo, “Scant evidence.”

⁶ Sam Cooper, “Surge of foreign cash bucks trend; Greater Vancouver.” *The Province*, 15 Oct., 2015, p. A.4. *Canadian Newsstream*.

⁷ Graeme Wood, “Foreign buyers bounce back.” *Richmond News*, 4 Nov., 2016, p. A.11. *Canadian Newsstream*.

on this one aspect of the housing crisis resulted in coverage with a notable slant, which led to stigmatizing of communities of Chinese descent. Through an examination of the newspaper coverage of the housing crisis from the years of 2013 through to the end of 2018, as well as through interviews with some notable journalists who have covered this issue, the aim of this thesis will be to highlight traces of possible bias within the news media when covering this highly contentious issue.

Bias is defined as being an “inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group, especially in a way considered to be unfair” by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In journalism, the term means largely the same thing, and is often used to describe reporting that is perceived as being in favour or against one side of the story. This is important given the journalism industry’s standard of reporting on “both sides” of the story for the sake of objectivity and impartiality. For this thesis, my interest is primarily in locating instances where the coverage appears to be noticeably prejudiced against wealthy Chinese buyers, who have been tied very closely to the wider discussion of housing and affordability.

Similarly, this project will also look to examine other factors that may have had an influence in the creation of an environment that helped breed an affordability issue, such as existing market issues, like low interest rates, as well as a lack of government action to contain the surging prices. It is important to remember that human beings are opinionated creatures, and it is hard for any one of us to completely remove our own perspectives and thoughts on any given issue, though there are many within the journalism industry who would argue that it is the duty of a journalist to do exactly that. In this way, this thesis will also aim to examine bias, though not in the traditional sense

of a noticeable slant or prejudice, but in the forms of the voices that were chosen to comment on and provide context to a highly contentious issue. In other words, this would be the slant that occurs in the representation of an insufficient range of voices when it is expected that both sides are represented.

In recent years, there has also been an increasing interest in what is called “unconscious bias” or “implicit bias.” The term is defined as “an automatic or unconscious tendency to associate particular characteristics with particular groups,” and, while it is not malicious, it could lead to “disparate treatment of individuals and groups.”⁸ This occurs when certain perspectives and stereotypes, and their association with a certain group of people, become so ingrained within others that they are automatically (unconsciously) applied to that group. There is a stereotype referred to as the “perpetual foreigner,” which is one that is often applied to immigrants of Asian descent. It is the idea that people of Asian descent are always seen as outsiders and do not truly belong in this country. Such perceptions do little to help ease any existing tensions and serve only to add heat to an already volatile situation. This thesis will also propose possible solutions to how those in the business of news media can improve how they approach issues that are heavily tied to race and ethnicity. By doing so, the goal would be to create awareness that special issues require a special sort of attention, and could help bring this industry forward while still holding true to the values of traditional journalism of being truthful, impartial and accurate.

⁸ Issac J. Bailey, “HOW IMPLICIT BIAS WORKS IN JOURNALISM: Avoiding the Pitfalls of Hidden Biases Can Lead to Better Story Selection and More Inclusive Reporting.” *Nieman Reports* (2019), 73:2, pg. 26.

In order to study possible evidence of bias within the news coverage of the issue, I have chosen to examine newspaper articles from the beginning of 2013 to the end of 2018. This period is significant because it is reflective of the ebb and flow that the housing crisis itself displayed. 2013 is the year that the possibility of foreign buyers and overseas capital having an influence on the market started to gain more traction in public discourse. 2014 was quite similar to 2013 in that there still was not much attention to the issue, but it was in 2015 that more and more evidence of the effects of foreign money on local housing markets began to surface in the media coverage, offering some confirmation to the initial suspicions that foreign buyers were having more of an impact on the housing market than initially believed. 2016 was when the issue started gaining much more significant attention, as evidenced by a jump in the number of articles (though only a fraction of total coverage, 14 articles from 2015 and 25 from 2016 were examined during research for this project, compared to three for both 2013 and 2014). 2016 was also the year governments admitted foreign buyers were indeed having some degree of influence on the housing market in Vancouver, and also the year the then-Liberal provincial government introduced measures in an attempt to lower housing prices and freeze the demand from foreign buyers. This came most notably in the form of a tax specifically on any and all residential real estate transactions involving a party who is not a Canadian citizen or permanent resident. 2017 was the year when the opposition New Democratic Party of British Columbia defeated the incumbent Liberal Party in an election that was defined by concerns surrounding housing, making it the year that the issue became further politicized through the sparring between the two major parties in the province. And finally, 2018 was the year when the NDP government introduced a series

of its own measures to help cool the hot real estate market, in the aftermath of a highly contentious election filled with lofty promises, including several that claimed to make housing more affordable for British Columbians. 2017 and 2018 were both years in which the aftermath of the tax introduced in 2016 was examined, and the true efficacy of it could be assessed. Therefore, this period between 2013 and 2018 would offer the most dynamic examples of coverage. Newspapers were specifically chosen not just because they could offer more in-depth coverage beyond a traditional television or radio news report, but also because print journalism continues to aid, inform and drive the coverage done by more broadcast-oriented news outlets. For this, I have chosen the *Vancouver Sun* and *The Globe and Mail* newspapers as the basis for this research, because these are reliable and well-respected outlets that were very diligent in covering the crisis, and could also do longer-form and more holistic coverage of the crisis. *The Province*, a sister paper of the *Sun*, was also included for this reason. Additionally, *The Globe and Mail's* coverage also takes on a focus on the economic and financial aspect, which allows for better research into that side of the housing and affordability crisis. I also chose to include journalism done by the *Richmond News* newspaper. This is a local paper in the City of Richmond, a suburb of Vancouver, most well-known as a city with a sizeable population of Chinese diaspora from various Chinese-speaking regions in the world. Since there was some coverage in other papers that Chinese immigrants were the cause of the affordability issues in Vancouver, it was fitting to include a paper that could bring some coverage from a more localized angle in a community that is home to 104,185 people of Chinese descent, accounting for 53 percent of the city's total population according to the Canada 2016 census.

The research will be further supplemented with interviews from notable journalists who have followed the housing and affordability crisis as it developed. The journalists interviewed for this project are Christopher Cheung of *The Tyee*, Frances Bula, a journalism instructor and freelancer for *The Globe and Mail*, Rob Shaw, the legislative reporter for the *Vancouver Sun* and *The Province*, who is based in Victoria, as well as a fifth journalist, a dedicated real estate reporter, who has requested to remain anonymous out of worry for the possible impacts on their professional career, and Ian Young, the Vancouver correspondent for the *South China Morning Post*. Though the *South China Morning Post* is not a local outlet, nor is it even Canadian, I interviewed Young because he has spent a number of years reporting on the housing and affordability crisis and also because, as he says, the situation in Vancouver became a topic of international interest owing to the involvement of foreign money.⁹ Each of these people is an experienced journalist and covers, or has covered, the housing crisis from a different point of view. *The Tyee* is an online-only publication and often covers an issue from outside the mainstream, as it is independent and non-profit. Bula has experience covering housing and other urban issues going back more than three decades, and Shaw, as a legislative reporter, was present when several major announcements were made by the provincial government regarding the housing issue and brings additional context on the more politicized aspects of real estate and housing.

Additionally, I conducted interviews with journalists because this is an issue that was polarizing not just for the public, but also within newsrooms. In our interview, Young alluded to a divide within the media itself, saying: “I’m talking about voices that

⁹ Ian Young, Phone Interview. 8 May 2020.

did not have bodies of peer-reviewed evidence behind them, but were very closely wedded to the real estate industry: real estate boosters, and real estate-boosting academics, real estate-boosting marketers, and real estate boosting journalists.”¹⁰ This was a reference to people within newsrooms who would only go to certain sources that would only give certain points of view, which would result in internal disagreements between journalists over how this issue should be covered.

In addition to interviews with working journalists, I also interviewed two former *Vancouver Sun* reporters, Mark Hume and Wyng Chow, who were working for the paper during the late 1980’s and the early 1990’s. The current housing and affordability crisis in Vancouver is not the city’s first brush with rising housing costs, and also not Vancouver news media’s first time covering a contentious issue that was so closely associated with other issues like immigration and race. Hume’s and Chow’s interviews will be included as I explore Vancouver’s history with covering matters of housing and race, which will also be done in Chapter 3.

Through a combination of the primary research and the interviews, this thesis will be able to provide a more critical and analytical view of the news coverage that was done over the defined period of time. While this body of work is not meant to be an attempt to pick apart every aspect of the journalism work done in covering this issue, to expose every flaw and try to find bias where there could very well be none to be found, that does not mean that perceived and actual flaws cannot be discussed in an even-handed way to promote a better understanding of complex issues, especially ones that could be increasingly sensitive as the matters of race, ethnicity and people’s stability and way of

¹⁰ Young, Phone Interview.

life are brought into it. Additionally, context matters. Context being the additional details and circumstances that give a situation credence and meaning. The analysis on context and how that can affect the production process for coverage, as well as the way it is consumed, will be based in the more academic-oriented “encoding/decoding school of thought” which was first proposed by the British cultural theorist Stuart Hall.

Context is something that cannot be removed from a situation, because it is truly what makes up the situation. The same is true for the housing and affordability crisis that had such an outsized impact on the province of British Columbia. Could there be factors and reasons – that may or may not necessarily be related in any way to pure economics or the real estate market – that helped create the crisis that defined a major election? Could it be that Vancouver has always been a more expensive market? What is it about Vancouver that makes it so expensive? Does Vancouver, and the province of British Columbia, have a history of less-than cordial behaviour towards groups or groups perceived to be the cause of certain issues? To answer these questions as best as possible, it will also be important to establish some groundwork, to address some of the underlying factors that could potentially create an environment for the housing market to become increasingly unaffordable. For example, one such factor could be found in the federal government’s attempts to cool the housing markets in Canada’s two largest cities, Vancouver and Toronto, through the introduction of new mortgage rules. In 2016, Canada’s Minister of Finance, Bill Morneau, introduced what is called a “stress test,” which is a method of determine whether or not a potential home buyer has the ability to continue making house payments as interest rates rise.¹¹ The test would, in essence, test a

¹¹ Gordon Isfeld, “New mortgage rules aim to cut crash risk.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 4 Oct., 2016, p. B.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

lender's income to see if it could keep up should their interest rates rise, though, in reality, the lender would be paying at rates lower than the ones they were tested at.¹² The hope was that such a rule change would slow down the rate of real estate transactions happening in Canada's two largest, and hottest, housing markets, with the Canadian Home Builders' Association predicting that the rule changes combined with other policy reforms could reduce the total number of real estate transactions by ten to fifteen percent in the following year.¹³ These mortgage reforms were introduced to make it harder for people who want to buy a home to secure a mortgage, which was assumed, in turn, to reduce the rate of buying which would then slow demand and theoretically lower housing prices. All these changes were made in response to the fact that for years, up until these changes were introduced, interest rates across the country were at "near-historic lows."¹⁴ It could be assumed, therefore, that securing a mortgage was much easier in previous years, and it was also not as difficult to make payments on them, which theoretically promote buying of real estate.

These new changes to the mortgage rules point to the fact that mortgages were not as tightly regulated before, and since it comes under the jurisdiction of the federal government, it is possible that the government's lack of oversight helped to create an environment that facilitated the growth of a housing and affordability crisis.

This is one aspect that is examined in urban studies to determine if something is what is referred to as an "urban crisis," something that is born from a combination of different factors, including governance failures, which could be considered a crisis. This

¹² Barrie McKenna, "Looming loan rules to pinch housing: BoC." *The Globe and Mail*, 29 Nov., 2017, p. A.3. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹³ McKenna, "Looming loan rules."

¹⁴ Isfeld, "New mortgage rules."

body of work will use the theory of urban crisis to pinpoint and explain the varying factors that formed the foundation for the housing crisis to be created upon.

Media has a distinctly powerful ability to influence the way those who consume it perceive and think about the world and society around them. If it is the duty of journalists to lead the conversation, guide the conversation, while providing facts and context through the form of reporting, then would it be a negligence of duty for journalists to simply follow the public discourse? When conducting interviews, I asked Rob Shaw of *The Vancouver Sun* if he ever felt that coverage of the housing and foreign buyers issue was skewed, whether it was disproportionately focused on foreign buyers or skewed in any other way. He answered by saying that he felt the coverage was skewed in the sense that the news media allowed the same small number of fairly influential housing experts to dominate the conversation. He said these were people with their own opinions, and often their own agendas, yet they were the ones constantly being called to comment on the issue and offer their own thoughts on how to solve the problem with housing.¹⁵ This is a case where news coverage can become “one-sided” in the literal sense, because it is the same side and the same voices that are given a platform.

To conclude, solutions to current problems with how the news media operates will be needed, and this body of work will aim to provide some possible solutions after a thorough examination of the current journalism covering the housing issue. The solutions will also be contextualized through an analysis of how coverage influences the ways people interact with their surroundings, as well as the dangers of having skewed coverage, even if it was not done intentionally or even out of malice. Similarly, the

¹⁵ Rob Shaw, Phone Interview. 4 Oct. 2019.

responsibility that media has in ensuring it is truthful and accurate will be further analyzed through the work of the late Roger Silverstone, who was a professor of media and communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

In terms of the structure, in Chapter 1, I will lay out a theoretical framework for how media messages influence one's perception of the world around them using the work from Stuart Hall. In Chapter 2, I will address pre-existing factors that could have an effect on the price of real estate in Vancouver, such as limited geography, which means less land that can be developed into housing. In the third chapter, I will provide an account of the news media in Vancouver's role in covering the issue of foreign buyers against the backdrop of the late 1980's and the early 1990's, when the region was experiencing a wave of immigration from Hong Kong. In Chapter 4, I will explain my findings from the primary research into a body of literature made up of newspaper articles sources from archives, both quantitative and qualitative findings. In Chapter 5, I will offer my own solutions as to what can be done to address lapses in how the media covered the housing and affordability crisis, framed through the work of Roger Silverstone and his writing on media and morality. In the final chapter, the sixth one, I will outline my conclusions.

There is much that can be learned from the Vancouver housing and affordability crisis. Many issues that news media continues to struggle with, including accusations of bias, can be further studied through an examination of this crisis. The question that I personally would most like answered is whether or not the coverage is the way it is because it is truly believed to be the most accurate and truthful, or because it is simply the most attractive and attention-grabbing headline. In an era where news outlets are

suffering from a loss of revenue, diminishing operating budgets and a disappearing audience, there is a constant struggle to ensure that information and the work of journalists can still reach the general public. Oftentimes, one would only need to look to the online world of click-bait and pseudo-journalism to know that sensationalism gets attention; it is the unexpected, and what could be considered the most shocking or inflammatory that can most easily entice a person to spend their time consuming information.

While it would be irresponsible to say that this body of work would be able to provide a cure-all solution, it should at the very least encourage the discussion of finding new and more holistic ways of covering sensitive issues. There is no solution to all the woes of the residents of Vancouver, but it is my hope and belief that this project will provide a new framework of understanding for all future coverage of housing issues, and contribute to a more well-rounded way of reporting by providing new perspectives and fresh voices, which is something I, and likely the majority of my colleagues in the industry, believe journalism should always strive to do.

Chapter 1: Interpreting Media Messages

Journalism is a method for information to be gathered, processed and further disseminated and spread. For many people, it is one of the ways in which they learn about the world and hence how they begin to formulate their own opinions about it. For members of the news media, it is their job to deliver information, to act as the public service that is information deliverer and gatherer, or at least, that is often the expectation. Regardless of whatever debate there may be about the true nature of a journalist's and a news organization's duties, it is true enough to say that media is crucial to the way people look at their surroundings. For some people, such as those unable to experience certain parts of the world themselves, media is a way for them to see and study those parts. People will also look to the media to be the ones to hold those in power to account, to be the body that asks questions others would not think, or possibly even dare, to ask. The media is what many members of the public look to in order to inform themselves of this vast world that we all live in, and is a very crucial point in which the public and the wider society can meet and interact with each other. Media, therefore, is crucial to how the public views the world around them, and is uniquely powerful in its ability to both inform and shape an individual's thinking. However, media outlets, especially in North America, also operate as corporate businesses that need to be and stay profitable.

To many, both within the journalism industry and outside of it, news media is also meant to take a more proactive role within that interaction between the public and society, to guide the sharing of information, rather than simply delivering it. There are some who expect journalism and journalists to not just be bringers of information and bearers of truth, but also to be a driving force of public discourse, to encourage wider conversations about implications and ramifications of certain things that happen within

society. What happens when that expectation becomes muddled by circumstances beyond the control of journalists? Even though journalism is arguably intended to be objective and unbiased, bias, defined as “inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group, especially in a way considered to be unfair” by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, can still be found within reporting through the voices represented and the source information used, or consumers of journalism could form their own biases based on what they learn from journalism. This is due to the fact that every person has the ability to interpret the world around them and form thoughts that they personally accept as being the truth. Journalism and other media as a whole also lend a degree of legitimacy and credibility to a views and issues, simply because media itself is usually seen as legitimate and credible. However, no one person is ever fully objective and some would argue that it is impossible for anyone, journalist or not, to achieve that. Every person is informed by their experiences as well as their own biases and prejudices, whether they choose to admit they have them or not. The issue here is not that news media must be objective, it is that the public expects it to be that way.

In this chapter, I will explore how media messages influence one’s perceptions of their surroundings, and subsequently how those messages affect the way one interprets and interacts with the world around them. In doing this, I will draw upon the works of cultural theorist Stuart Hall, specifically his essay on what he called the “encoding/decoding model of communication.”

Encoding/decoding

Hall first developed the model of encoding/decoding in 1973. In essence, the theory behind this particular model of communication is that several factors contribute to

the ways people interact with media messages. A very general summary of his ideas would be that certain circumstances inform the ways media messages are produced, “encoded,” and certain circumstances will also inform the way the intended audience of a media message interprets that message, or how they “decode” it. However, understanding the complexities of this model may offer some insights into how the journalism industry can address the issue of bias within its coverage of certain events, whether said bias was intentional or not.

According to Hall’s work, previous attempts to study the concept of mass communications were focused on what was referred to as a “loop,” which is to say that media messages proceed through a circuit akin to “sender/message/receiver.”¹⁶ However, this theory had been criticized for its linearity, and Hall has proposed examining this loop differently, segmenting it into what he describes as “distinctive moments” which he calls “production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction.”¹⁷ In essence, both of these are meant to describe the process through which the media produces a message, its circulation, and its eventual arrival at the audience, the people who consume the message. However, it should be noted that the circuit proposed by Hall is decidedly more nuanced. The overall theory behind this alternative outlook on a standard model of communication is rooted in the idea of language. On this, Hall writes “the apparatuses, relations and practices of production thus issue, at a certain moment (the moment of production/circulation) in the form of symbolic vehicles constituted within the rules of ‘language,’¹⁸ and also that when it is in a ‘discursive form that the circulation of the

¹⁶ Stuart Hall, “Encoding, decoding,” *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993), 90-91.

¹⁷ Hall, 91.

¹⁸ Hall, 91.

product takes place, as well as its distribution to different audiences.’’¹⁹ However, once that media message has been thoroughly circulated to its audience, it must also be “translated – transformed, again – into the social practices if the circuit is to be both completed and effective.”²⁰ All of this is a highly theoretical way of saying that it is through the use of language that media messages are first produced, through the use of language that they are then transferred and disseminated to people who consume them, who then rely on language again to obtain meaning from them. Therefore, without the medium of language, as general a term as that may be, media messages would have no meaning and therefore, have little effect.

Furthermore, it should also be noted that language by itself has its limits. Hall calls the individual processes of “encoding” and “decoding” “determinate moments,”²¹ which is to say that within the bounds of language, the process of creating the message and later interpreting it, are ultimately what gives the language meaning, and vice versa. A “raw” historical event cannot be presented to an audience as it is through any form of media message, as it needs to be repackaged within the bounds of language to be communicable.²² Paradoxically speaking, something would need to be a “story” – something that can be relatable – before it can become a “communicative event,” which is when the language that was used to interpret the original occurrence would take over the larger narrative in order to communicate it in smoother fashion, without completely removing from the discourse and from existence.²³ With this portion of his work, Hall

¹⁹ Hall, 91.

²⁰ Hall, 91.

²¹ Hall, 91.

²² Hall, 91-92.

²³ Hall, 92.

has identified what I believe to be an issue within modern news coverage. When Hall refers to something needing to be a “story” before it can be communicated, he is saying that the nature of the event must be summarized in a way that makes it more understandable, and also portrayed in such a way that it is worth sharing. This is common practice within the editorial process of any journalistic endeavour. Journalists are constantly thinking of ways to give their work momentum, to ensure that the work is able to sustain a wider conversation, that the story can be carried forward. As a working journalist, I have seen this desire manifest during the editorial process; the decisions made on the treatment given to a story to ensure engagement from news consumers and add new information to the wider narrative. This sort of behaviour is born out of habit, as it is based on practices that have been used for a long time within the industry, and include things like technical skills, and what Hall refers to as “professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience.”²⁴ All of these things work to inform the ways a producer “encodes” – or “creates” – the message that is to be shared.

Similarly, it is also these processes used to create the message that can be detrimental to the message being produced. When we as members of an audience consume media, such as news media, there is an understanding that what is being shown to us is not the real thing; the images of violence “are not violence but messages about violence.”²⁵ The messages that are seen and circulated, for example, on television, are “constituted by the combination of two types of discourse, visual and aural,” which is to say, they are made up of the images that can be seen, as well as the language that is used

²⁴ Hall, 92.

²⁵ Hall, 94-95.

as the medium to deliver it. Hall remarks that the message would therefore possess “some of the properties of the thing represented.”²⁶ In other words, the media messages that are ultimately disseminated to the audience are imperfect representations of the original thing. It ‘is’ whatever that original thing is, but it cannot truly ‘be’ what the original thing is, simply because it lacks certain details that make up its entirety. Based on what I have learned from Hall’s writing, what those imperfect representations lack is often the context of the original event being communicated through media. Context is the varying factors that help put a situation into perspective and offer a more nuanced interpretation of it. Ultimately, the argument is that whatever “reality” we see through media messages is a reality that has been crafted through various production practices, as well as the language through which it is transferred.

In his essay, Hall refers to the processes of producing and interpreting messages as “codes,” due to the variety of different factors that go into each of these processes. Furthermore, there is also the issue of when these codes become “naturalized,” as Hall calls it, which is when they start to become so specific to a language community or a culture, that they appear “not to be constructed.”²⁷ In other words, there are different ways of creating and finding meaning in media messages that become so ingrained within different communities that those communities can no longer differentiate between whether or not the media messages they are receiving are real, or a representation of the real thing. The naturalized feeling of these codes would, therefore, not be a reflection of their efficacy in interpreting what is disseminated through the media, but a reflection of the level of their universal acceptance. Slowly, through this naturalization, audiences can

²⁶ Hall, 95.

²⁷ Hall, 95.

start to lose sight of these codes, and begin to think that what is consumed through the media truly “is” whatever it presents itself as, rather than an “interpretation” of what it is. However, these messages also have influence “because they reproduce the conditions (that is, the codes) of perception in the viewer.”²⁸ These “conditions of perceptions” are a direct result of “decoding,”²⁹ which is to say that the way something is viewed and understood, is a result of a several outside factors that inform and create the lens used to view that something.

Furthermore, there is also much to be said about the nature of the language being used in the codes. To set the tone for his argument, Hall makes a distinction between “denotative” and “connotative” codes. The term “denotative” is “widely equated with the literal meaning of a sign” because it is widely, almost universally, recognized as being correct.³⁰ On the other hand, “connotative” has come to be accepted as meanings and definitions that are more fluid and interchangeable, are associative, and vary from “instance to instance” and are therefore reliant on codes for meaning.³¹ Why this distinction needs to be made is because the associative level is much more prone to ideological discourse and meanings, because the associative level is more fluid and not as universally accepted as something that is “denotative.”³² The fluidity of certain terms and how they are interpreted are what gives them meaning and influence. It is not so much about what they literally mean, but what people come to think they mean, and what is associated with those terms, that gives them weight in a media setting. There is a strong

²⁸ Hall, 96.

²⁹ Hall, 96.

³⁰ Hall, 96.

³¹ Hall, 96.

³² Hall, 97.

distinction to be made between what something “does” mean, as opposed to what it “could” mean.

This is an aspect of Hall’s work that is very useful in the study of the issue of foreign buyers. The term “foreign buyers” on its own refers to any person or entity that is not a citizen of Canada who arrives in the country to purchase property. That is its literal definition, its “denotative” meaning. However, I have come to believe that many people within Vancouver’s housing market have come to interpret the term to mean “Chinese buyers,” which then becomes its “connotative” meaning. In my interview with Ian Young of the *South China Morning Post*, I asked him specifically if he had ever felt that the term “foreign buyer” was being used as a veiled reference to Chinese buyers. He responded that he did think that was the case, saying: “I did get that impression. For some people the terms ‘foreign buyer’ meant the same as ‘Chinese buyer,’ meant the same as ‘Chinese immigrant buyer.’ It incorrectly allowed people to frame ‘Chinese buyers’ or ‘immigrant buyers’ as foreigners.”³³

If one were to accept Hall’s notion that associative terms are where ideological meanings and discussions can take place and have more influence, then these theories on encoding/decoding could be used to explain why there seemed to be an outsized focus on the race of the buyers in the coverage of the housing crisis. For the newspaper articles that I examined for this thesis, more than half of the articles from the years 2015 and 2016 contained at least one mention of Chinese buyers. When I interviewed the journalist who wished to be anonymous, they reflected on the coverage at the height of the fervour and how some of it seemed too focused on the buyers themselves, saying: “I think that

³³ Ian Young, Phone Interview. 8 May 2020.

maybe some people might have been doing that, and that might be an example of unfairness. Who it is that's got the money is neither here nor there. That shouldn't have been an issue. There were people who might have conflated foreign buying with immigration.”³⁴ This is evidence suggesting that the public did start conflating the term “foreign buyer” with “Chinese.” Both this anonymous journalist and Young told me that they believe there should have been, and needs to be, a clear distinction made between “foreign buyers” and “foreign money,” based on their arguments that where these buyers were coming from is not as big of an issue as the fact that they had money. It is the presence of foreign money, and a lot of it, they say, that has the most impact on the housing and affordability crisis. However, both have also expressed their concerns with the outsized focus on the race of the buyers as opposed to their wealth. On this point, Young said: “The problem is that it overlaps so very heavily with ‘Chinese-ness’ of people. The ‘millionaire-ness’ of those same people was what was driving the affordability crisis. So, it wasn't as if there was a mistake being made about who and what was driving it if you focus on the ‘millionaire-ness.’ The problem is if you focus on the ‘Chinese-ness’ as the driver, and as the undesirable thing, then you're in very, very dangerous territory.”³⁵ I will go into greater detail on my findings from my research, as well as what I learned from other journalists during interviews, in subsequent chapters.

Additionally, connotative meanings are not all equal, and oftentimes, society will “impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world” upon those meanings.³⁶ Society will often attempt to force its own ideas and interpretations of what a

³⁴ Anonymous Journalist, Phone Interview. 1 May 2020.

³⁵ Young, Phone Interview.

³⁶ Hall, 98.

term “could” mean onto others, and that is also another way to possibly explain the public reaction to foreign buyers in British Columbia. If the wider public and society determines on its own accord that “foreign” is a code word or shorthand method of describing “wealthy Chinese buyers” through the application of their own methods of decoding, then would this therefore become a case where media messages have contributed to the creation of a bias, rather than being a platform for it? In the particular case of foreign buyers, we see the denotative and connotative become blurred. The wider acceptance of a connotative meaning – the Chinese buyers – had essentially changed it to a new denotative meaning. The interpretation of the message of foreign buyers changed to being largely focused on a specific ethnicity, and eventually, this particular method of coding became “naturalized” in its specific ties to the wider housing discussion in Vancouver and the province. This is the definition of “unconscious,” or “implicit bias,” as mentioned in the previous chapter. The association between foreign buyers and Chinese buyers has become so closely tied together, that people who are Chinese are automatically labelled as “foreign.”

Throughout his body of work, Hall makes extensive reference to what he called “dominant or preferred meanings.” Overall, the term can be used to refer to any narrative or interpretation of a media message that holds the most sway and influence within a media-oriented hierarchy of messages. However, this is not to say that the dominant narrative is something that one-sidedly determines what any other event within the hierarchy means, but it does create the framework in which a decoding can occur.³⁷ Furthermore, the concept of encoding – the production of – the media message is also

³⁷ Hall, 99.

said to have “the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate. If there were no limits, audiences could simply read whatever they liked into any message.”³⁸ In more straightforward terms, this is a way of saying that the encoding process creates the limitations that dictate how a message can be interpreted. However, it is hard to see this particular argument as being applicable to real-life examples of news coverage, especially that which has been examined over the course of this thesis. Many times, it does appear that there were no real limits placed on the message by the encoding process. If anything, I would argue that the coverage tended to be more ambiguous and communicated more in generalities, thereby leaving the coverage open to interpretation.

In 2014, in a *Globe and Mail* article, it was reported that “Dan Scarrow, vice-president of corporate strategy at Macdonald Realty Ltd., said he has heard enough anecdotal evidence of well-heeled home buyers with roots in China to make it worthwhile to invest in a Shanghai office.”³⁹ Furthermore, it was reported that, while official estimates put foreign buyers at anywhere from one to three percent of all buyers within British Columbia, Scarrow said that, if statistics included “recent immigrants with origins in China,” then the overall impact that Chinese buyers were having on housing market would be far greater, particularly on the fairly expensive single detached homes market of Vancouver’s west side.⁴⁰ With this example, we can examine the effects of encoding and decoding as laid out in this chapter. Firstly, we have a fairly prolific realtor from one of the province’s largest real estate firms saying that he’s heard enough

³⁸ Hall, 100.

³⁹ Jang, “B.C. firm.”

⁴⁰ Jang, “B.C. firm.”

anecdotal evidence of Chinese buyers that he believes it is worth opening an office in China to court more of such buyers, despite anecdotal evidence not being official data or figures. Secondly, even though this story made mention of one particularly well-to-do neighbourhood in Vancouver, this coverage is circulated all across the Greater Vancouver region, including out into the suburbs. For example, the City of Richmond was historically a white neighbourhood, but in recent years has become increasingly more diverse, so much so that by the year 2016, more than three quarters of the population identified as part of a non-white ethnic group, according to data from the 2016 census. Furthermore, of this large portion of the population that identified as non-white, more than a 100,000 identify as being of Chinese descent, accounting for roughly 53 percent of Richmond's total population. If someone who does not identify as a minority group sees the coverage, then takes a closer look at the community around them, sees the increasing number of people who appear to be of Chinese descent, acknowledges the rising home costs not just in Richmond, but across the Lower Mainland, they would likely come to the conclusion that this reporting is factually reliable. They would "decode" the message in accordance to what they see, hear and experience in their surroundings, and interpret the message in accordance to their own codes, which is, that someone in Richmond would be very likely to believe that buyers of Chinese descent were indeed having the biggest influence in the housing market. The process of encoding and decoding in this scenario would also suffer the same drawbacks as laid out in the arguments of Hall and in this chapter. The media encode the message in accordance to their own practices, but also their own limitations, which in this case would be the lack of ability to verify the realtor's accounts for themselves, since he was speaking in terms of anecdotes. The media would

need to encode in relation to their limitations, and package it in such a way as to make it easily circulated and transferred to the people who will consume it and derive meaning from it. In turn, the audience will also be limited in the scope of how they can interpret the message.

Concluding Thoughts

In summary, the overall experience of encoding and decoding is explained quite satisfactorily, in a quote: “By the word *reading*, we mean not only the capacity to identify and decode a certain number of signs, but also the subjective capacity to put them into a creative relation between themselves and with other signs: a capacity which is, by itself, the condition for a complete awareness of one's total environment.”⁴¹ What this means is that our ability to properly interpret messages, to decode them, and put them into context with the way they were packaged is born from an understanding of our environment. Our interpretations can be flawed based upon our own flawed understanding of our environment. Additionally, the Chinese community in Richmond is still predominantly Cantonese-speaking, tracing their roots to Hong Kong, not the Chinese mainland, where realtor Dan Scarrow was focused on expanding.

This highlights one particular issue with interpreting media messages without skepticism. In his essay, Hall writes that decoding media messages sometimes results in a response referred to as the “dominant-hegemonic position,” which is when a viewer “takes the connoted from, say, a television newscast or current affairs programme full and straight.”⁴² In simpler terms, a person who consumes and interprets a media message takes it at its face value and interprets it as if it were completely representative of the

⁴¹ Hall, 99.

⁴² Hall, 100.

original issue. This particular response is triggered when the images, language and other production techniques used by the media are deliberately chosen and packaged in such a way as to tell the most “compelling story.” It could also be said that media production methods “reproduce hegemonic definitions specifically by *not overtly* biasing their operations in a dominant direction: ideological reproduction therefore takes place here inadvertently, unconsciously, ‘behind men's backs.’”⁴³ Based on the theories presented in Hall’s writing on encoding/decoding, I believe it is a reasonable summation to say that when news media attempts to remove as much bias as they can, they inadvertently allow the coverage to retain some semblance of bias simply because they allow the dominant narrative to take a prominent role in the coverage. This, in essence, confirms a theory that I will explore in greater depth in subsequent chapters, which is that local Vancouver’s media coverage of the housing issue was not intentionally biased in the sense that it went out of its way to foist blame on the Chinese community for the region’s housing woes, but that it retained and created a noticeable slant, independent of any personal prejudices, because it allowed biased sources to drive the conversation, by frequently quoting the same small group of “housing experts,” or by failing to engage with voices from underrepresented groups. In the following chapter, I will explore some of the different factors that created an environment for the housing and affordability crisis to flourish, other than the presence of foreign money in Vancouver’s housing market.

⁴³ Hall, 101.

Chapter 2: The Factors at Play

Location, Location, Location

The City of Vancouver is the largest city in British Columbia in terms of population, with residents numbering roughly 670,000. According to the 2016 census, a total of almost 2.5 million people reside in the City of Vancouver and the surrounding area, referred to as the Lower Mainland or Metro Vancouver, also known as Greater Vancouver. This includes smaller suburbs such as Burnaby, Surrey, Richmond and Delta. Although Metro Vancouver is the third largest metropolitan area in Canada, the reality is that the area is quite small. Regardless of how large the city is in terms of its population, Vancouver is small in the sense that there is no real way for it to become any larger, due to being confined by a handful of naturally occurring barriers. To the north of Vancouver lies a range of mountains known as the North Shore Mountains.⁴⁴ If one were to try and get around them, one would leave the boundaries of Metro Vancouver altogether. In the northwestern portion of Metro Vancouver is the vast Stanley Park,⁴⁵ an immensely popular attraction with tourists and locals alike, which was named a National Historic Site of Canada by the federal government in 1988. To the west lies the Pacific Ocean, to the east is the agricultural land reserve, and to the south, less than 50 kilometres away from Vancouver proper, is the United States-Canada border.⁴⁶ All of these provide barriers that keep Metro Vancouver confined to a very small portion of the land mass that is the province of British Columbia, and as a result, there just is not very much land to be

⁴⁴ Iain Marlow and Brent Jang, "Vancouver's real estate boom: The rising price of 'heaven'." *The Globe and Mail*, 10 Oct. 2014. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/vancouver-real-estate-boom-the-rising-price-of-heaven/article21071391/>. Accessed 8 Aug. 2019.

⁴⁵ Marlow and Jang, "Real estate boom."

⁴⁶ Marlow and Jang, "Real estate boom."

developed into housing which means a limited supply. If one were to consider the basic economics of supply and demand, a limited supply combined with high demand, means the existing supply becomes more expensive.

Furthermore, the agricultural land reserve is another issue to contend with. The agricultural land reserve refers to parcels of land within the province of British Columbia that are set aside and zoned specifically for agricultural use, which means they are meant, and required, to be farms first and foremost. About five percent of British Columbia's land is labelled as part of the agricultural land reserve, although owners of the land are allowed to build one single-family dwelling on the property.⁴⁷ In other words, this is land that cannot be touched and used to build housing, though there are circumstances where the owners of the land can apply for exemptions.⁴⁸ Additionally, of the land – at least the land within the City of Vancouver itself – that can be developed into housing, 65 percent of it is zoned specifically for single-detached family homes.⁴⁹ This means that if developers were interested in building condominiums, townhouses or even multi-story affordable housing complexes, they would have to go through the process of getting the land re-zoned before they can begin breaking ground. Apart from the re-zoning process, there is another barrier to developments in Vancouver. Christopher Cheung of *The Tyee* mentioned in our interview that in some neighbourhoods of Vancouver, there is a strong “NIMBY” presence. NIMBY is an acronym meaning “Not In My Back Yard,” which usually refers to people who tend to be older and wealthier, in terms of owning property,

⁴⁷ Gemma Karstens-Smith, “Weaver calls for ban on non-residents purchasing farmland.” *The Globe and Mail*, 24 Aug. 2017, p. S.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

⁴⁸ Karstens-Smith, “Calls for ban.”

⁴⁹ Natalie Obiko Pearson, “Chinese envoy raps tax on foreign buyers; Liu Fei is latest critic to question rationale behind real estate levy.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 13 Aug 2016, p. E.3. *Canadian Newsstream*.

who vehemently oppose any new construction project or development in their neighbourhoods on the basis that it “does not fit the character” of the area.⁵⁰

Conversely, what higher density housing there is in the City of Vancouver – mostly within the downtown core – is mainly composed of “tiny one and two-bedroom apartments favoured by investors.”⁵¹ According to economics professor Tom Davidoff, “family-friendly town houses and three-bedroom apartments are ‘like unicorns’ because developers have zero incentive to build them.”⁵² If it is true that investors prefer smaller apartment units because they are looking to make money, then a developer hoping to make a profit as well would have little incentive to build larger units. Furthermore, Cameron Muir, the former chief economist for the British Columbia Real Estate Association, says that measures meant to control demand – such as the foreign-buyers tax – “also send a signal to developers and builders to slow down.”⁵³ The Urban Development Institute also states the process to obtain re-zoning agreements for new projects can take years, and the red tape ultimately adds an additional 20 percent to the cost of a project.⁵⁴ According to Brian McCauley, president of Concert Properties Ltd., a union- and pension-backed company and one of British Columbia’s largest developers, “In every jurisdiction, the approvals are taking longer. You're bumping up against existing communities where there is a fear of change. There is a political reality of nimbyism.”⁵⁵ All of these factors combine to create an environment where the issue of supply by itself is fairly hard to solve. Higher density housing, which is traditionally

⁵⁰ Christopher Cheung, Phone Interview. 26 Sept. 2019.

⁵¹ Natalie Obiko Pearson, “No one's building houses anymore; New mortgage rules putting brakes on developers' plans for new projects.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 16 Dec. 2016, p. C.5. *Canadian Newsstream*.

⁵² Pearson, “No one's building.”

⁵³ Pearson, “No one's building.”

⁵⁴ Pearson, “No one's building.”

⁵⁵ Pearson, “No one's building.”

cheaper than single detached homes, is harder to come by in the Vancouver housing market, meaning a shortage of options for first-time buyers or others who do not have as much capital to buy more expensive housing, unless they are willing to move further out in the Greater Vancouver region where cheaper options are available.

Additionally, Vancouver is also a very desirable place to live. With its picturesque natural environment made up of the ocean, parks and mountains, as well as an attractive skyline, Vancouver is fairly consistently described, both in conversation and in the media, as being a very beautiful place to live. The surrounding mountains and ocean also provide many experiences for people who are interested in hiking, boating, snowboarding and skiing, and other outdoor activities, to enjoy themselves. Vancouver also has a much milder climate compared to the rest of the country. Being close to the ocean, the weather in Vancouver is very temperate; winters are not too harsh and summers are not too hot, with the one caveat being that it rains a considerable amount from late autumn until mid-to late spring every year. Therefore, one would get all the benefits of living in Canada without any of the harsh and messy Canadian winters as experienced by those who live in Ontario, Quebec, the Maritime provinces, or even the Prairie provinces like Alberta. For these reasons, the desirability of the locale helps to drive interest in living in the city, thereby resulting in increased demand, which can influence the rise of real estate prices.

Furthermore, it has also been reported in the media that buyers of Chinese descent who move to Vancouver have other things that draw them here. A study conducted by the University of British Columbia found that “all but a few newcomers said their move to Canada was not primarily about improved economic opportunities,” which is something that is “contrary to what immigration researchers have always presumed is the main

motivation for changing countries.”⁵⁶ Many of the people interviewed for this study said better schooling, better food, and the chance to have a second child were big motivators for wanting to make a life in Canada.⁵⁷ This was due to China’s one-child policy, though the law is no longer as strictly enforced as before. One such newcomer, David Li, said he and his wife moved to Canada in 2014 after becoming “fed up with life in Communist China,” and that their biggest concern was for the education of their teenaged son.⁵⁸ He says that the education system in China is more focused on “stuffing propaganda” into the minds of students, adding, “They control children's minds. You have to love the nation, love the Communist Party.”⁵⁹ Reports from 2013 indicate that the motivation for moving to Canada for many Chinese newcomers were the same. James Liang said he moved to Canada with his wife and two daughters in the hopes of getting them a “more rounded education” and hopes that they will grow up and stay in Canada, saying, “We want our kids to know society more. In China, the education, especially for high-school students, is mostly focused on [academics] like math, physics, chemistry. We want our kids to have a lot of other activities, like playing piano, joining the band, swimming, [first-aid courses].”⁶⁰ Overall, the consensus among Chinese buyers is that the quality of life in Vancouver – and Canada in general – is much better than the country they originally came from.

⁵⁶ Frances Bula, “Wealthy Chinese immigrants come for better housing, not money: study.” *The Globe and Mail*, 5 Sept. 2016. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/wealthy-chinese-immigrants-come-for-better-housing-not-money-study/article31714480/>. Accessed 17 Nov. 2019.

⁵⁷ Bula, “Wealthy Chinese immigrants.”

⁵⁸ Frances Bula, “Meet the wealthy immigrants at the centre of Vancouver’s housing debate.” *The Globe and Mail*, 30 July 2016. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/real-estate/vancouver/meet-the-wealthy-immigrants-at-the-centre-of-vancouvers-housingdebate/article31212036/>. Accessed 17 Nov. 2019.

⁵⁹ Bula, “Meet the wealthy immigrants.”

⁶⁰ Andrea Woo, “Scant evidence behind myth of Vancouver real estate's foreign buyers.” *The Globe and Mail*, 23 Feb. 2013. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/scant-evidence-behind-myth-of-vancouver-real-estates-foreign-buyers/article9000860/>. Accessed 19 Nov. 2019.

These underlying conditions combined make Vancouver naturally one of the most expensive markets in Vancouver. Desirability can go a long way in influencing the housing prices in any given city, often down to specific neighbourhoods within a city. However, how attractive a city is to people hoping to move in is one piece of the puzzle. In the following sections, I will explore how other factors, other than demand from buyers, can influence the affordability of housing markets.

Market Conditions

Vancouver has become one of the most expensive places in the entire world to live, becoming the second least affordable city across the globe, according to the fifteenth annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey, surpassed only by Hong Kong.⁶¹ However, it should be noted that data released by this agency is regarded as being somewhat problematic. From becoming the most expensive Canadian city for renters in 2009, to the rising housing prices that came to define the housing affordability crisis, housing costs in British Columbia's largest city have always been high compared to many other places in Canada.⁶² Vancouver is one city among several job-rich cities around the world that have experienced large growths housing costs, but where Vancouver stands out is how large the gap is between incomes and housing costs. The question that must now be answered is: what are the relevant underlying historical factors that contributed to such an expensive place to live?

Within the Vancouver housing market, experts of all stripes, from academics to real estate agents, agree that foreign buyers do have influence on the rising housing

⁶¹ Tiffany Crawford, "Vancouver housing second least affordable in world: report." *The Vancouver Sun*, 22 Jan., 2019. <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/vancouver-housing-second-least-affordable-in-world-report/>. Accessed 22 Mar., 2020.

⁶² Pablo, "Highest rent."

prices. Professional services network PricewaterhouseCoopers and the Urban Land Institute released a report titled “Emerging Trends in Canadian Real Estate 2018,” which detailed that, despite tax measures introduced to curtail foreign investment, overseas investors – including those from China – remained largely optimistic about opportunities in the Greater Vancouver Area. In the same report, it was stated that investors were looking to expand their investments beyond just housing to include industrial projects and warehouses, as well as condominiums and commercial real estate in Vancouver’s downtown core. Additionally, the report called British Columbia’s foreign-buyers tax – which was initially introduced in July of 2016 as a 15 percent levy on any real estate transaction involving a buyer who is not a Canadian citizen or a permanent resident – “more of a speed bump than a roadblock.” The tax was brought in as a measure to control what was believed to be a major factor in the rising real estate prices in Vancouver, and then-premier Christy Clark was quoted saying: “The tax on foreign purchasers in British Columbia has done exactly what the government and what citizens hoped it would do, and that is slow down the tremendous growth in the cost of housing in the Lower Mainland. We did it. The NDP opposed it. It turned out that it did exactly what we expected it would do.”⁶³ However, the report says that while it did result in a drop in transactions involving foreign parties, foreign buyers eventually returned to the market – though the report offered no specific numbers on the magnitude of foreign buying in relation to domestic buyers – and are now proceeding with more caution and patience than before, as they await new opportunities. The report also states that from August 2016 to August 2017, the benchmark price of single detached homes rose 2.2 percent, but

⁶³ Shaw, “Foreign-Buyer Tax.”

the benchmark price of high-density housing like condominiums rose 19.6 percent in the same period. What numbers the report does provide can be corroborated by other government numbers, such as an article in *The Vancouver Sun*, which remarks that the foreign-buyers tax dropped the number of transactions involving foreign buyers from 13.2 percent of all sales in June of 2016 to around four percent in December the same year.⁶⁴ Figures cited in another article from October of 2017 also reported that the benchmark price for a detached home was up 2.9 percent compared to the same period the previous year, and that the benchmark price of condos had risen 22.7 percent, and townhome prices had climbed 19.5 percent compared to September 2016.⁶⁵ The same article also said that Vancouver's real estate market experienced a slump in transactions in the fall season of 2016, which was in the immediate aftermath of the foreign-buyers tax taking effect in August of 2016 after being introduced a few months earlier.⁶⁶ The additional data presented lined up with the report released by PricewaterhouseCoopers, which would confirm that the presence of foreign buyers was indeed having an effect on the rising prices within the market. However, the data presented in all reports also documented one other issue, which is that one of the biggest policy changes made to try and curb the demand from overseas investors ultimately had very little lasting impact on making the housing prices more affordable. In spite of then-premier Clark's declaration that the tax worked, the evidence suggests otherwise, so should governments not take at least some of the blame for the high cost of housing? People were desperate for solutions

⁶⁴ Rob Shaw, "Foreign-Buyer Tax Gets A Tweak, But Affordability Still Elusive." *The Vancouver Sun*, 13 Mar., 2017, p. A.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

⁶⁵ Brent Jang, "Sharp uptick in condo sales fuel Greater Vancouver housing market." *The Globe and Mail*, 4 Oct., 2017, p. B.5. *Canadian Newsstream*.

⁶⁶ Jang, "Sharp uptick."

and the tax “served to vent the public’s frustration with a small subset of the problem – mainly wealthy offshore Chinese investors who didn’t pay taxes here – but it doesn’t appear to have addressed the root of the issues that drove two years of skyrocketing home prices.”⁶⁷ The following sections in this chapter will explore how factors such as government action can have an effect on the rising prices in a housing market.

Understanding Urban Crisis

Crisis is defined as a time of intense difficulty, trouble or danger. Based on this definition alone, it could be argued that the rising unaffordability in Vancouver’s housing market is indeed a crisis. Again, Vancouver is one out of several cities around the world with rich job opportunities experiencing this. The costs of housing and the rates at which they have grown have outpaced income growth and priced many individuals, particularly those from younger generations, out of the market, as evidenced by a Vancouver-based movement in 2015 called “#DontHave1Million,” organized by a woman named Eveline Xia, to rally young professionals who do not have the money needed to buy an “average Vancouver house” and draw attention to the city’s lack of affordable housing.⁶⁸ A lack of affordable housing options suggests that the problem with rising housing costs lies in the fact that there are not enough housing units to go around, and building more would therefore solve the issue by simply putting more housing options on the market. While this simple concept of supply and demand is not entirely untrue, the theory of it is too simplistic to account for other factors that can influence a market. Recall that it was in April of 2009 that Vancouver became the most expensive city for renters in all of

⁶⁷ Shaw, “Foreign-Buyer Tax.”

⁶⁸ Christopher Cheung, “Why Racism in Vancouver’s Housing Debate Can’t Be Ignored.” *The Tyee*, 7 Aug. 2015. <https://thetyee.ca/News/2015/08/07/Vancouver-Housing-Debate-Racism/>. Accessed 5 Mar. 2020.

Canada,⁶⁹ but that same month, the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation reported an apartment vacancy rate of 1.9 percent in Vancouver, up one percentage point from the same month in the year before.⁷⁰

In order to better understand what could have led to the skyrocketing housing prices in Vancouver, an examination of some of the different influences on the market at the time is necessary. This includes various factors such as governance, economics and social changes, examined in a concept known as an “urban crisis,” which is a relatively new idea within the field of “urban studies,” a scholarly field that is largely focused on studying the urban changes happening within cities. The factors that are referenced in urban crisis literature are often referred to as “structure,” “politics,” and “alienation.” Alternatively, these terms can also be referred to as “governance,” “mechanics” and “effects” respectively. While these alternative terms appear just as ambiguous and vague as the original terms, they can be used to better understand the ways in which an urban crisis begins to manifest itself.

Over the course of my own research and foray into field of urban studies, I identified these three factors as being “pillars” of urban crisis – though not of the field of urban studies itself – what is needed to sustain the structure of an urban crisis. Without them, the urban crisis cannot remain standing. While I would not venture to say that an urban crisis should be something that is stable and present, it is important to understand the varying levels of an urban crisis that make it what it is. For the first pillar, “structure,” otherwise known as “governance,” it refers specifically to changing economic situations that can lay a foundation upon which an urban crisis can rise. The concept of urban crisis

⁶⁹ Pablo, “Highest rent.”

⁷⁰ Pablo, “Highest rent.”

draws some of its theoretical framework from Marxist ideology, which theorizes in order to offset extreme changes or swings in a capitalist economy, “class exploitation” – defined as being exploitation of the working class for profit within a capitalist framework – will either become increasingly present, or be used as an attempt to strike a balance between the highs and lows; the swings between the boom and bust that an economy could experience.⁷¹ It should be noted that, ironically, although this concept draws from Marxist ideology, some of the ideas it puts forward appear somewhat right-wing in nature. However, this method of intervening to try and strike a balance within an economy also leads to another serious issue, which is that it can become even harder for markets to grow, and when that growth slows to a certain degree, the entirety of an economy will stop.⁷² Therefore, the scholarship theorizes that when certain missteps are made in trying to regulate a market – “governance” – it creates the bedrock upon which an urban crisis is supported. Though the concept of “boom and bust” is not directly applicable to Vancouver’s housing market, the notion of governments intervening, or not doing so, can contribute to the creation of a starting point from which a crisis begins to form.

The second pillar of an urban crisis is “politics,” which is also known as “mechanics.” This is to say that this pillar is how a crisis begins to spread itself into the rest of society, the way in which a crisis is delivered and how it is manifested in the wider public, as well as how “governance” can take shape. The theory behind urban crisis contends that most crises can often be traced back to governments. Most notably, the

⁷¹ Bayirbag, Mustafa Kemal, et al. “Interrogating urban crisis: Cities in the governance and contestation of austerity.” *Urban Studies* (2017), 54:9, pg. 2026.

⁷² Bayirbag et al., “Interrogating urban crisis,” pg. 2026.

scholarship asserts that crises are formed as a result of “local governance failures, public pension commitments and global economic turmoil.”⁷³ Additionally, the scholarship also suggests that crises can be born from “alleged lack of political will to reduce commitments to city employees and residents.”⁷⁴ The theory being presented in this case is a way to say that governments allow crises to form often due to little more than that they are completely unaware that there are such issues that need to be addressed, as well as minimal desire and motivation to actually solve them, even if there was evidence to suggest a crisis was about to form.

This leads to the final pillar of urban crisis, “alienation,” or “effects.” Using this final aspect of an urban crisis is how one can truly assess the consequences of a crisis left unchecked and unresolved. The idea of urban crisis, drawing again from Marxist ideology, defines alienation as a “fatal schism between profit seekers and wage earners.”⁷⁵ This is a way of saying that as workers continue to sell their labour for money – their salaries – eventually, a rift will start to grow between them and their employers, as the employers get richer, but employees continue to make the same amount of money. This results in a rift between the workers and the jobs that they perform. However, this particular theory has one glaring flaw in that it refers specifically to employees and employers, which is not a relationship that can be used to explain the housing affordability crisis in Vancouver. However, the study of urban crisis also offers a more appropriate and holistic definition of alienation which is that “as a social relation, it refers to how affections, loyalties and trust can be alienated (transferred, stolen away) from one

⁷³ Bayirbag et al., “Interrogating urban crisis,” pg. 2026.

⁷⁴ Bayirbag et al., “Interrogating urban crisis,” pg. 2026.

⁷⁵ Bayirbag et al., “Interrogating urban crisis,” pg. 2026.

person, institution or political cause to another.”⁷⁶ This definition, as opposed to the previous one, can be reconfigured in a way to address more of the dynamics that could be witnessed in the housing and affordability crisis of Vancouver, which I would argue, became an issue of “haves and have-nots,” people with the means to buy property and those who did not and the growing rift between those two camps, as well as the growing dissatisfaction with governments that seemed to be dragging its feet in dealing with the crisis, and addressing the needs of citizens.

Now that the general meaning of each pillar has been explained, specific examples will be provided to further illustrate the differing factors that created the housing crisis in Vancouver, from a lens examining it as an urban crisis.

Housing Affordability as an Urban Crisis

Local Troubles

In 2012, then-City of Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson assembled a task force to study the issue of housing affordability and foreign buyers. The task force engaged in two different case studies, including one to determine the number of unoccupied apartments and condominiums in Vancouver’s downtown core. The hypothesis was that there was a significant number of units sitting empty and unused in the city, but since those units were not being rented out, it resulted in a diminished supply of available rental housing, and therefore drove up rents. The study was conducted based on information provided by BC Hydro, which suggested that any unit consuming just enough energy – or less energy than is needed – to power a refrigerator would likely be empty. However, in their final submission titled “*Academic Working Group – Foreign*

⁷⁶ Bayirbag, Mustafa Kemal and Mehmet Penpecioglu, “Urban crisis: ‘Limits to governance of alienation’.” *Urban Studies* (2017), 54:9, pg. 2058.

Investment Report,” the task force could not conclusively say that foreign buyers were having any impact on affordability, because based on the evidence gathered, there was nothing that could prove or disprove the notion that foreign buyers have the ability to influence the market. The task force also concluded that even if the study on empty condominiums was accepted as true, there was no other evidence to suggest that there was an affordability issue. The final submission to the mayor and city council was that better data tracking of housing investments would be needed to find any link between foreign buyers and the real estate market in Vancouver because current empirical data was “weak.”

Upon closer examination, the submission that better data tracking was needed to gauge the influence of foreign buyers was needed is true. Property transfers and ownership, and transactions related to real estate are handled by the province. Over the course of my research, I sifted through several sets of real estate data provided by the provincial government, specifically the Ministry of Finance. The government of British Columbia did not start tracking real estate transactions involving foreign parties until four years after the Mayor’s Task Force made its final submissions. Similarly, the first major attempt by the provincial government, then led by the BC Liberal Party, was to introduce a foreign-buyers tax, which was a levy imposed on any housing transaction involving a party who was not a Canadian citizen or permanent resident. As a result, any foreign party wishing to buy property would need to pay an additional 15 percent property transfer tax on top of all other costs. However, this levy did not take effect until August 2, 2016. By then, prices had already been growing, with prices experiencing a 25 percent

jump in April 2016 compared to the same month in the previous year,⁷⁷ and the issue of foreign buyers dominated public discourse surrounding the issue of real estate. The response by the provincial government came too late.

In 2015, Brad Saltzberg, a local Vancouver man who was quite well-known in media circuits and online comment sections for his harsh views on immigration, said that rising costs of housing in Vancouver should be blamed on real estate transactions “facilitated by local companies and developers, to Mainland Chinese buyers.”⁷⁸ He later clarified his comments to *The Tyee* in a note, saying: “I have never, and would never, blame anything on a particular race or ethnicity. In terms of responsibility for the lack of affordability within Vancouver’s housing market, the number one culprit is the BC Real Estate Association, who through a lack of regulation has allowed our residential real estate market to transition into a playground for the world’s wealthy. Buyers from Mainland China are a major component of this, as facilitated by local real estate companies and realtors.”⁷⁹ Regardless of what his personal views may be, the fact that the real estate industry was at one point self-regulated is something to be noted. It was in 2016 that the provincial government under then-premier Christy Clark and her BC Liberal Party ended the real estate industry’s ability to self-regulate after an independent report into misconduct within the industry, which includes less-than-ethical practices such as “shadow flipping,”⁸⁰ which is a process in which a house is sold multiple times at increasing prices before the deal is closed, but none of the profits make it to the original

⁷⁷ Garry Marr, “Metro markets risk meltdown; Vancouver, Toronto housing ‘in danger of entering speculative-land.’” *The Vancouver Sun*, 6 May 2016, p. C.8. *Canadian Newsstream*.

⁷⁸ Cheung, “Why Racism.”

⁷⁹ Cheung, “Why Racism.”

⁸⁰ Simon Little, “B.C. creates new Crown agency to regulate real estate industry.” *Global News*, 12 Nov. 2019. <https://globalnews.ca/news/6160358/bc-new-crown-agency-real-estate/>. Accessed 6 Mar. 2020.

seller, and the realtor is able to pocket commissions from each sale. This behaviour was a result of a provision in many real estate contracts called the “assignment clause,” which was what allowed a property to change hands multiple times, because the deal has not fully closed.⁸¹ As a result, the buyers in between get to pocket any differences between their selling price and the resale price, while not having to pay the land transfer tax.⁸² The assignment clause was originally brought in as a safety measure to give buyers a way to back out of a transaction if their circumstances change after they make an offer, as well as to protect the seller by ensuring a sale can proceed so long as another buyer is found.⁸³ The result was a loophole that realtors exploited for profit. As noted, this practice was not ethical, but there was nothing in the law that made this practice illegal, as it was a provision in legal contracts, although economics professor Tom Davidoff says of the act of shadow flipping: “It’s not the cause of high housing prices, it’s an outcome of high housing prices.”⁸⁴ Regardless of the legality of this practice, this example shows how a lack of action can affect housing prices. The lack of oversight due to a self-regulating real estate industry allowed practices like this to take place with no consequence.

By April of 2016, housing prices in Vancouver had reached another new high, growing roughly 25 percent higher than the price during the same time period in the year before, with the average selling price for a single-detached house in Metro Vancouver was reported to be \$1,817,027 in April 2016.⁸⁵ This stagnation of local wages would not

⁸¹ Geordon Omand, “What you need to know about ‘shadow flipping’ in Vancouver.” *Global News*, 18 Mar. 2016. <https://globalnews.ca/news/2510453/what-you-need-to-know-about-shadow-flipping-in-vancouver/>. Accessed 5 Mar. 2020.

⁸² Omand, ““Shadow flipping.””

⁸³ Omand, ““Shadow flipping.””

⁸⁴ Jon Azpiri, “BC government tightens rules on shadow flipping.” *Global News*, 10 May 2016. <https://globalnews.ca/news/2693526/bc-government-tightens-rules-on-shadow-flipping/>. Accessed 5 Mar. 2020.

⁸⁵ Marr, “Metro markets.”

only have an effect on the ability to buy a home, but it can also determine the ability to rent. Consider the “living wage,” which is defined as the amount of money made each hour for a household would need in order to make ends meet. In 2018, it was reported that a family of four living in Vancouver with both parents working would need an estimated \$75,000 a year in order to get by.⁸⁶ This yearly amount would then calculate to roughly \$20.64 an hour, which is the wage both adults in the family of four would need as their living wage.⁸⁷ Bear in mind that this wage simply means that the money they make is just enough to get by; they have enough for rent, food, clothing and other necessities, and while they are not going into debt, they are unable to put any away into savings. Therefore, workers who make minimum wage, as well as younger people who are just starting out in their jobs and have not reached the point where they are making enough, are the most impacted by the wages that have failed to keep up. Although people who are not making as much money will not be as inclined to buy a single, detached house, further evidence shows that even traditionally cheaper housing options may be out of reach.

In the summer of 2018, it was reported that housing prices overall were beginning to drop, but that did not affect the cost of what is called “starter housing,” which refers to condominiums and townhouses, which are usually better options for someone who is younger and just entering the housing market.⁸⁸ This is owing to the fact that several policy changes, namely the foreign-buyers tax, affected a drop in the price of detached

⁸⁶ Lori Culbert and Tracy Sherlock, “Working poor: Meet the people whose jobs don’t pay the bills,” *Vancouver Sun*, 15 Jan. 2018. <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/b-c-s-working-poor-meet-the-people-whose-jobs-dont-pay-the-bills>. Accessed 11 Nov. 2019.

⁸⁷ Culbert and Sherlock, “Working poor.”

⁸⁸ Brent Jang, “Vancouver housing market cools off, but entrylevel homes see little change.” *The Globe and Mail*, 1 Aug. 2018, p. A.7. *Canadian Newsstream*.

homes, but not other forms of housing, and compared to prices in 2014, the cost of a condominium had risen 50 percent.⁸⁹ Urban planner Andy Yan, who was hired to do demographic research at an architecture firm when he started doing studies on the housing market, and is also an adjunct professor at Simon Fraser University, was quoted as saying that the only thing that would help the younger generation of buyers enter the market was realignment of prices and wages, which could come in the form of an exponential growth in wages, a sudden collapse of housing prices, or a combination of both.⁹⁰

Furthermore, additional reporting from news outlets in 2018 showed even more evidence that local incomes were unable to keep up with the rising costs of housing. In the second half of 2018, *Daily Hive* posted an article about a report released by the real estate website *Zoocasa*, which stated that with average home prices at \$1,196,000, an income of \$161,193 a year would be needed in order to buy into the housing market.⁹¹ However, the median income in Vancouver was reported to be just \$65,327 a year, far below the amount needed to be able to buy a home.⁹² In 2015, median income was reported to be \$72,662, and \$86,140 in 2017, according to official census data, neither of which would be enough to allow a household to buy into the housing market with average prices for single detached homes rising to over \$1.8 million in 2016, if that were the type of housing they were seeking.

⁸⁹ Jang, “Vancouver housing market.”

⁹⁰ Jang, “Vancouver housing market.”

⁹¹ DH Vancouver Staff, “A \$150,000 income is not enough for a home in Vancouver: report.” *Daily Hive*, 8 Nov. 2018. <https://dailyhive.com/vancouver/vancouver-income-housing-report-zoocasa-2018>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

⁹² “A \$150,000 income.”

In my interview with the anonymous journalist, they spoke about how this “decoupling” of housing prices from local incomes was the root of the affordability crisis; when locals could no longer afford to buy property in the city. “All you have to do is look at the average household income and look at the average price of a home, and there's something off here, there's something that no longer makes sense,” they say.⁹³ They also added that the growing unaffordability could be attributed largely in part to governments that dragged their feet in handling the issue, allowing the crisis to grow to the scale that it eventually reached.⁹⁴ All of these factors work to highlight the fact that in British Columbia, municipal governments are powerless in control of the housing market. Wages are set by employers and the minimum wage is the domain of the provincial government, just as the province co-regulates the real estate industry with the Real Estate Council of British Columbia.

Federal Missteps

In the year prior to the introduction of the foreign-buyers tax in British Columbia, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper promised to allocate \$500,000 to fund a study on the effects of foreign ownership in Canada, as well as gather data on foreign home ownership in Canada’s two largest housing markets, Vancouver and Toronto.⁹⁵ However, it is also stated in the same news report that there had been no similar study conducted in the past.⁹⁶ Despite this, a University of British Columbia political science professor, Max Cameron, called the announcement little more than a politically calculated move, because

⁹³ Anonymous Journalist, Phone Interview. 1 May 2020.

⁹⁴ Anonymous, Phone Interview.

⁹⁵ Jeff Lee and Tiffany Crawford, “PM vows foreign home ownership study; Conservatives, if re-elected, would spend \$500,000 to gather data on housing market.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 13 Aug. 2015, p. A.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

⁹⁶ Lee and Crawford, “PM vows.”

that is what the voters care about, saying: “It is an easy promise to make and a modest sum of money, although probably more than you would need to get the data, and the data would probably show that there is real estate speculation in Vancouver. What a surprise.”⁹⁷

In the same article, it was reported that the frenzied demand heating up Vancouver and Toronto’s housing markets were also the result of “historically low” interest rates with the Bank of Canada.⁹⁸ Similarly, it was reported again in 2016 that “record low” interest rates, on top of Vancouver’s dwindling housing supply, were fueling the housing crisis.⁹⁹ It was also in 2016 that it was reported a mortgage “stress test” would be introduced in an attempt to reduce the number of transactions happening across Canada, however, the stress test did not take effect until January 1, 2018. By then, interest rates had increased twice, yet they still remained extremely low.¹⁰⁰ Further reports from news outlets reveal that the new mortgage rules introduced to try and slow the rate of buying happening in heated housing markets did little more than make it harder on first-time home buyers, people without as much capital, to purchase property.¹⁰¹

Additionally, in the summer of 2018, it was reported that measures introduced earlier to cool the housing market did not have a lasting effect, as the foreign-buyers tax reportedly did not accomplish its main objective, which is to make the housing market

⁹⁷ Lee and Crawford, “PM vows.”

⁹⁸ Lee and Crawford, “PM vows.”

⁹⁹ Theophilos Argitis, “Foreign-buyer tax puts the ball in Ottawa’s court; Trudeau’s pledge to aid affordability could backfire, observers believe.” *The Vancouver Sun*. 12 Aug. 2016, p. C.12. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹⁰⁰ Jonathan Ratner, “Housing remains steady; Analysts confident that chances of credit event remote for Canada.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 2 Oct. 2017, p. N.7. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹⁰¹ Naomi Powell, “First-time homebuyers feel effects of market moves.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 31 Jan. 2018, p. B.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

cheaper for locals. After a brief cooling off in the immediate aftermath of its introduction, prices began rising again early on in 2017, before the average price for a detached home reached another near-record high at \$3,080,563 in October of that year.¹⁰²

Provincial Inaction

At the provincial level, in 2015, then-premier Christy Clark and her trade minister Teresa Wat “held intimate meetings with Hong Kong developers and donors who had billions invested in Vancouver property. They wanted to know if Clark’s government would intervene in the market to reduce prices,”¹⁰³ according to a report by the *Vancouver Sun*. This occurred just as prices were starting to “sky-rocket” in Vancouver, and documents obtained through a freedom-of-information request shed some light on “courting strategies employed by Clark and Wat for trade meetings with real estate tycoons and corporations in China and Hong Kong.”¹⁰⁴ According to the report, potential investors were told that “the government’s willingness to permit a foreigner to own a significant portion of Vancouver... marked a significant turning point in the city’s development,” referring to the sale of Expo 86 lands to a Hong Kong tycoon Li Ka-shing in 1988, which reportedly “paved the way for the influx of capital that followed.”¹⁰⁵ Here is an example of two influential figures in the previous provincial government actively courting overseas buyers from Chinese-speaking regions to invest in the Vancouver real estate market. Furthermore, a report in 2017 alluded to Clark and her government’s refusal to intervene in the housing market in the previous year, only to introduce a slew

¹⁰² Brent Jang, “Vancouver’s detached-home market hits a rough patch.” *The Globe and Mail*, 10 July 2018, p. B.3. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹⁰³ Sam Cooper, “Clark met with Chinese developers while housing prices skyrocketed.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 14 Nov. 2017, p. A.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹⁰⁴ Cooper, “Clark met with.”

¹⁰⁵ Cooper, “Clark met with.”

of new housing measures to cool the market in the months leading up to the May 2017 provincial election, including a pledge to allocate \$500 million to affordable housing.¹⁰⁶ These examples illustrate not just governance failures, but also reveal the lack of interest in taking meaningful action as explained in the concept of urban crisis. The previous Liberal government allowed the crisis to flourish, only taking action when they felt they could no longer ignore the issue, yet the action came too late, and further action was only promised in the lead-up to an election, likely as a final attempt at trying to cling to power.

Alienation within Transactions

As a result of these lapses in government action, both structural and political, we slowly begin to see the “alienation,” or “effects” start to surface. While the government should be acknowledged for taking action, regardless of how delayed it may have been, it cannot be denied that the measures put in place and the policy changes made have done little to make the market more accessible. As a result of the changes to mortgage rules, first-time buyers – who are often younger and do not already own any real estate capital of their own – now have a harder time buying their first homes, because it is now harder for them to obtain an insured mortgage. Furthermore, the foreign-buyers tax, which had some success in reducing the price of detached homes, ultimately had very little lasting effects on the housing market, as it was reported that while the price of detached houses dropped, condominiums and townhomes saw increases in average price.¹⁰⁷ It was predicted by a Vancouver-area real estate agent that the tax, combined with other changes made including a provincial speculation tax targeting people who buy housing specifically as an investment, should cause prices to drop to levels similar to what the

¹⁰⁶ Shaw, “Foreign-Buyer Tax.”

¹⁰⁷ Jang, “Vancouver housing market.”

prices were in 2015 and 2016.¹⁰⁸ However, the prices were also predicted to plateau, before slowly rising back up again, which – as evidenced by numbers cited in other media reports¹⁰⁹ – did indeed happen. It can be said that the affordability situation in Vancouver did improve, but at the cost of accessibility. As reported, prices had gone down to a small degree, but it was not becoming any easier for buyers attempting to enter the market, especially younger, first-time buyers as the prices of traditionally cheaper, starter housing options, like condominiums and townhouses, shot up. This is where the alienation occurs, the struggle between the haves and the have-nots. Those who already own real estate capital, will find it easier to upsize and stay active within the market, while those who do not, or those who do not make as much money, find it harder to enter the market.

Additionally, urban crises in the past have also been defined by race, and alienation can occur along those lines. In the 1960's, the government of the United States of America implemented several programs aimed at what it called “urban renewal,” defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “construction projects aimed at redeveloping substandard buildings within urban areas.”¹¹⁰ These programs were implemented heavily along racial lines, specifically in predominantly African-American neighbourhoods, focusing on addressing what was referred to as the “fundamental problem.”¹¹¹ In this case, the problem at hand was allegedly the “crumbling” of African-American families, due to “high rates of divorce, illegitimate births, matriarchal families,

¹⁰⁸ Kerry Gold, “‘A reality check’: Housing prices continue to drop in Vancouver,” *The Globe and Mail*, 5 Mar. 2019. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/real-estate/vancouver/article-a-reality-check-housing-prices-continue-to-drop-in-vancouver/>. Accessed 12 Nov. 2019.

¹⁰⁹ Jang, “Vancouver's detached-home market.”

¹¹⁰ Weaver, Timothy. “Urban crisis: The genealogy of a concept.” *Urban Studies* (2017) 54:9, pg. 2044.

¹¹¹ Weaver, “The genealogy of a concept,” pg. 2045.

drug use and ‘welfare dependency,’” which supposedly created a “culture of poverty” within the African-American community.¹¹² While the Chinese community in Vancouver did not face any repercussions due to being poor, there was a backlash towards them owing to their perceived wealth.

In my interview with Rob Shaw of *The Vancouver Sun*, he spoke about how the foreign-buyers tax implemented by the BC Liberal Party was little more than a political move made to cultivate support.¹¹³ He called it a backlash against this perception that there were millionaire immigrants from Asia buying up property in Vancouver and then leaving their children there, and these children, would drive expensive luxury sports cars around Vancouver’s downtown core and live in extravagant mansions. Shaw says that the government implemented the tax without any evidence other than this perception that wealthy people of Asian, likely Chinese, descent buying up houses and making the market more expensive. This was the “fundamental problem” of the Chinese buyers. They are wealthy, offshore buyers who do not pay Canadian taxes, and make the city more unlivable for the people that do. According to Shaw, the government implemented the tax on the belief that these people needed to be punished, based on their wealth, and what it was doing to the province.

However, in spite of the measures taken against foreign buyers, there is also one subset of the population that also shoulders some of the responsibility for rising housing costs: Albertans. In some of the articles examined for this thesis, including two from 2018 – one published in February, the other in June – there are mentions of the effects people from Alberta were having on British Columbian housing markets. In February

¹¹² Weaver, “The genealogy of a concept,” pg. 2045.

¹¹³ Shaw, Phone Interview.

2018, then-president of the Union of BC Municipalities Wendy Booth, who is from the Kootenays in the interior of the province, said that her region was hit by what she called “the Alberta effect,” where these fairly well-to-do Albertans were buying vacation properties and causing issues for locals.¹¹⁴ The article from June referred to people from Alberta as being “one of the largest groups of buyers of recreational properties in BC, are expected to increasingly shop closer to home,” following the introduction of the “speculation tax,” geared towards ending the phenomenon of out-of-province buyers purchasing properties they do not live in.¹¹⁵ In the same article, Phil Soper, a chief executive for real estate company Royal LePage, issued a statement saying that while the speculation tax was geared more towards foreign ownership, “international purchasers make up a very small portion of the recreational market, and the dreaded ‘house flippers’ are an urban phenomenon.”¹¹⁶ Although they are not foreign buyers, there is now evidence to show that fellow Canadians were also having some influence on the rising housing costs in British Columbia. “Vacation homes” by their definition are not places where the owners live for most of the year. The aforementioned reports do not mention whether these homes owned by Albertans are rented out or occupied for the rest of the year when the primary owners do not live it. If it is assumed that the homes remain empty most of the time, then that is housing stock that sits empty, and is taken out of housing market activity, meaning that it is potential rental stock that is unutilized; the fewer the options, the higher the demand, which can lead to increased prices. On March 12, 2019,

¹¹⁴ Frances Bula, “B.C. mayors say rethink on housing is urgently needed.” *The Globe and Mail*, 2 Feb. 2018, p. A.12. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹¹⁵ Janet McFarland, “Vacation home values expected to drop.” *The Globe and Mail*, 6 June 2018, p. A.8. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹¹⁶ McFarland, “Vacation home.”

the Canadian Housing and Mortgage Corporation released a report titled “New Insights on Non-resident Ownership and Participation in BC, ON and NS Housing Markets,” which states that non-residents, meaning someone who does not routinely live in Canada, make up 6.3 percent of property owners in British Columbia and 7.6 percent of owners in Vancouver. The numbers suggest that foreign buyers remain relatively low in the housing market, however, it is not the most accurate measure of foreign buyers because “non-residents” also include Canadians who live outside Canada long-term.

Through a combination of structural, political and alienating factors, we can confirm that Vancouver’s housing and affordability crisis is an urban crisis. There is a link between inadequate wages and lapses in government action that resulted in a situation that has not improved much from when it was at its peak. Therefore, based on these observations, there is an indication that several other factors have influenced the rising cost of real estate, and to pin it solely on the influence of overseas buyers and their wealth would be an inaccurate summation of the issue.

Concluding Thoughts

When the different factors that could potentially be at the root of the Vancouver housing and affordability crisis are considered together in their entirety, there is no doubt that foreign buyers do indeed have an influence on the housing market. However, when considering other factors such governance failures or the effects of Albertans on the local housing markets, then foreign buyers are one piece in a much larger and more complicated puzzle. It is undeniable that foreign buyers did and do have an impact on the upwards pressure put on local housing prices. In 2016, it was reported that between June 10 and August 1, 25 percent of all properties purchased within the City of Richmond

involved a foreign party, and 90 percent of them were of Chinese heritage.¹¹⁷ However, the caveat is that the transactions were specifically taking place in Richmond, a city of roughly 200,000 people within the Greater Vancouver Area, where more than 50 percent of the population identified as being of Chinese descent, and non-white ethnic groups made up more than three-quarters of the total city population according to data from the Canada 2016 Census. Similarly, it was reported that prior to the foreign-buyers tax taking effect in 2016, when the housing crisis was at its peak, “foreign money accounted for 96 percent of all transactions involving foreigners,” but by November 2016, that number had shrunk to 59 percent.¹¹⁸ Areas like Richmond would be favoured by newer immigrants owing to the ethnic make-up of the city. The greater presence of people with similar roots and who speak similar languages, means newcomers will have an easier time adapting to life in Canada.

Though the evidence has shown that the foreign-buyers tax did indeed result in some drop in the level of foreign investing, even if the tax ultimately did not contribute to any meaningful decline in the extremely high housing costs, exemplified when in August 2017, a year after it took effect, the price of new homes in Vancouver jumped 1.5 percent in June of that year, with an overall rise of five percent since March 2017.¹¹⁹ Between March and June of that year, that was the biggest rise seen during a three-month period since 1990.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Graeme Wood, “Foreign buyers bounce back.” *Richmond News*, 4 Nov. 2016, p. A.11. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹¹⁸ Wood, “Foreign buyers.”

¹¹⁹ “Vancouver housing on fire with biggest price gains since 1990.” *The Province*, 11 Aug. 2017, p. A.2. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹²⁰ “Vancouver housing on fire.”

The evidence presented and framed through an urban studies lens – centred on the theory behind “urban crisis” – show that no one piece of the puzzle can be fully to blame for the cause of the crisis. All the differing factors that could contribute to the housing crisis both in terms of availability and of affordability, must be taken together in their entirety to fully understand the magnitude of the crisis. Yes, foreign buyers were and are a part of the problem, but clearly, not the only problem. In consideration of these varying factors, I will present the findings from my research into the news coverage of the housing crisis in order to prove that there was a greater degree of focus on foreign buyers above the other factors which can have an effect on housing prices.

However, it should also be noted that the media’s over-emphasis on one aspect of the issue, as well as its focus on the ethnicity of the buyers, is not new to Vancouver’s media landscape. The following chapter will examine the media in Vancouver’s history with covering immigration, specifically the immigration of people of ethnic Chinese descent, and how it tied to the issue of housing in the 1980’s and the 1990’s, when the city experienced a new wave of immigration from Hong Kong. Just as the immigrants from Mainland China did in recent years, the people arriving from Hong Kong also faced accusations that they were rich foreigners buying up local properties and causing prices to rise for local buyers and residents.

Chapter 3: Stories From the Past

Media: The Easy Headline

Cambridge Dictionary defines “sensationalism” as the “act by newspapers, television, etc. presenting information in way that is shocking or exciting.” It is an editorial tactic used by mass media to specifically package news and information in a way that is meant to capture the attention of a news consumer in a way that elicits a strong emotional reaction. It is a method of presenting news meant to do little outside of reaching the largest audience possible. All of this is to say that it is a way for certain media, particularly those that cater to a more working-class level audience, to present the “sexiest” story; the headline that will draw in the most number of people to read the article. However, there is no definitive proof that the way the housing and affordability crisis of the mid- to late- 2010’s decade was reported on was merely a sensationalist tactic deployed to ensure more people signed up for subscriptions to their local paper; at the very least, no definitive proof based on the definition of sensationalism by itself. However, it would be false to say that media had not utilized that approach, or at least considered it, in the past. This chapter will specifically explore Vancouver media’s history with coverage of the immigration of people of ethnic Chinese descent, and how the media ultimately fell short of covering the issue in a truly objective and even-handed manner. It will also include interviews with two former *Vancouver Sun* reporters, Mark Hume and Wyng Chow, who shared with me their experiences in a newsroom engaged in the coverage of an issue heavily tied to race.

In the late 1980’s and again in the 1990’s, journalist Frances Bula, who was also interviewed for this thesis, wrote articles undertaking a “debriefing” of sorts, outlining how *The Vancouver Sun*, one of the most prominent and respected local news

publications in the province of British Columbia, handled their reporting of what was a new wave of immigration from Hong Kong, and issues surrounding Vancouver real estate properties being sold to off-shore buyers. The first article was published in 1989 in *The Vancouver Sun* and was adapted from another story she had written for *The Bulletin*, which was a publication run by the Centre for Investigative Journalism.¹²¹ In this *Bulletin* piece, Bula details how in the year 1988, the *Sun* published 659 articles containing the phrase “Hong Kong,” and 250 articles containing the phrase in the first 90 days of 1989 alone, which averages out to more than one such article on any given day in the time periods mentioned.¹²² Furthermore, another 183 stories containing the words “Hong Kong” and “real estate” were published over the same period, from the beginning of 1988 through to the end of the first three months of 1989.¹²³ According to Bula’s story, this spree of mass coverage did not go without resistance from the *Sun*’s reporters. Of the nine reporters who were assigned to write stories focused on the “effects of Hong Kong immigration,” four of them pushed back and protested what they saw as the “ethnocentric bias of some of the assignments and the *Sun*’s approach in general,”¹²⁴ and Mark Hume, who is now retired, remarked that a story he wrote “indulged in a bad case of ‘Hong Kong phobia.’”¹²⁵ He also expressed his concerns, three decades ago, to Bula and his editors that there was a “current of racism” plaguing British Columbia, and that the nature of the coverage being done by the *Sun* would do little more than inflame those fears even further.¹²⁶ “There was an atmosphere then of suspicion, distrust, even fear, I

¹²¹ Frances Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES ITS OWN ETHICS: HONG KONG: THE STORY BEHIND THE SUN STORY.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 8 July 1989, p. B.5. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹²² Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

¹²³ Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

¹²⁴ Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

¹²⁵ Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

¹²⁶ Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

think, in the city about an influx of Asian immigrants, who were – it was felt – being driven to Vancouver by the political uncertainty in Hong Kong at the time,” Hume told me in my interview with him.¹²⁷ “And there was a lot of anecdotal evidence, stories about how Asian buyers were snapping up all the homes in the city, and the concern being expressed by some was that our culture, our way of life in Vancouver was somehow threatened by this.”¹²⁸

During my conversation with Christopher Cheung of *The Tyee*, he spoke about the backlash against the “monster houses” that was one of the issues raised by the detractors of the wave of Hong Kong immigrants moving to Vancouver. Cheung says: “On Vancouver’s west side, you had a lot of Hong Kong buyers coming in, and they redeveloped a lot of single detached homes, and they’ve rebuilt them a lot of times to max out on the square footage. A lot of people who are white, who lived in those neighborhoods, they were really upset, because a lot of the homes on the Westside tend to be British architecture, kind of like Tudor-style homes.” Cheung adds: “That is kind of a way of discriminating against those buyers. If you look at the newspapers of the time, they were like, ‘Oh, these newcomers, they don’t have any taste, they’re just going for ‘bigger is better,’ and ‘they’re [ruining] the character of the neighborhood.’ There is this really interesting question of who has a right to belong in the city.”

Building on Cheung’s mention of the idea of “belonging,” I recalled an interview I did with University of British Columbia professor Henry Yu. Yu’s specialty is in Asian-Canadian history in British Columbia, and I had initially interviewed him for a story I wrote looking back on the 1907 riots in Vancouver, during which white Canadians tore

¹²⁷ Mark Hume, Phone Interview. 15 Apr. 2020.

¹²⁸ Hume, Phone Interview.

through Vancouver's Chinatown as well as a portion of the city's Japanese enclave. The riots, as Yu says, were backlash against Asian immigrants, and the legacy of the violence "is the sense of who this place belongs to." Though Yu says – and one would hope – that Vancouver is not on the cusp of another race riot, he also says that the racial tensions that led to the hostilities never really went away, and that it is impossible to understand the riot – and subsequently, the current housing crisis – without an understanding of British Columbia's history with racial animus.

"There's a sense that Asians are always foreign – you could be fourth generation, it doesn't matter – Asians are foreign, they don't belong," Yu says. "That's a legacy of the period, of taking land away from Indigenous peoples and then determining who should get it, and who *should* get it are whites, are people from Europe." What Yu mentions is essentially a way of describing the stereotype of the perpetual foreigner, the idea that people of Asian descent will never fully adapt to life in a western country, and will forever be an outsider. When one considers the legacy of the 1907 riots, and compare them to the reported "ethnocentrism" of news coverage in the 1980's and 1990's,¹²⁹ then it becomes clear that the fear and suspicion of immigrants of Asian descent is something that never fully disappeared from life in Vancouver, and continued to be an underlying issue on the matter of housing.

Furthermore, following the publication of a series of stories that were written from Hong Kong by reporter Gillian Shaw who had been sent to the city, *The Vancouver Sun* was accused of making another misstep.¹³⁰ The series generated several stories, including two that dealt directly with the wealthy buyers who were coming from Hong

¹²⁹ Bula, "A NEWSPAPER DEBATES."

¹³⁰ Bula, "A NEWSPAPER DEBATES."

Kong. In one, published on March 18, 1989, residents of Hong Kong are described as being more confused than offended at the fury directed towards them in Vancouver, with the piece describing their feelings as “why the fuss?”¹³¹ The article also mentions how the practice of flipping a property, where a property is purchased then quickly re-sold to make a profit, “doesn't even raise eyebrows here – in fact, it is seen as shrewd business dealing,” and that it is not uncommon for a condominium to change hands five times in the time between its initial selling as a pre-sale floor plan to when a resident actually moves in.¹³² In the same article, a publisher named Albert Cheng, himself a former Vancouverite, says that while he does see the Hong Kong immigrants in Vancouver as being victims of local outrage, he does not sympathize, saying: “They go to Canada but they don't want to live like Canadians.”¹³³ He adds, “You can't blame them for wanting to live in big houses after living in small spaces here, but they have no taste – the houses are ugly,” referring to the “monster houses” that seemed to be favoured by the wealthy newcomers from Hong Kong.¹³⁴ Cheng added that he was specifically talking about the “nouveau riche,” people who had recently become wealthy, but are lacking good taste, and though they are the minority amongst the immigrants from Hong Kong, they are the most visible.¹³⁵ However, Cheng also said that the buyers from Hong Kong cannot be blamed for the houses, as they are simply buying what is offered, saying: “It is the developers in Vancouver who are building the houses,” and that it was developers who were specifically targeting buyers from Hong Kong to sell such properties to.¹³⁶

¹³¹ Gillian Shaw, “Investment anger confuses Hong Kong, Series: Gillian Shaw in Hong Kong.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 18 Mar. 1989, p. A.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹³² Shaw, “Investment anger.”

¹³³ Shaw, “Investment anger.”

¹³⁴ Shaw, “Investment anger.”

¹³⁵ Shaw, “Investment anger.”

¹³⁶ Shaw, “Investment anger.”

Another story published from Hong Kong, which ran in the *Sun* on March 20, reported on a two-day sale, which saw at least 500 local buyers purchasing 32 out of 33 units in a Vancouver condominium development.¹³⁷ The units were all presale, and the building they were in had yet to go up, with the expected completion date being April 1990.¹³⁸ The report said that many of them could be back on the market within 24 hours, and a realtor named Alice Chan was quoted as saying that some of the buyers were buying them as an investment because they thought the prices would go up, adding, “This allows them to transfer their unit to another party and only pay a small fee. If somebody pays \$160,000 Canadian for a unit and can sell it two months later for \$180,000, then they’ve made a \$20,000 profit. Of course they should sell at a higher price, otherwise how can they make money?”¹³⁹ Stories such as these two written from Hong Kong paint immigrants from the region as opportunistic, and only looking to make money. The ones that do settle in Vancouver, living in “monster houses,” come off as being tasteless, and unwilling to adapt to their new surroundings. Though these stories are not factually incorrect, they offer a very narrow view of a certain subset of Hong Kong’s population.

In response to the stories filed from Hong Kong, a reporter named Wyng Chow, who speaks fluent Cantonese and had family in Hong Kong, wrote an internal letter to the *Sun*’s then-editor-in-chief Nick Hills, complaining that he had been excluded from the meetings and the decision-making process prior to the trip overseas which generated the series, and for their “shallow view” of Hong Kong as a whole.¹⁴⁰ During my interview

¹³⁷ Gillian Shaw, “Flipping is Hong Kong game, Series: Gillian Shaw in Hong Kong.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 20 Mar. 1989, p. A.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹³⁸ Shaw, “Flipping.”

¹³⁹ Shaw, “Flipping.”

¹⁴⁰ Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

with Chow, he addressed his displeasure with being excluded from the meetings, saying: “I was one of the very, very few Asians in the whole newsroom. I was the only one with contacts in Hong Kong and in Mainland China, because I actually immigrated here when I was a young boy, and I grew up in Canada. I had the contacts, I had the cultural knowledge and everything else, and I don’t believe I was ever asked about it.”¹⁴¹ Chow’s complaint of *The Vancouver Sun* having a shallow view of Hong Kong, and the immigration and real estate issue, is representative of newsroom practices that could have been more inclusive, rather than any overt wrongdoing on the part of journalists, as well as an overall lack of cultural understanding. By Bula’s account, for many people, the issue – and therefore the story – was that there was a “noticeable surge” in wealthy Chinese immigrants arriving in Vancouver despite them representing only around a quarter of all the immigrants arriving.¹⁴² Chow’s criticism that there was a lack of understanding of issues related to Hong Kong would become evident in later years.

Passport Babies

A few years after this initial piece was written, Bula wrote another for *The Vancouver Sun* in 1994 as a means of assessing the media response following coverage of the “passport babies” phenomenon, where expectant mother who were not citizens would travel from their country of origin to give birth in Canada, which would automatically make their infants Canadian citizens. *The Vancouver Sun* picked up the story of an expectant mother from Hong Kong, and her goal of finding her child a way out of Hong Kong in anticipation of the 1997 handover, returning Hong Kong to Chinese Communist

¹⁴¹ Wyng Chow, Phone Interview. 21 Apr. 2020.

¹⁴² Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

Party control.¹⁴³ Reporter Moira Farrow was alerted to it by several phone calls from non-Chinese women, complaining that there were Asian women sitting next to them in the hospital, looking to have their babies in Canada.¹⁴⁴ Farrow later wrote the story after two student nurses at the hospital in question, St. Paul's Hospital, were willing to go public.¹⁴⁵ However, it should be noted that prior to Farrow taking on the story, it was actually a reporter by the name of Anthony Li, who worked for the then-fledgling *Ming Pao*, the local Chinese language newspaper in Vancouver, who initially broke the story.¹⁴⁶ Both journalists determined that between 250 to 350 births each year involved mothers who were not citizens, but neither was able to determine exactly how many of them involved mothers specifically from Hong Kong.¹⁴⁷ As a result, Li chose to write that there were only a handful of births involving Hong Kong mothers, because that was the perception of the Chinese community, but Farrow chose to write that it was a majority, because that was what the student nurses believed.¹⁴⁸

Clement So, the executive editor of *Ming Pao*, later stated that he did not feel reporters and editors at the *Sun* deliberately wrote stories that reflected poorly on the Chinese community, believing it to be a result of a lack of understanding of cultural differences.¹⁴⁹ However, he would also state that he knew why immigration-related stories would often focus on the negatives of immigration, saying: "I'm a journalist and I know, bad news sells."¹⁵⁰ What So said is the dictionary definition of sensationalism:

¹⁴³ Frances Bula, "Hospital baby stories reflected what reporters were predisposed to think." *The Vancouver Sun*, 14 Jan 1994, p. B.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹⁴⁴ Bula, "Hospital baby stories."

¹⁴⁵ Bula, "Hospital baby stories."

¹⁴⁶ Bula, "Hospital baby stories."

¹⁴⁷ Bula, "Hospital baby stories."

¹⁴⁸ Bula, "Hospital baby stories."

¹⁴⁹ Bula, "Hospital baby stories."

¹⁵⁰ Bula, "Hospital baby stories."

news that is of interest is packaged and written in a way that sometimes sacrifices accuracy in order to elicit a reaction from consumers.

In an odd turn of events, when looking for the article Farrow wrote on the “passport babies” that was the subject of Bula’s article, a search through a newspaper archive did not return many results, only two articles that were written by Farrow which published after Bula’s 1994 piece. One article was a report on how the children born to non-Canadian mothers would be part of a review into Canadian citizenship legislation.¹⁵¹ Farrow also reported that the then-immigration minister, Sergio Marchi, was asking the committee in charge of the review to take a “hard look” at the laws regarding granting automatic citizenship to infants born on Canadian soil.¹⁵² The other article dealt more with numbers and figures, reporting that in the previous five years, of the roughly 217,500 births that occurred in British Columbia, only 1192 were to foreign mothers, making for roughly 0.55 percent of all births.¹⁵³ Of those 1192 births, 303 were to mothers from Hong Kong.¹⁵⁴ These two pieces contrast greatly with what I have learned from Bula’s writing, which suggests that the original story on passport babies was born out of anger and frustration on the part of the public, and of the nurses at the hospital.

When I attempted to reach Farrow for an interview, it was Frances Bula who informed me that Farrow had died several years ago, and there is no way for me to get a clearer understanding of her reasons and motivations for reporting on the story the way she did. However, in Bula’s piece from 1994, Farrow was described as having admitted

¹⁵¹ Moira Farrow, “‘Passport babies’ part of new immigration review.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 15 Apr. 1994, pg. A.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹⁵² Farrow, “‘Passport babies’.”

¹⁵³ Moira Farrow, “Non-resident births count low: Hong Kong, U.S. top spots.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 16 May 1994, pg. A.2. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹⁵⁴ Farrow, “Non-resident births.”

that the story she had written was a product of her own outrage, saying she believed that a foreign mother having a child in a Canadian hospital was an abuse of the system, and “not fair play,” and the story’s focus was also that the nurses were outraged at what they saw as “immigration queue-jumping,”¹⁵⁵ and if what Bula had written in 1994 is accurate, there was no attempt made to try and communicate with the mother from Hong Kong, not even through a translator. The story was clearly skewed, and the sources interviewed questionable at best owing to their clear biases. Later on, a survey conducted by a Chinese-language radio station found that of the 263 births involving foreign mothers in 1993, only 63 were to mothers from Hong Kong; a figure that calculates to less than one-in-four.¹⁵⁶ This is a stark contrast to the claims of the two nurses that Hong Kong women made up a “majority” of non-resident mothers giving birth in the hospitals.

That same year, in *The Province*, the *Sun*’s sister paper, a twelve-page series was published on the topic of Asian immigration, but the series was almost entirely focused on the Hong Kong community.¹⁵⁷ While the coverage did include a significant piece devoted to covering the poorer Chinese immigrants living in Vancouver’s East Side, the series also dedicated a considerable amount of space to “Chuppies.”¹⁵⁸ The term is meant to be an abbreviated way of saying “Chinese yuppies,” describing the younger individuals who attended school at the University of British Columbia, drove expensive, luxury sports cars and wore designer brands.¹⁵⁹ In response to this story, city editor Neil Graham admitted that he did not think “Chuppies” were representative of all Chinese

¹⁵⁵ Bula, “Hospital baby stories.”

¹⁵⁶ Bula, “Hospital baby stories.”

¹⁵⁷ Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

¹⁵⁸ Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

¹⁵⁹ Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

immigrants, but the working class immigrants of the east side just were not interesting enough, and the *Sun* simply “couldn’t resist that story.”¹⁶⁰ In other words, he was admitting that an editorial decision was made to pursue this story because they knew it would get people’s attention. Graham more than likely would have known that a story about “Chuppies” would make people angry, but within the larger framework of covering immigration issues, it probably has no real substance.

Housing can easily become one of those issues which turns into a confrontation of the “haves and the have-nots” variety, pitting people with the means to buy a home against those who do not. This is another example of the alienation that can occur, as explained in the previous chapter, through the decoupling of local incomes from housing prices, as well as how those with capital will have an easier time remaining in and staying active within the market. A story focused on children of wealthy immigrants can be seen as confirmation by some, that it is indeed wealthy foreigners who are buying up properties while hardworking Canadian locals are left to fight over the scraps. The idea of “Chuppies” is eerily similar to coverage that emerged during the more recent housing crisis. The newer coverage also described young men and women, who are of Asian descent, driving expensive sports cars and wearing designer clothing, only this time, the people in question were believed to be of Mainland Chinese descent. Therefore, the belief in the notion of wealthy foreigners buying properties and living lavish lifestyles in Vancouver is a notion that never truly disappeared from public discourse, even after decades had passed.

¹⁶⁰ Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

Among several other flaws and missteps made by the *Sun*, the stories were assigned to staff reporters who are not of ethnic Chinese descent, and have little to no understanding of Chinese culture or the Cantonese language, something that Chow was particularly critical of. “Almost all the management, and certainly the senior editors, were all white. So, a lot of them don't have any clue about Asia, or most of the rest of the world, except what they read on our news wires,” Chow said. “Maybe their next door neighbor who happened to be a Canadian-born Chinese is taking them for dim sum. And that's about all they would know about Asia.”¹⁶¹ Additionally, Chow, a reporter who can trace his roots to Hong Kong, who speaks the language and has a deeper, more nuanced understanding of its people and culture was completely excluded from the process that would generate story ideas. At the time, the leadership in the newsroom would have included editor-in-chief Nick Hills and city editor Scott Macrae, who led the series of stories that was generated from Hong Kong. However, attempts to reach the leadership in the newsroom have also yielded no results. In trying to reach Hills, it was Chow who told me that he had died some time ago, and Macrae, though curious about the nature of this thesis, declined to do an interview. The nature of the motivations and the editorial judgment used in steering the coverage in the direction it took remain unknown at this time.

Reporters from the *Sun* admitted themselves that the stories written during this period were “ethnocentric” and could possibly stoke the underlying racism that was plaguing British Columbia.¹⁶² Hume, who was one of nine reporters assigned to these stories, was one of four reporters, along with Frances Bula and senior reporter Bill Boei,

¹⁶¹ Chow, Phone Interview.

¹⁶² Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

who spoke out against the coverage being done in 1989.¹⁶³ In my interview with Hume, he reflected on his experience being in the newsroom then, saying: “I sort of had a little bit of a conflict with the features editor, Shelley Fralic, at that time, but I wasn't suggesting we not report on the issue, I was just urging that we do it in a well-thought out way that didn't feed the racist sentiments I heard being expressed.”¹⁶⁴

The coverage of the issue of Hong Kong buyers took what Bula referred to in her 1989 debrief as “dinner-party, over-the-fence, and taxi-cab conversations”¹⁶⁵ and brought those conversations and opinions to the mainstream, giving it a degree of credibility and legitimacy that would otherwise have eluded it. It amplified the original message and gave it a platform, and ensured more and more people were able hear it and see it. In other words, it normalized opinions that could have been racist and xenophobic in nature, when it would not have been acceptable otherwise. Bula’s article made mention that critics of media often point out that perception can have just as much impact on a story as the facts do, but many journalists would fiercely disagree with that critique.¹⁶⁶ To admit that perceptions have just as much influence on a story as facts, would be to admit that every story contains at least some trace of opinion, and therefore bias.

However, none of the aforementioned issues are purely the fault of journalists alone. Perception and personal beliefs do not have to come from the journalists. In her writing, Bula addresses an ages-old problem that journalists to this day continue to face, even more so now than before: a lack of time and proper resources.¹⁶⁷ These two issues,

¹⁶³ Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

¹⁶⁴ Hume, Phone Interview.

¹⁶⁵ Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

¹⁶⁶ Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

¹⁶⁷ Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

combined with an over-reliance on other people's thoughts and opinions and presenting them as straight facts, as well as the questionable practice of assigning stories "complete with a preconceived angle," the need to find people who can provide quotes to validate that angle, all make it very hard for reporting to be truly objective and unbiased.¹⁶⁸ In this particular case, should a journalist complete a story in this manner, it would be a clear example of bias in the sense that it would be presenting inclinations or prejudices that are clearly for or against a person, group, thing or place. Even the habit of "attribution," to clearly and concisely display that certain things said are the opinions and views of the people being interviewed and not the journalist, does not remove bias. By attributing quotes to person who provided them, it distinguishes the quote as being the opinion or perspective of the person in question, not the journalist. Therefore, this would be an example of a slant or bias that occurs independent of the journalist's own personal opinions, and because of the very nature of the source of information. This is not something that is limited to print publications. In broadcast journalism, there is the concept of the "mind movie," which is a general idea of how the story should go, slowly and gradually coming together in the journalist's own head. Therefore, before the first word is written, the first audio clip recorded or the first few seconds of B-roll footage is shot, a journalist usually already has a fairly well-thought out idea of how the story will be told. Then it becomes a matter of gathering the voices and elements to push that story forward.

¹⁶⁸ Bula, "A NEWSPAPER DEBATES."

The Parachute

In my first semester at Carleton University, I encountered a term I had never seen or heard of prior, “parachute journalism.” After more research, I learned that the term is used to describe the act of placing a journalist into an environment that they have little knowledge of and experience with in order to report on a story. Though no dictionary definition of the term exists, online sources such as *Wikipedia* say that the practice of parachute journalism – owing largely in part to a reporter’s lack of knowledge and tight deadlines – often results in coverage that is inaccurate and distorted, with further criticism saying that stories completed with this method “turn into one-dimensional ‘parachute pieces’ that capture only the most popular or newsworthy clichés.”¹⁶⁹ However, even parachute pieces can give news consumers a great sense of the intricacies of a particular place, and “offer insight into a place readers aren't familiar with, a thoughtful examination that tells us what's interesting and what's worth noting about a community,” if they were done well.¹⁷⁰ In the year 1995, in the United States, following the arrest of domestic terrorist Timothy McVeigh, “hordes of reporters” descended on the small town of Junction City, Kansas, after federal authorities determined the town as the place where McVeigh rented the truck that carried the explosives to Oklahoma City,¹⁷¹ an attack that took the lives of 168 people and injured almost 700 more. Among those journalists were Los Angeles Times reporters Louis Sahagun and Stephen Braun, who had described the town as “a dreary Army town that ‘sits snug like a fattened leech up against [Fort] Riley...drawing economic lifeblood’ from the military compound.”¹⁷² In

¹⁶⁹ Sharyn Wizda, “Parachute Journalism.” *American Journalism Review* (1997), 19:6, pg. 42.

¹⁷⁰ Wizda, “Parachute Journalism,” pg. 42.

¹⁷¹ Wizda, “Parachute Journalism,” pg. 42.

¹⁷² Wizda, “Parachute Journalism,” pg. 42.

response to this description, David Bossemeyer, then the executive director of the Junction City, Kansas/Geary County Economic Development Commission, said: “They were going for some kind of sensationalism. Being a military town, we do have taverns, we do have check-cashing places. Some of them sought out the most unsavory places in town, so naturally they ended up with that kind of story.”¹⁷³ Braun was the primary author of the piece, and his use of the phrase “fattened leech” inspired other newspapers to pick it up, including the *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver, which used the phrase to set up coverage of McVeigh’s trial.”¹⁷⁴ The danger of this sort of journalistic practice, and the parachute pieces that it produces, is that the reporters tend to highlight certain details – that may be to a certain degree accurate – that do not truly represent the nuances of a town or community, “or, worse, give the wrong impression.”¹⁷⁵ To this point, Howard Kurtz, who covered media for *The Washington Post*, said: “Especially when it’s done as a quick-hit, you are trying to shoehorn a whole community, with all its complexity, into some preconceived storyline. You do the story in one day, you end up with pretty predictable fare.”¹⁷⁶ Kurtz also remarked that such pieces also suffer due to a reporter’s tendency to edit out certain quotes that do not necessarily fit with the wider narrative.¹⁷⁷ In a similar vein, Tim Jones of the *Chicago Tribune* says that, more often than not, reporters only have a day’s worth of time to complete a story and, when dealing with tight deadlines, that can often lead to stories that are largely impressionistic, and contain inaccuracies.¹⁷⁸ Other times, even with the proper amount of time to complete a story,

¹⁷³ Wizda, “Parachute Journalism,” pg. 42.

¹⁷⁴ Wizda, “Parachute Journalism,” pg. 42.

¹⁷⁵ Wizda, “Parachute Journalism,” pg. 44.

¹⁷⁶ Wizda, “Parachute Journalism,” pg. 44.

¹⁷⁷ Wizda, “Parachute Journalism,” pg. 43.

¹⁷⁸ Wizda, “Parachute Journalism,” pg. 44.

reporters are often accused of not having the “empathy and understanding” needed to produce a thoughtful profile.¹⁷⁹ The reporting on Junction City in 1995 made it clear that journalists often do suffer from a lack of proper understanding of a given place or community, often because they have never spent any amount of meaningful time in those places or communities. As a result, they gravitate towards aspects that they consider strange, and may also be strange to readers and audiences unfamiliar with the place. The motivation behind it is to find something that is eye-catching, that they know will get people’s attention, because the “impetus to keep a good story going is often what spurs such pieces,” according to the *Philadelphia Inquirer’s* Stephen Seplow, adding: “There is a danger of coming to broad conclusions from two hours walking around a neighborhood. It’s a good idea not to rush in and come to some stereotypical conclusion so you can fill 15 inches on the jump page.”¹⁸⁰

The issues of parachute journalism are not just limited to small town America. In 2006, when open fighting began between Israel and Hezbollah, news organizations around the world rushed to send correspondents to Beirut to cover the conflict.¹⁸¹ At the start of the conflict, *Newsday’s* Middle East bureau chief Mohamad Bazzi was in his Beirut apartment, and in an interview, he said he only knew Anthony Shadid of the *Washington Post* was in Beirut for sure, as the correspondents for *CNN* and *NBC* were on vacation and on assignment in Gaza respectively.¹⁸² As the violence escalated, correspondents for various agencies were redeployed from places as far away from Lebanon as China and Africa, as well as India; “an overtaxed foreign press corps, thinned

¹⁷⁹ Wizda, “Parachute Journalism,” pg. 44.

¹⁸⁰ Wizda, “Parachute Journalism,” pg. 43.

¹⁸¹ Sherry Ricchiardi, “The Limits of the Parachute.” *American Journalism Review* (2006), 28:5, pg. 42.

¹⁸² Ricchiardi, “The Limits,” pg. 41.

to the bone by two decades of budget cuts and staff reductions and exhausted by years of dangerous duty in Iraq,” was called in to assist the small group of correspondents already on the ground.¹⁸³ *ABC News*’ David Wright was sent from London, and the *Washington Post* sent Beijing Bureau chief Edward Cody to Beirut.¹⁸⁴ While the newly arrived correspondents were getting their bearings, Bazzi was already at work, touching base with contacts in the Lebanese government as well as local media, all the while monitoring Lebanese news and television.¹⁸⁵ For the July 16, 2006 edition of *Newsday*, Bazzi wrote a story about how Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, had basically seized control of the country, after having read all of Nasrallah’s speeches.¹⁸⁶ On the story that he wrote, Bazzi said: “Those are the kinds of quick interpretative stories that you can write if you’ve been covering a region for years. Someone who parachutes in might not have this context in mind. They might not see how Nasrallah changed his terminology or demeanor.”¹⁸⁷ *Newsday* Foreign Editor Roy Gutman echoed Bazzi’s sentiment, saying: “This is a case of a living, breathing correspondent who watches everything and knows everything. He’s not duplicating anyone else. This is the moment when you need depth of knowledge, not only about what’s happening on the surface, but what underlies the conflict. You don’t get it by dropping in.”¹⁸⁸

Though Metro Vancouver is hardly a small town in Kansas, and the issue of foreign buyers is certainly not an all-out war with possible global ramifications, the criticisms of parachute journalism applied to the cases of Junction City and the 2006

¹⁸³ Ricchiardi, “The Limits,” pg. 42.

¹⁸⁴ Ricchiardi, “The Limits,” pg. 42.

¹⁸⁵ Ricchiardi, “The Limits,” pg. 42.

¹⁸⁶ Ricchiardi, “The Limits,” pg. 42.

¹⁸⁷ Ricchiardi, “The Limits,” pg. 42.

¹⁸⁸ Ricchiardi, “The Limits,” pg. 42.

Israel-Hezbollah War still apply to the matter of foreign buyers. In the late 1980's and early 1990's, few, if any, of the reporters who were writing stories about the immigration from Hong Kong, and how it tied to the housing issue, were of Chinese descent. In my interview with him, Chow says that when he was first hired by *The Vancouver Sun* in 1973, he was the only ethnic Chinese reporter in the room,¹⁸⁹ and in 1989, was kept out of the decision-making process for a series of stories written from Hong Kong, despite him having family in the city and speaking Cantonese. Similarly, a reporter from the *Sun*, the late Moira Farrow, wrote a story based on the opinion of two student nurses at a hospital who believed that Hong Kong women made up the majority of non-resident mothers giving birth in local hospitals, a belief that was ultimately debunked in a study showing less than a quarter of all births to non-resident mothers were to women from Hong Kong.¹⁹⁰ There is also no evidence to suggest that any effort was made to try and build rapport with the Hong Kong community. It is unknown if Farrow was able to speak Cantonese, though Chow says she was someone he would quite frequently disagree with when they were colleagues at the *Sun*, including on the issue of Hong Kong.¹⁹¹ Similar to how the parachute pieces on Junction City were criticized for relying on clichés,¹⁹² Hume and *Sun* senior reporter Bill Boei questioned the nature of an assignment from an editor that they said asked them to find a Shaughnessy neighbourhood – Shaughnessy being one of the wealthier parts of the City of Vancouver – that had been “*Hongkongified*,” where heritage homes were being “being torn down and replaced with *feng shui* palaces.”¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Chow, Phone Interview.

¹⁹⁰ Bula, “Hospital baby stories.”

¹⁹¹ Chow, Phone Interview.

¹⁹² Wizda, “Parachute Journalism,” pg. 42.

¹⁹³ Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

Feng shui is a cultural practice originating in China which seeks to harmonize an individual with their surroundings, and the term is often stereotypically associated with people of ethnic Chinese origins. “That language used in that assignment was culturally insensitive at best, and at worst, I think, could be described as verging on racist. Whatever it was, it was certainly loaded, and I voiced my concerns at that time,” Hume said during our interview.¹⁹⁴ When I asked Hume if he remembered the headlines the stories using the phrase “*feng shui* palaces” were published under, if there were any published, he mentioned that the phrase was definitely “bandied about” in the newsroom, but he could not recall clearly if the terms were ever used in print. The language is more indicative of poor newsroom practices in dealing with issues tied to race, rather than any incident of insensitive language making to print. This particular aspect of the issue highlights the lack of understanding Chow mentioned, as an area that could have been improved upon to avoid inflaming racial tensions as Hume had explained.

A search through the archives yielded only one article that used the phrase, which was Frances Bula’s piece from 1989. However, I did come across one article from 1988 which ran under the headline “*An opulent ‘spec’ house that reflects Oriental life.*”¹⁹⁵ The article describes a “spec house” as a house that is built before a buyer is identified, and the belief is that it can sell for a price to cover its construction and still yield a profit.¹⁹⁶ In the article, the architect of the house, Kingsley Lo, says: “Oriental people are proud to live with their parents. They wouldn’t want parents to live in a second-class suite. The parents deserve respect,” which is why he added additional features to reflect that aspect

¹⁹⁴ Hume, Phone Interview.

¹⁹⁵ Vancouver Sun Staff, “An opulent ‘spec’ house that reflects Oriental life.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 10 Sept. 1988, pg. C.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

¹⁹⁶ “Opulent ‘spec’ house.”

of life in Asia.¹⁹⁷ Throughout the article, the use of the terms “the Orient” and “Oriental” are used quite freely, such as when the report was stating that the development company that started the project, CYS Developments Ltd., was deliberately marketing the house “in the Orient” and how the house had “Oriental influence,” with Lo mentioning that he applied principles of *feng shui* when he designed the house.¹⁹⁸ By current standards, the language used in the article is outdated at best, and loaded at worst. However, standards and ethics in newsrooms are not the same as they were over 30 years ago, and this might have been acceptable to an editor at *The Vancouver Sun* in 1988. However, I agree with Hume in saying that the language used was problematic, and efforts could have been made to remove offensive language.

The cases of Junction City and the 2006 conflict in Lebanon show the value of having someone who has a richer and more nuanced understanding of the places and the people in the communities being covered, and reporting on issues regarding those communities. *Newsday*’s Mohamad Bazzi is an Arabic speaker of Lebanese-American descent, who spent more than three years building his beat in Beirut,¹⁹⁹ and was able to produce stories on the escalating conflicts in Lebanon that other journalists simply could not.

In terms of coverage from more recent times, out of 160 articles that I examined for this thesis, only two were written by someone who is likely a fluent speaker of Mandarin Chinese, despite the prominence of Mainland Chinese buyers as a focus through all of the coverage. Both stories were published in *The Globe and Mail*, one from

¹⁹⁷ “Opulent ‘spec’ house.”

¹⁹⁸ “Opulent ‘spec’ house.”

¹⁹⁹ Ricchiardi, “The Limits,” pg. 42.

2017, the other from 2018, and were written by Xiao Xu. Her profile on the *Globe's* website says she speaks Mandarin Chinese, and spent some time as a journalist with *Fairchild*, Vancouver's local Chinese television and radio station. So, it stands to reason that she has a more nuanced understanding of the Chinese community in Vancouver, and likely has more of a connection to it than other journalists with other outlets. However, two out of 160 is not an encouraging figure, and the question remains if journalists such as Xu are not being utilized to the best of their capabilities in regards to underrepresented groups like the Chinese community. Of course, there are likely reporters who would protest to being assigned Chinese-related stories on the basis of being Chinese themselves, as nobody likes to be shoehorned into a role, but the importance lies in recognizing the value of assets. Language capabilities that other journalists do not possess can go a long way in generating more rounded coverage and establishing ties with underrepresented communities.

Though it may not have been malicious, past news coverage of housing and immigration in Vancouver carried some of the characteristics of parachute journalism, namely that reporters who – through research into news articles from the time, and interviews with former colleagues – do not give the sense that they have a good enough understanding of the places and communities they are covering, are being assigned to report on the issues within those communities. The result was the reporters themselves calling the stories they did “ethnocentric,” and expressing their fears that the stories would do little more than stoke existing tensions and the “undercurrent of racism” that was affecting British Columbia.²⁰⁰ Though the ethnocentrism is not as evident in more

²⁰⁰ Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES.”

recent coverage, the issue of parachuting reporters to do stories on matters they might not be familiar with is something that the journalism industry still needs to contend with. Bula, in our interview, admitted that there were stories she did on Mainland Chinese buyers that would have been impossible for her had she not had the assistance of a Mandarin-speaking journalism student, and all of the journalists I interviewed believed that the hiring of more Mandarin-speakers to newsroom positions would be a good method of addressing some of the lapses in coverage.

Concluding Thoughts

During my interview with reporter Christopher Cheung of *The Tyee*, he mentioned that he also does not think any of the bias or skewed points of view are the fault of the journalists. To that point, he also said some of which had been brought up in the criticism of parachute pieces, saying: “A lot of these pieces are written in the span of a day. So, if the reporter is calling up people who work in the real estate industry for analysis, they always say the same thing, but [the reporter] might not have an opportunity to fact check that. They’re just like, ‘Oh, great, I got the expert voice, I don’t need to include anyone else.’” The result, Cheung says, is that stories become reliant on the same “talking heads” offering up their own views on what is wrong with the housing situation without any real analysis.²⁰¹ It would then be hard to find a story that quotes a low-income individual, asking them about their experiences trying to find a place to live, or a foreign buyer about their struggles in their current environment. Think back to the two student nurses interviewed by a *Sun* reporter in 1994. They would have been the “experts” in their case, as they worked in the hospital and therefore would have a better

²⁰¹ Cheung, Phone Interview.

understanding of the “passport babies” issue than an outsider. Yet, just as how Cheung mentioned the lack of a real “human” point-of-view, there did not appear to be any effort or attempt made by the *Sun* to talk to a non-resident mother who arrived in Canada to give birth.

Editorial decisions in newsrooms are made to determine the nature of the coverage for a news day, but oftentimes, that becomes a situation where someone who has the power to make those decisions determines “this is how a story should be told” or “this is the story we should be telling.” As evidenced by the accounts given by Bula, this method of operation may have done more harm than good during the coverage of highly sensitive issues like housing and immigration. While such a decision-making structure helps streamline the reporting process and can generate coverage from angles never utilized before, it leaves too much of the story at the mercy of outside variables, such as the voices that are quoted. Mark Hume himself also spoke out against this sort of editorial practice, saying: “One of the concerns I had, one of the flags that was raised to me, was the lengthy assignment that was first provided to me where they described, ‘Find this block that’s been ‘*Hongkongified*.’” It was very lengthy, it was pages long. That, to me, is always a clear warning that the editors are deciding in advance what they want to hear. They’re telling you ‘get this story’ instead of asking you to find out what the story really is.”²⁰²

The debriefs on the news coverage of the past, and the coverage from 2013 to 2018 clearly show that foreign buyers are indeed a part of the problem, but the media practices used to cover this aspect of the housing crisis may have done more damage than

²⁰² Hume, Phone Interview.

good. The practice of “dropping” reporters into situations they are unfamiliar with has been shown to generate coverage that is shallow and not fully representative of all the complexities of an issue, especially one as contentious as housing and immigration. People rely on news media for information and a better understanding of the things they are not familiar with themselves. It is clear now, that oftentimes, journalists should probably gain a better understanding for themselves before they can try and do the same for audiences and news consumers.

Chapter 4: Finding Bias in Coverage

In conducting research into the news coverage of the housing and affordability crisis, I chose to use newspaper articles written and published from the beginning of 2013 to the end of 2018. The reason for this period was to capture the coverage from the time when the issue of foreign buyers started gaining more traction in public discourse in 2013, to the coverage generated in the aftermath of the introduction of regulations in an attempt to control the housing market in 2018. As covered in the previous chapter, this coverage was done for what could be described as Vancouver's second brush with foreign buyers following what occurred in the 1980's and 1990's. The majority of the articles examined came from *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Globe and Mail*, as well as the *Sun's* companion paper *The Province*. These three papers are the most prominent publications in the Greater Vancouver region, and have been highly diligent in their coverage of the crisis. Additionally, print media continues to provide the foundation upon which other journalism outlets operate, including television, radio and online outlets. The data sample utilized for the research also contains articles from other publications like *The Tyee*, *The Financial Post* and *Richmond News*, a local paper covering the Metro Vancouver suburb of Richmond. These papers have also done their own coverage of the housing crisis and provide alternative perspectives to the more well-known and widely read ones found in the *Sun* and *Province* and *The Globe and Mail*. However, I did exclude coverage done by the *South China Morning Post*, even though the publication did also provide very notable coverage. I will also contextualize the articles used in the research by bringing in the interviews with Christopher Cheung, Rob Shaw, and Frances Bula, as well as the journalist who requested anonymity, and Ian Young, the Vancouver correspondent for the aforementioned *South China Morning Post*. All five of these

journalists have been very engaged with the issue and since some of the articles examined were written by them, they will bring a unique look into reputable journalists' own views on how the crisis was covered.

In locating these articles through a search in a newspaper archive, I came up with a sample size of 160 newspaper articles, in addition to five interviews – seven if you count the interviews conducted with retired journalists Wyng Chow and Mark Hume, regarding the housing crisis of the 1980's and 1990's – and academic papers on Vancouver's unaffordability. The newspaper articles were located through a series of searches on the *Canadian Newsstream* archive, which initially yielded about 5500 results, and filtered down to exclude any entries that were blogs, podcasts or about areas outside of British Columbia, including some articles that were addressing issues in Vietnam, Mexico, the United States and other countries around the world. Afterwards, I added additional filters to exclude any opinion and editorial pieces.²⁰³ This is owing to the fact that editorials and opinion articles often present the writer's personal perspective on a particular issue within the news, and is not as firmly rooted in the act of delivering facts. However, the filters were not perfect and some editorials were left in the search, and a handful of articles were also discarded after having been found to be duplicates of other articles yielded by the search, but printed in different publications – this was mostly seen with articles that ran in both the *The Province* and *The Vancouver Sun* – with different headlines. Similarly, there were a few articles that were only about market figures, such as more industry-focused articles describing only the number of transactions conducted in a given month, but offered very little insight into the issues examined in this thesis.

²⁰³ See Appendix 1 for search terms

Ultimately, the number of articles examined over the course of research for this thesis amounts to a total of 160 articles.

On a first glance, there are very few articles to be examined in the years 2013 and 2014, which was not a discovery that caused any major surprise, as those were the years when the possibility that there might be an issue with housing in Vancouver first started appearing in news media. The number of articles increased to double digits in 2015, at 14 articles, before a very noticeable increase in 2016, and again in 2017, before dropping again in 2018. This follows several major developments in the progressive increases in the severity of housing crisis.

Table 1: Newspaper Articles by Year

“When I first started, people pretty much ignored the beat. It became a lot more exciting, it went from being sort of feeling like you're in a vacuum to being under a

tremendous spotlight, and suddenly the scene got very crowded and a lot more people were writing about it,” says the anonymous journalist, regarding when the housing crisis started getting more coverage in the news media.²⁰⁴ “It didn't happen instantly. Seven years ago is about right, that's when it became clear that there was something happening in the housing market, but it still took a couple more years to really get going.”²⁰⁵

Following the increase in media attention on this issue, 2015 was when evidence was starting to surface that foreign buyers may be having a significant influence on housing prices. 2016 was the year that the provincial government, then still under the leadership of Premier Christy Clark and her BC Liberal Party, introduced a foreign-buyers tax to be levied on any real estate transaction where the buyer was not a Canadian citizen or permanent resident. This came after instances in previous years, such as in 2015, when the province declined to take any action to regulate foreign buying on the basis that there was not enough evidence to suggest they were having any sort of influence at all.²⁰⁶ 2016 was also the year preceding a major provincial election, in which the Liberals hoped to stay in power whilst a resurgent New Democratic Party led by John Horgan sought to unseat them. 2017 was the election year itself, during which housing was a keystone issue for all major parties running in the election, and the instances of coverage increased. 2018, the year following the election, saw continued coverage as the province continued to deal with the aftereffects of a contentious election – in which the NDP took power by forming a coalition with the Green Party to create a small majority –

²⁰⁴ Anonymous Journalist, Phone Interview. 1 May 2020.

²⁰⁵ Anonymous, Phone Interview.

²⁰⁶ Reuters, “How skyrocketing Vancouver home prices are fueling anger towards foreign buyers.” *The Financial Post*, 9 July 2015. <https://business.financialpost.com/personal-finance/mortgages-real-estate/how-skyrocketing-vancouver-home-prices-are-fuelling-anger-towards-foreign-buyers>. Accessed 6 Nov. 2019.

and other changes that were made, including a five percent increase to the Liberals' foreign-buyers tax, increasing it from a 15 percent levy to 20 percent.

In engaging with the primary research utilized for this thesis, I used the *NVivo 12* software to code the articles, and for the process of coding, I created a list of specific things I was on the lookout for. These things include, but are not limited to, mentions of “foreign buyers,” mentions of “housing prices,” “Specific Mentions of Chinese,” and mentions of “real estate.” The practice of locating mentions of “housing prices” and “real estate” is a bit general, but this was more to make sure that the articles I was examining kept close to the real estate angle, which is the foundation of the crisis, and rising housing prices, which is what defined the crisis. For mentions of “real estate,” it registered 156 articles out of 160 specifically addressing the matter of real estate in one form or another, which tells me the body of research is most likely to be fairly reliable. For each of these terms, one part of my goal was to capture as many mentions of that term as possible. For example, every time the phrase “foreign buyers” would appear, it would be “coded” to a “node” – essentially a category or folder containing all the mentions of the term I was looking for – labelled as such, although this node also includes variations of the term like “international investor” or “offshore investor.” Out of the 160 articles that were examined, 139 articles contained at least one mention of the phrase “foreign buyers” or a variation of it. Since that is the aspect of the housing and affordability crisis in Vancouver I am most interested in, this particular node showed that I was on the right track, at least in terms of finding articles that addressed, at least to some degree, the issue of offshore buyers and their wealth possibly distorting the market. Similarly, this node was tied fairly closely to the node “Specific Mentions of Chinese” during my research. For this node, I

was looking to code the times the words “Chinese” and “China” were mentioned in each article, and the context within which they were mentioned. In examining mentions of “foreign buyers” and “China” or Chinese,” I noticed that there was some overlap in which they both appeared within the same code (meaning a specific mention or reference), though it was rare that happened. For example, one excerpt from an article published in 2016: “Resentment reached a fever pitch this week, when the province acted to put a check on investors by adding 15 per cent to the property transfer tax for buyers who are not citizens or permanent residents. At the same time, new data showed 10 per cent of sales in the Lower Mainland were to foreign buyers – most from China.”²⁰⁷

Additionally, out of 160 articles, only 36 made specific mentions of the “Chinese” or “China,” which calculates to 22.5 percent. However, despite making up less than a quarter of all the articles, there is still value to be gleaned from these pieces.

²⁰⁷ Bula, Frances. “Meet the wealthy immigrants at the centre of Vancouver’s housing debate.” *The Globe and Mail*, 30 July 2016. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/real-estate/vancouver/meet-the-wealthy-immigrants-at-the-centre-of-vancouvers-housingdebate/article31212036/>. Accessed 17 Nov. 2019.

Table 2: Specific Mentions of Chinese - Top 20 Articles

The chart above shows the 20 articles with the most references to Chinese people or China, out of 36, described in the vertical axis as “Number of coding references.” For the research into the newspaper articles, after I downloaded each of them, I marked them with their publication date at the beginning of the file name using a year/month/day format, so an article labelled “20150310” would have been published on March 10, 2015. Of the 20 articles with the most mentions of Chinese or China, only five were published after 2016. This indicates that there was a drop in the usage of the terms “China” and “Chinese” in the media coverage, towards the end of the period I had defined earlier, from which I obtained all the articles examined for this thesis.

Figure 1: Most Commonly Used Words ("Foreign Buyers" node)

The word cloud pictured above, generated using *NVivo*, shows some of the most frequently coded words within the node “Foreign Buyers” which I created to help guide my research. In terms of sheer frequency of occurrences, the term “foreign,” which is usually seen preceding the word “buyers,” was coded 378 times across 139 articles that made at least one mention of “foreign buyers” which were recorded in the node. However, this contrasts heavily with another term of interest. The term “Chinese” was only coded 58 times in the “Foreign Buyers” node, which contrasts heavily with an initial thought I had when I first undertook this project, that the majority of the coverage focused on explaining the issue of foreign buyers was disproportionately centered on Chinese buyers. The evidence as provided by the coding shows that was not necessarily the case, but this also does not account for the possibility that perhaps the terms “foreign” and “Chinese” were used interchangeably, and there is the possibility that any mention of “foreign buyers” is in fact a veiled reference to wealthy Chinese buyers. Over the course

of interviewing for this thesis, each of my interview subjects agreed that there was an overemphasis on the ethnicity of the buyers in the coverage, as well as a conflation between the issue of affordability and the issue of immigration. For example, Rob Shaw, legislative reporter for *The Vancouver Sun*, reflected on the term “foreign buyers” by saying: “At some point, writing ‘foreign buyers’ is a shorthand way of writing ‘wealthy Chinese.’ I don’t know if ‘lazy’ is the right word, but words take on more meaning than just the word.”²⁰⁸ It was his way of saying that at a certain point, for some news consumers, words took on more connotative meanings; consumers started interpreting the words to mean something different, besides what the word typically means. However, as these articles were not written by me, nor would I be able to speak with every journalist in Vancouver who had written an article on foreign buyers, I have no method to determine whether or not the terms really were substituted for each other, or find any trace of bias in the conventional sense – a prejudice against a person or group – at least not by only looking at the articles by themselves.

In contrast, the term “Chinese” was coded 83 times over 36 articles in the node “Specific Mentions of Chinese.” This is natural, as this node was made to code any mention of the terms “China,” “Chinese” or even “Hong Kong.” However, in a similar fashion to the previously mentioned “Foreign Buyers” node, the term “foreign” was coded only 25 times. While this also does not mitigate the possibility that the two terms were used interchangeably, there is less evidence to suggest that the coverage was disproportionately focused on Chinese buyers. This node shows that very few, just 22.5

²⁰⁸ Rob Shaw, Phone Interview. 4 Oct. 2019.

percent, of the articles examined over the course of the research project made even a passing mention of people of Chinese descent.

Based purely on numbers, there is nothing in this particular data to suggest that Chinese buyers were unfairly targeted by the media and scapegoated as the cause for Vancouver's housing woes. My theory was that the coverage surrounding foreign buyers was mostly focused on the Chinese buyers and inflating the influence they were having on the housing market. Similar to Shaw, the journalist who wished to remain anonymous also mentioned their own discomfort with the focus on the race aspect of this issue, saying: "I have seen coverage that makes me cringe. I'll be honest – I won't name names – there's definitely been coverage that has made me think 'okay, you're focusing way too much on race in this coverage.' I remember in the early days [of the crisis] there was this one guy on-camera who was overtly racist, and when it comes to those voices, you have to shut them down really quickly."²⁰⁹ I would venture, however, to argue that even though Chinese buyers did not dominate the coverage as I initially thought, the way in which they were covered ultimately contributed to an inflated sense of just how prominent they actually were in the news coverage, as well as how much impact they were having on rising housing costs in the Greater Vancouver area. Looking again at the articles in a more quantitative way, the articles making specific mention of Chinese buyers gradually declined over 2017 and 2018. The one article that made mention of Chinese buyers in 2013 was actually focused on debunking the "myth" of foreign buyers,

²⁰⁹ Anonymous, Phone Interview.

and quoted a real estate agent who said that very few of his clients are from out of country, and the ones who are, are usually searching for a better life for their children.²¹⁰

If we want to look at years in which the number of articles making mentions of Chinese buyers increases, then we would begin in 2015. Of the articles examined for the research, nine from 2015, 11 from 2016, and eight from 2017, as well as just four from 2018, were observed to have made at least one mention of non-citizen buyers from China being involved in real estate transactions. While the numbers by themselves are not remarkable, they are when put into context with the other articles from their year. For this thesis, a total of 14 articles from 2015 were examined, plus 25 from 2016, 67 from 2017 and 46 from 2018. Therefore, roughly 64 percent of articles from 2015, 44 percent from 2016, about 12 percent from 2017, and about 8.6 percent of articles from 2018, made specific mentions of Chinese buyers. As a result, these numbers confirm my initial thoughts on the general trend of coverage of Chinese buyers over the course of the five or six years of the crisis that I am the most interested in: there were mutterings of the issue in 2013 and 2014, the first evidence starts to arise in 2015, and along with 2016, it becomes one of the years where it really peaks before slowly starting to fade in the midst of several changes made to control the housing crisis in 2017, and largely disappearing from public discourse in 2018.

After tracking the ups and downs of the coverage through the time period of interest, it became clear that to study the effects of how media coverage of the Chinese buyers influenced the housing market, 2015 and 2016 were most likely to be the years of

²¹⁰ Andrea Woo, "Scant evidence behind myth of Vancouver real estate's foreign buyers." *The Globe and Mail*, 23 Feb. 2013. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/scant-evidence-behind-myth-of-vancouver-real-estates-foreign-buyers/article9000860/>. Accessed 2 Dec. 2019.

interest. This also was the route that made the most sense, as 2016 was, as previously mentioned, the year where one of the most momentous changes to provincial governance in British Columbia took place: the foreign-buyers tax levied on all residential real estate transactions so long as the buyer was not a Canadian citizen or permanent resident. When combining the two years together, the rate at which articles mention Chinese buyers averages to about 51 percent. By taking a look at both 2015 and 2016 together, now more than half the articles address Chinese buyers at least once.

The first article from 2015 to make a reference to Chinese buyers, specifically from Mainland China, mentions that many of Vancouver's most expensive real estate had been purchased by Chinese buyers, including a \$51.8 million mansion sitting on three lots.²¹¹ The house was sold to a well-known Mainland Chinese businessman named Mailin Chen, who had also bought and sold several other multi-million dollar houses in Vancouver in the past, and he is not alone.²¹² An agent from Royal Pacific Realty estimated that about 75 percent of all houses in the 4-million-dollar-and-above market were sold to people who had "ties to Mainland Chinese money."²¹³ Similarly in 2016, economists made an estimate that roughly one-third of all real estate purchases went to buyers who originated from mainland China.²¹⁴ The reporting in articles such as these provide the sense that there are extremely wealthy Chinese buyers entering the Vancouver housing market with millions of dollars in capital that they had obtained overseas in order to buy property. Therefore, it would be easy for readers to come to the

²¹¹ Joanne Lee-Young, "Priciest Metro homes lure cash from China; Falling dollar makes Vancouver mansions a bargain in yuan." *The Vancouver Sun*, 10 Mar. 2015, p. A.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

²¹² Lee-Young, "Priciest Metro homes."

²¹³ Lee-Young, "Priciest Metro homes."

²¹⁴ Tamsin McMahon, "Study to fuel debate on foreign buyers." *The Globe and Mail*, 24 Mar. 2016, p. B.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

conclusion that it was foreign buyers, particularly those from China, who were driving up real estate prices. However, the problem with the information being reported on by the media at the time was its reliability. In a few different instances that were recorded during the coding for this specific node, there were acknowledgments from people familiar with the nuances of the real estate industry, including Dan Scarrow, the vice president of corporate strategy at Macdonald Realty, who were saying that any information pertaining to the presence and influence was largely anecdotal.²¹⁵ However, Scarrow also set himself apart by saying the anecdotal evidence he had heard was enough to convince him and his company that it would be worthwhile to open an office in Shanghai.²¹⁶ As unreliable as personal accounts of offshore investment driven by buyers from China tend to be, as all anecdotal accounts are, they are not a sign that foreign buying is not happening at all. This is where the bias within the media coverage can set in. Anecdotal accounts are, by their definition, often personal accounts of real incidents and people, they are influenced by the teller's own perceptions and experiences, and as a result, become susceptible to overgeneralizing. Realtors can say that they are seeing more and more customers who appear to be of Chinese descent and who have surnames typical of Mainland China, but what they are leaving out, assuming they had even thought to ask, is whether these people are non-citizens, permanent residents or Canadians. Having a Chinese surname does not remove the possibility that they may be Canadian citizens. However, it should also be noted that realtors, like Scarrow, stand to gain from the presence of foreign money in Vancouver's real estate market. Expensive transactions

²¹⁵ Brent Jang, "B.C. firm looks for luxury buyers in China." *The Globe and Mail*, 20 Jan. 2014, p. B.3. *Canadian Newsstream*.

²¹⁶ Jang, "B.C. firm."

translate to bigger commissions for realtors, and would provide a motivator for attempts to shut down the conversations being had about foreign buyers. In my interview with the anonymous journalist, they explain that while foreign money was indeed a very big influence on the housing market, it was by no means the sole driver for the rising unaffordability. “They introduced a lot of money into the market, and a lot of local people were taking full advantage and got very wealthy off that. A lot of developers did. Local developers and realtors, and the whole system played a role,” they say.²¹⁷

Moreover, the issue of anecdotal evidence is also very telling of a glaring flaw within the government, especially at the levels with the power to exercise control over the real estate market. Reliability aside, the sharing of anecdotal accounts of foreign buyers and their influence also highlights the reality that no level of government in Canada had ever done any meaningful tracking or data collection on foreign buyers. A search through the British Columbia government’s website for open data on housing shows that transactions involving foreign parties were not tracked until the summer of 2016, and any data from before that time simply does not exist. It is very hard to conduct truly informed and thorough reporting if there simply is not very much information that is readily available to be accessed and researched. I would venture to say that it was the coverage from the years 2015 and 2016 that skewed the perception of the issue of foreign buyers in Vancouver’s housing market. Apart from the fact that data from before 2016 was not tracked by the provincial government, I also noticed none of the data that is readily available contains any explicit information on the nationality of the buyers in what the provincial government calls “foreign-involved” transactions. Furthermore,

²¹⁷ Anonymous, Phone Interview.

correspondence with the media contacts within British Columbia's Ministry of Finance – the ministry in charge of tracking housing data – yielded no further results, as those contacts asserted that data tracking the nationality of foreign buyers also does not exist. This absence of official information led to a reliance on information that could be described as somewhat questionable, which in turn resulted in coverage that could be incomplete at best and skewed at worst. Since much of the information came from real estate agents or people who were familiar with the industry, there was a certain degree of legitimacy that was given to those anecdotal accounts. Real estate agents spend most of their time engaging with the housing market in one way or another, and they have expertise when it comes to understanding the workings of the industry. Since they are also frequently dealing with clients, it could be assumed that many people took their word as truth when the first whisperings of foreign buyers from China sweeping up high-value properties and distorting the market first appeared in the public discourse.

In regards to the public reaction surrounding the issue of foreign buyers, Frances Bula specifically attested to the public backlash against the people who were coming from Mainland China, which she called a repetition of sorts of the same backlash that immigrants from Hong Kong had faced decades prior.²¹⁸ On this, she says: “When the Hong Kong immigrants came, previous Hong Kong immigrants who came to Vancouver in the 60’s and 70’s defended this new group. They had spokespeople who defended them, whereas the Hong Kong people aren't really crazy about Mainlanders, as you know. They can be more negative about Mainlanders than any non-Chinese Canadian. And [the Mainlanders] weren't very plugged in locally, because they weren't really

²¹⁸ Frances Bula, Phone Interview. 11 Oct. 2019.

working; a lot of them were coming here with their money to get away from the pollution and the education system in Beijing, so they didn't have community contacts.”²¹⁹

However, Bula adds that the reaction to the arrival of immigrants from China was far more vitriolic compared to the reaction seen decades earlier. “At least with the Hong Kong people, it was seen that they were fleeing here to get away from ‘the evil communists,’ whereas the Mainlanders, there was a lot of suspicion that many of them did have attachments to the Communist Party. So, people's feelings about Mainland Chinese immigrants and real estate got wrapped up with their very negative perceptions of the Chinese Communist government,” she says.²²⁰ Bula also says that she saw much of the negative views on Mainland Chinese immigrants after a story she wrote in 2016.²²¹ This story, as she says, was an attempt to humanize the Chinese buyers, to really get an understanding of who was coming to Canada and what their reasons were.²²² Bula also reiterated the absence of people who were willing to speak out on behalf of this newest group of arrivals from China, other than an occasional figure with a real estate interest, which she says would immediately be dismissed as just an attempt to continue profiting off this community.²²³ This suggests that there was outrage directed at the newcomers from Mainland China unseen with other communities because some individuals were unable to disassociate their personal dislike of the government in China from the people who were arriving. Similarly, this level of outrage was not seen in the gentrification of certain neighbourhoods in Vancouver. Mark Brand, a restaurateur and entrepreneur, who

²¹⁹ Bula, Phone Interview.

²²⁰ Bula, Phone Interview.

²²¹ Frances Bula, “Meet the wealthy immigrants at the centre of Vancouver’s housing debate.” *The Globe and Mail*, 30 July 2016. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/real-estate/vancouver/meet-the-wealthy-immigrants-at-the-centre-of-vancouver-housingdebate/article31212036/>. Accessed 17 Nov. 2019.

²²² Bula, Phone Interview.

²²³ Bula, Phone Interview.

owns several businesses including in the traditionally working class East Vancouver, has been referred to as the “poster child of gentrification” in a 2013 article from *Maclean’s* magazine.²²⁴ Brand, who is not Chinese, was reported as being the target of a concerted effort to drive him out of the neighbourhood, and other high-end eateries in the area, such as Famoso – which is run by “Alberta expats” – had been vandalized.²²⁵ The article referred to the people trying to drive him out as a “violent city anarchist group” and “anti-gentrification thugs,” and the co-owner of Famoso, Trevor Stride, was being sent flowers.²²⁶ There were no accusations that they were destroying the character of the neighbourhood, or destroying the Vancouver way of life, which was something that immigrants, including those from Hong Kong in the 1980’s and 1990’s, had been singled out for.²²⁷ If anything, this article tries to portray gentrification, which is often followed by rising costs of housing, as a good thing. It should also be noted that East Vancouver has traditionally been a very diverse neighbourhood, home to many non-white residents, but has been increasingly less diverse in recent years, partly due to gentrification.²²⁸ Census data indicated that the “non-visible-minority population” grew around as much as 30 percent in certain areas of Mount Pleasant, an East Vancouver neighbourhood.²²⁹ Yet also in this instance, the reaction to this phenomenon has not been same as the reaction to newcomers from China.

²²⁴ Maclean’s, “The gentrification war in East Vancouver.” *Maclean’s*, 2 Apr. 2013.

<https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/violent-protesters-go-off-menu/>. Accessed 26 Jun. 2020.

²²⁵ “The gentrification war.”

²²⁶ “The gentrification war.”

²²⁷ Frances Bula, “A NEWSPAPER DEBATES ITS OWN ETHICS: HONG KONG: THE STORY BEHIND THE SUN STORY.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 8 July 1989, p. B.5. *Canadian Newsstream*.

²²⁸ Roshini Nair and Tara Carman, “East Vancouver becoming less diverse, census shows.” *CBC*, 28 Oct. 2017. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/east-vancouver-becoming-less-diverse-census-shows-1.4373858>. Accessed 26 Jun. 2020.

²²⁹ Nair and Carman, “Becoming less diverse, census shows.”

The disconnect between the local community and the new arrivals is evident in Bula's comments, and if they are true, then this lack of understanding between different communities does contribute to an environment of distrust. What struck me was Bula's reference to people's dislike of the new immigrants from China being connected to their own biases and perceptions of what the culture is like in China. What is it about the media coverage that causes people to think of China in such a way? There is evidence to suggest that economic criminals have been taking shelter in Vancouver and using real estate as a means of hiding their money, such as an article published in *The Province* in 2015 that reported on how it appeared Canadian authorities were increasing their cooperation with China on 'Operation Fox Hunt' and 'SkyNet,' the Chinese government's initiatives to crack down on people suspected of political corruption, including suspects believed to have fled to Canada.²³⁰ It is not possible that all of the new immigrants from China fall into this category. In all the articles examined, from 2013 to 2018, there were none that stood out as painting Chinese buyers as being white-collar criminals who were looking for a way to escape justice in their country of origin. However, there were also few articles that portrayed them in a way that could be considered 'favourable.' Bula's piece spotlighting members of the Chinese community is one out of 160 articles that have largely covered the issue of foreign buyers, a lot of whom are Chinese, as being the cause of Vancouver's housing woes. Take for example, the aforementioned article from *The Province*. Therefore, it is understandable that an article which presents a more contrary stance of that nature is met with a certain degree of incredulity. Media does have the ability to influence the way a news consumer views and

²³⁰ Sam Cooper, "Money launderers snap up local real estate; China Connection." *The Province*, 4 Aug. 2015, p. A.8. *Canadian Newsstream*.

interacts with the world around them, but there is also the issue of the human mind.

Articles like the one from *The Province* create biases within readers. The article is about money laundering being done through Vancouver, and has some details about how there is a joint effort between Canadian and Chinese authorities to track down suspects. This can potentially create, albeit unintentionally, this idea that wealthy buyers from China are all economic criminals, and from there, all the other negative connotations that comes with being “Chinese” start to surface as well. However, this is not meant to be a criticism of the way the story was reported on. In truth, the article was written in a way that is quite objective, but different people interpret media messages differently, and that is simply a factor that is out of the control of any journalist. Upon closer examination of this *Province* article in question, one would find that though the information was presented in a straightforward and largely objective way, the overall tone of the article does create a sense of urgency. The article is titled “*Money launderers snap up local real estate; China Connection*,” and presents compelling evidence that foreign money is to blame.²³¹ “A lot of the illicit money coming into Canada from Chinese citizens is laundered through real estate in Vancouver,” according Hayley Labbe, a senior forensic investigator with, MNP LLP, an accounting and consulting firm.²³² Furthermore, Kim Marsh, a fraud investigations executive, said that, at the time, he was working on a case involving a man who had left China with \$450 million in “corruption money” and had been laundering it in Vancouver for years.²³³ “This guy is just one of many,” Marsh said. “The evidence is mounting of a lot of grey money coming into Vancouver’s real estate market from China.

²³¹ Sam Cooper, “Money launderers snap up local real estate; China Connection.” *The Province*, 4 Aug. 2015, pg. A.8. *Canadian Newsstream*.

²³² Cooper, “Money launderers.”

²³³ Cooper, “Money launderers.”

So, we have some serious issues in Vancouver and we need more deterrents.”²³⁴ This is due the fact that even though the Chinese government forbids taking more than \$50,000 Canadian out of the country a year, the fines paid in Canada for undeclared assets is quite low.²³⁵ The report says that an unidentified Mainland Chinese man was caught with \$177,500 hidden in the lining of his suitcase, his clothing and wallet at Vancouver International Airport, and any cash over \$10,000 must be declared to customs when entering the country.²³⁶ However, after telling customs he wished to buy a house, or maybe a car with the money, he was allowed to leave with all of his money, minus a \$2,500 fine.²³⁷ By the time this *Province* article was published, some \$17.4 million had been seized from Chinese nationals in 976 seizures, making them the second highest nationality involved in seizures based on monetary value, after Canadians.²³⁸ The article says Canadian border officials “almost always” return the money after a fine, and according to the article, much of it does end up in Vancouver’s real estate market.²³⁹ One realtor who went unnamed says: “The people buying these multimillion-dollar properties here in Greater Vancouver don’t care what the asking price is. Some are corrupt government officials and insiders, and all they want to do is get the money out of China and use Vancouver to launder the money.”²⁴⁰ Though the article points out that this money is coming from China, which is an appropriate action to take given the laws, Canadian and Chinese, that are at play, the pointed mention of the connection between money launderers and China in the headline, and the mention of possible corrupt

²³⁴ Cooper, “Money launderers.”

²³⁵ Cooper, “Money launderers.”

²³⁶ Cooper, “Money launderers.”

²³⁷ Cooper, “Money launderers.”

²³⁸ Cooper, “Money launderers.”

²³⁹ Cooper, “Money launderers.”

²⁴⁰ Cooper, “Money launderers.”

government officials in the body of the article casts a very negative light on the racial aspect of the housing issue. It creates the impression that foreign buying, especially when it involves people of Chinese descent, is heavily linked to criminal activity.

However, it was Ian Young of the *South China Morning Post* that mentioned it is coverage like this that takes attention away from the core of the issue, which is that large amounts of foreign money is making its way into the housing market. “The foreignness of the buyer doesn't matter anywhere near so much as the foreignness of their money. From an economic and affordability point of view, it doesn't matter whether someone is from China, what matters is their money, if it was declared and earned here. If the money is coming from outside Canada, from outside the system, by definition, that's boosting unaffordability.”²⁴¹

The Great Millionaire Migration

The unaffordability of Vancouver's housing market can also be attributed to a system that encouraged foreign investing in local real estate. This is related to the immigrant investor program, which made it fairly easy for wealthy offshore buyers to come to Canada. “In Vancouver, it happened to be very highly focused on the real estate market because of Canada's historical tendency to take in large numbers of millionaire migrants a lot more than other places in the world. I don't think the broader community really understood that.”²⁴² Since the 1980s, Canadian governments at all levels encouraged and courted offshore investment, trade and migration from the Asia-Pacific region.²⁴³ During the 1980s, recessions as well as drops in OPEC oil prices resulted in

²⁴¹ Ian Young, Phone Interview. 8 May 2020.

²⁴² Young, Phone Interview.

²⁴³ Ley, David, “Global China and the making of Vancouver's residential property market.” *International Journal of Housing Policy* (2017), 17:1, pg. 15.

increasing national debt and unemployment rates averaging around 9 percent through the entire decade, which led not only to the national economy shrinking 3 percent in 1982, but also the abandonment of a federal social housing program which was never brought back.²⁴⁴ The recessions were particularly hard on British Columbia, which experienced a housing bubble burst and a 40 percent deflation of housing prices and a resource-centred regional economy shrinking by 8 percent in 1982.²⁴⁵ In his article “*Global China and the making of Vancouver’s residential property market*,” University of British Columbia geography professor David Ley, one of western Canada’s leading experts on “millionaire migration,” writes that in an attempt to revitalize the struggling economy, all three levels of government undertook several trade missions to Asian countries like Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, in order to establish trans-Pacific trade ties, in addition to publicizing Vancouver’s hosting of *Expo 86*.²⁴⁶ Following the end of the six-month world fair, the British Columbia government sold off the 82-hectare site where the event was hosted to a joint submission by three of Hong Kong’s largest development companies led by Li Ka-shing, at the time, the richest man in Hong Kong.²⁴⁷ This, Ley writes, was what opened the door for increasing investment in Vancouver real estate from Hong Kong, for “where the big fish swim, the smaller fish follow.”²⁴⁸ The Canadian government facilitated this increasing investment through the “business immigration programme” (BIP) in which there were two streams, the entrepreneurial stream and the investor stream.²⁴⁹ While the entrepreneurial stream was in some ways a variation of the skilled workers stream

²⁴⁴ Ley, “Global China,” pg. 17.

²⁴⁵ Ley, “Global China,” pg. 17.

²⁴⁶ Ley, “Global China,” pg. 18.

²⁴⁷ Ley, “Global China,” pg. 18.

²⁴⁸ Ley, “Global China,” pg. 18.

²⁴⁹ Ley, “Global China,” pg. 19.

method of immigration, requiring people with the financial capital and business skills to set up a company in Canada and employ at least one Canadian, the investor stream was not as stringent.²⁵⁰ Established in 1986, it was the investor stream that allowed the BIP to turn into the preferred method for bringing wealthy individuals into Canada from the Greater China region (which contains Taiwan, Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China), many of whom invested in real estate.²⁵¹ From 1986 to 2001, some 330,000 wealthy offshore investors arrived in Canada through the BIP, and while the entrepreneurial stream was initially the most popular, it was in 2001 that the investor stream became the most popular.²⁵²

While entrepreneurs were required to start businesses and had their progress monitored by immigration officials, investors were much more passive and only required to contribute a larger sum of money (as much as \$800,000), which would then be returned interest-free after five years.²⁵³ From 1986 to 2008, as Ley writes, British Columbia – in essence, Vancouver – was the most popular destination for these wealthy newcomers, with 49 percent of all landings arriving in the province.²⁵⁴ Though Ley offers no explanation for why Vancouver was such a popular destination, one could create a link to not just the proximity to the Asia-Pacific region, but also because of the sale of the *Expo 86* lands, and innovations on the part of the real estate industry in Vancouver.

Chinese-Canadian real estate companies, often started by immigrants who were part of the early cohort to arrive in Vancouver via the BIP and became wealthy through

²⁵⁰ Ley, "Global China," pg. 19.

²⁵¹ Ley, "Global China," pg. 19.

²⁵² Ley, "Global China," pg. 20.

²⁵³ Ley, "Global China," pg. 20.

²⁵⁴ Ley, "Global China," pg. 20.

real estate investment, established property-selling networks between Vancouver and principal cities in Asia like Hong Kong, Seoul, South Korea, Taipei, and later on, Shanghai and Beijing.²⁵⁵ These companies would often engage in pre-build sales, where a unit is marketed based on floor plans before construction even begins, and by specifically marketing Vancouver properties overseas.²⁵⁶ Several companies became very wealthy off this sort of practice, including Royal Pacific realty, founded by realtor David Choi, who began his career selling Vancouver properties in East Asia, and his company sold an estimated \$10 billion worth of real estate in 2014 alone.²⁵⁷

As a result of these practices, East Asian investors continue to have a presence in Vancouver's housing market, especially in the higher end market.²⁵⁸ In 1971, only 30,000 ethnic Chinese residents lived in the Greater Vancouver region, but by the time Ley's article was published, over 400,000 called the city home, including "tens of thousands of business immigrants."²⁵⁹ In the 1990s, the majority of such immigrants were from Hong Kong, but they have since been overtaken by those from Mainland China.²⁶⁰ Despite their overall high economic standing owing to their higher level of access to capital, tax data shows that this group of migrants declare income "lower than any other visa category, including refugees."²⁶¹

As Ley writes in his paper, "it is offshore capital that continues to drive the top end of Vancouver's market even though buyers may be temporary or permanent residents

²⁵⁵ Ley, "Global China," pg. 23.

²⁵⁶ Ley, "Global China," pg. 23.

²⁵⁷ Ley, "Global China," pg. 24.

²⁵⁸ Ley, "Global China," pg. 25.

²⁵⁹ Ley, "Global China," pg. 25.

²⁶⁰ Ley, "Global China," pg. 20.

²⁶¹ Ley, "Global China," pg. 25.

of Canada.”²⁶² This is exactly what Young told me in my interview with him. This was money that was not being earned, declared or taxed, in Canada, and it was the presence of vast sums of offshore money that led to unaffordability, because local incomes simply could not compete with these foreign millions.²⁶³ From 1977 to 2006, median family incomes in Vancouver peaked in 1980 at \$61,800 before dropping to \$54,900 by 2006, based on 2015 inflation rates, and during that same period, housing prices in Vancouver nearly doubled.²⁶⁴ Furthermore, the 2011 Household Study ranked individual incomes in the 10 largest Canadian cities, and Vancouver came in dead last, residents aged 25 to 55 with bachelor’s degrees made incomes just 65 percent of what similarly qualified people made in first place Toronto.²⁶⁵ In addition to this, from 2001 to 2014, average wages in Vancouver grew only 36 percent compared to an overall housing price increase across the City of Vancouver of 211 percent, and a 63 percent increase across the Metro Vancouver region, over the same period.²⁶⁶

“If you measure on affordability as the ratio between prices and local incomes – which is the way that affordability is measured – that’s how you work out whether or not the city is affordable. How much do people earn here versus how much do they pay for their homes here?” Young says during our interview.²⁶⁷ The Royal Bank of Canada Housing Price Index (HPI) computes how much of a typical household’s pre-tax income would go towards covering the cost of buying a house, and in the first quarter of 2015, the HPI calculated that a Vancouverite could spend as much as 86 percent of their gross

²⁶² Ley, “Global China,” pg. 26.

²⁶³ Young, Phone Interview.

²⁶⁴ Ley, “Global China,” pg. 26.

²⁶⁵ Ley, “Global China,” pg. 26.

²⁶⁶ Ley, “Global China,” pg. 26.

²⁶⁷ Young, Phone Interview.

income to buy a typical house in Vancouver.²⁶⁸ This number is based on a figures released by the Royal Bank of Canada in June 2015 in a report called “*Housing Trends and Affordability*.” In essence, the report says a Vancouverite would need to spend 86 percent of their gross income to buy an average house in Vancouver based on a 25 percent down payment and other costs of home ownership, such as mortgage payments, utilities and property taxes.

This information shows that there clearly was an issue with foreign investment in the Vancouver housing market, though not in the way even I had initially believed. Although Ley makes several reference to buyers coming from Chinese-speaking regions of the world, this was used to clearly establish that foreign buyers were coming to invest in local markets because all levels of government were specifically courting them to do so. The ethnicity of these buyers, and where they come from ultimately have no bearing on the housing prices; not in the same way that their wealth did. In truth, the fact that these buyers happened to be ethnically Chinese is neither here nor there in the larger picture of the housing crisis. It was the presence of their money, and their eagerness to invest in real estate that made the market unaffordable for locals, as property ownership was seen as a “primary building block” for home life as well as investment portfolios for these buyers.²⁶⁹ Furthermore, it was the fact that their money came from overseas. It was not earned here, declared here or taxed in the same way a local income would be. Despite government regulations in China that limit the amount of money that can be brought out of the country to \$50,000 Canadian a year, there were wealthy individuals who possessed millions of dollars in capital earned overseas who were coming into the local Vancouver

²⁶⁸ Ley, “Global China,” pg. 26.

²⁶⁹ Ley, “Global China,” pg. 23.

market to invest. This is due to those long-established investment networks between local markets and Asian markets that allow proxies, such as a local resident or real estate professional, to be used as a stand in to buy property, including students at local universities.²⁷⁰ This, as the journalist who requested anonymity says, was at the root of the unaffordability crisis.²⁷¹ “The simple matter was that people's incomes were no longer attached to housing. There was a complete decoupling, and nobody could understand the reason for it,” they say. “And then, when it became clear that there was this new wealth flowing into the market, from outside the country, it made sense. Obviously, it wasn't just that wealth, it was also local speculation that was taking advantage of that.”²⁷² By “local speculation,” they were referring to the local real estate industry that had directly marketed to East Asian countries, and managed to profit tremendously from that practice.

Re-examining Possible Bias

In light of the research provided by David Ley, as well as information gathered from Ian Young and the anonymous journalist's interviews, I would venture to rethink my own theory on bias in the coverage of the housing crisis. Initially, I was convinced that there was bias towards the Chinese community as a result of offshore investments. However, considering the work of Ley, as well as the insights from Young and the anonymous journalist, I feel confident in saying that the coverage was not biased in the sense that it was intentionally done to be unfavourable to the Chinese community, but it retained semblances of bias because the focus was misplaced. The race and ethnicity of the buyers has been tied heavily to the issue of foreign buyers, so much so that it is hard

²⁷⁰ Ley, “Global China,” pg. 26.

²⁷¹ Anonymous, Phone Interview

²⁷² Anonymous, Phone Interview.

to talk about one without the other. However, as Young and the anonymous journalist have expressed in their interviews, it is not the ethnicity of the foreign buyers that is the issue, as much as the fact that they are wealthy. It was money that came from overseas that was being invested in local housing that was fueling the rising housing prices. In spite of this, 22.5 percent of the news coverage made specific references to Chinese buyers, with the majority of the articles being published in 2015 and 2016, the years where the crisis, and prices, peaked. The coverage I examined all had one thing in common, which is that they wrote about foreign buyers as being the problem, rather than the fact it was foreign capital being brought into the market. Take for example the article from *The Province* reporting on money launderers examined earlier in the chapter. It was overly focused on the Chinese aspect of money laundering, rather than getting into more detail about how illicit money made its way into Canada, except for one reference to Mainland Chinese money launderers hiring mules from Hong Kong to carry money for them.²⁷³ Even if such articles cannot be considered biased, it creates a perception within the public which informs how they interpret wider issues.

In our conversation, Cheung also alludes to this notion of the perceived causes of rising unaffordability. According to him, one can get a very good sense of where people's concerns and beliefs lay by seeing the interactions happening in the online comment sections of articles and on social media, saying: "You get politicians and experts all the time saying things like, 'Oh, there is no such thing as a magic bullet.' And yes, there is *no* magic bullet. There's only a good kit of tools that we can use, we have to attack the crisis from all different angles, but I still see whenever pieces come online, as people share

²⁷³ Cooper, "Money launderers."

them, as they're commented on, in the comment threads of the stories, or on Facebook, or on Twitter, people still really want the simplistic solution. And so you know, you'll get a very well written piece that explains policy, for example, but somebody might just be like, 'Oh no, I don't think so, I think it's this.'"²⁷⁴ In essence, Cheung is alluding to the idea that people want to think there is only one easily quantifiable cause for the housing issues people were facing, but the reality is that nothing is ever simple. However, it was this simplistic belief that led to the most prolific measure implemented by the government of British Columbia.

Rob Shaw, as the legislative reporter for *The Vancouver Sun*, was present when major policy changes, including the foreign buyer tax, were announced in the provincial legislature. In 2016, when the tax was first introduced, Shaw recalls hearing one of his colleagues in the press gallery musing out loud if the tax would become something the provincial government would apologize to the Chinese community for in the future, posing the question of whether or not the tax was racially motivated.²⁷⁵ In our conversation, Shaw confirms that the tax was indeed built on the foundation of race, saying: "The government launched into the foreign-buyers tax without any evidence, really, of anything other than people were upset, [because] they saw a lot of young Asian people driving very expensive sports cars around Downtown Vancouver and living in extravagant mansions, and they wanted those people to be penalized for some reason. I remember there being a certain level of discomfort in some way, because everyone assumed that the main nationality [they were] targeting is wealthy Chinese immigrants. Once the foreign-buyers tax came in, they started reporting some numbers back, and

²⁷⁴ Christopher Cheung, Phone Interview. 26 Sept. 2019.

²⁷⁵ Shaw, Phone Interview.

although the Chinese were the highest, there were a number of other groups that were represented in the foreign buyers-tax, that were also fairly high and I don't remember that getting very much coverage.”²⁷⁶

When I asked additional questions about the data, Shaw mentioned that within the nationalities of foreign buyers tracked by the government, he recalls Russian and Iranian were also fairly high on the list.²⁷⁷ As mentioned before, the Ministry of Finance’s media contacts insist this data tracking the nationalities of foreign buyers does not exist. I followed up with Shaw and asked him if he remember how he initially came across this data, and he says that when the figures first came out, they were broken down directly to journalists, though they are not readily available on the BC government’s webpage for official data, *DataBC*, but Shaw says he remembers Americans, Russians, South Koreans and people from the United Arab Emirates as also being featured quite prominently in the numbers of foreign buyers. Furthermore, direct requests I made to the government for this data have not been returned, and *DataBC* also declares on its webpage that it does not respond to Freedom of Information requests. In spite of this, I was later able to acquire the data Shaw had mentioned. It came as a news release from the British Columbia Ministry of Finance which tracked residential property transactions from June 10 to 29 in the year 2016. According to this data, 77.4 percent of all transactions that involved foreign nationals across the province occurred in Metro Vancouver. Of these transactions, 90 percent involved a Chinese citizen, followed by Korean and Taiwanese nationals, both at 1.9 percent. There is information that tells us that Canadian governments have been courting foreign investment since the 1980s, starting with the

²⁷⁶ Shaw, Phone Interview.

²⁷⁷ Shaw, Phone Interview.

Four Asian Tigers (Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea), Asian countries that saw their economies expand rapidly in that time period.²⁷⁸ There has also been an increase in investment from countries recently wealthy and growing countries like Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, collectively known as the BRICS nations.²⁷⁹ Each of these countries has contributed an increasing number of what are referred to as the new middle class (NMC), high-net-worth individuals (HNWI), ultra-high-net-worth individuals (UHNWI), and ultra-ultra-high-net-worth-individuals.²⁸⁰ The NMC is commonly associated with the BRICS nations, as the economic growth in those countries have lifted people out of poverty.²⁸¹ The HNWI are individuals who hold disposable assets worth at least \$1 million USD, UHNWI are those with at least \$30 million in disposable assets, and UHNWI as those with a minimum of \$50 million in assets.²⁸² Wealthy individuals from the Four Asian Tigers and BRICS countries have been linked to foreign investing not just in Vancouver, but other metropolitan areas like London, England, New York and Sydney.²⁸³

One news report from the *Richmond News* published in November of 2016 says that Chinese nationals made up as much as 90 percent of foreign buyers involved in real estate transactions that took place from June 10 to August 1 of 2016 in British Columbia.²⁸⁴ If the figures presented in other news reports are accurate, then the reason

²⁷⁸ Rogers, Dallas and Sin Yee Koh. "The globalisation of real estate: the politics and practice of foreign real estate investment." *International Journal of Housing Policy* (2017), 17:1, pg. 1.

²⁷⁹ Rogers and Koh, "Globalisation of real estate," pg. 1.

²⁸⁰ Rogers and Koh, "Globalisation of real estate," pg. 3.

²⁸¹ Rogers and Koh, "Globalisation of real estate," pg. 3.

²⁸² Rogers and Koh, "Globalisation of real estate," pg. 3.

²⁸³ Rogers and Koh, "Globalisation of real estate," pg. 8.

²⁸⁴ Graeme Wood, "Foreign buyers bounce back." *Richmond News*, 4 Nov., 2016, p. A.11. *Canadian Newsstream*.

for why Chinese people seemed to be singled out becomes clear: it was easy. Vancouver is a very diverse city; so diverse in fact, that within the Greater Vancouver Area, “visible minorities” now outnumber white residents. The 2016 census data reports that around 48.9 percent of the Greater Vancouver Area’s 2,426,235 people identify as being a member of a visible minority group, while 48.6 percent of the population identified as having European ancestry. People of ethnic Chinese descent make up the majority of visible minorities, accounting for 19.6 percent of the total population. With such a high level of ethnically diverse individuals, it was easy to single out a group seen as “foreign” as being the cause of all the trouble being experienced within the housing market. There was no formal data tracking of the issue until the introduction of the tax, and little reliable evidence to offer some insight into the causes. With people of Chinese descent making up the majority of people who identified as a visible minority, this was the easiest group to scapegoat. They were visible, they were present, and there had been anecdotal accounts suggesting they were the ones bringing money into the province, buying up properties and driving up the cost of housing. They were the easy target for a much desired easy solution.

They were an easy story for the media to cover because there were people willing to go on the record to say with a certain degree of confidence Chinese buyers were entering the local market. They were an easy target for public outrage because there were enough people within the community who believed they were the problem. Therefore, it seems clear that there was a certain degree of bias within the coverage of the Chinese buyers, though it was not likely malicious or even intentional. It was unconscious or implicit bias. The media was hobbled by the fact that there was very little in terms of

reliable information they could access, whether that was through sources willing to go on record to explain their positions, or from data that could be provided by an official institution. Journalists could only base their reporting on whatever information they could get which has been confirmed, even within the reporting itself, is largely hearsay. It stands to reason that these sources were used as a result of journalists picking and choosing evidence to better support the narrative they were tasked with presenting.

In 2017, the number of references to Chinese buyers drops in terms of the rates at which they were occurring, with only 8 articles out of 67 examined – which calculates to roughly 12 percent – making at least one mention of Chinese buyers. This is significant drop from 2015 and 2016, as the two years combined averaged out to over half of all articles making at least one mention. However, it should also be noted that 2017 was also the year that yielded the most articles involving coverage of the foreign buyers and housing issues, so the topic did not completely disappear from the public discourse. In spite of this, the sharp drop in the number of mentions of Chinese buyers did make me question what exactly might have changed within the housing market that could have sparked this change. In general, a good portion of the coverage of the housing market in 2017, at least within the first half of the year, was dedicated largely to policy and campaign promises, which is logical considering that it was in 2017 that a historical election took place in British Columbia, which saw the Liberal government removed from power. According to Shaw, the housing issue hit another “fever pitch” in its prominence as an issue, as it was a central focus to every political campaign, and came to define the election, so therefore, it would be logical that the level of coverage, at least, would be greater. However, the simple prospect of an election does not seem to be

logically tied in any way to a sudden drop in focus on Chinese buyers. By the time of the election in May of 2017, the foreign buyer tax had already been in place for roughly nine months, having been implemented by the Liberal government on August 2, 2016, so the election was happening in its aftermath, when some of its effects were being reported on. According to a report from *The Globe and Mail*, the tax did indeed result in a drop in house prices in Vancouver, with the one caveat being that after six months of dropping prices, they slowly began to rise again.²⁸⁵ Using the Multiple Listing Service to compare benchmark prices, I found that the benchmark price for a detached house in Greater Vancouver was \$1,581,200 in August 2016, the same month the foreign-buyers tax was introduced, but had dropped to \$1,480,100 in February of 2017, before climbing to \$1,530,100 two months later in April. Overall, the tax resulted in a roughly 3.2 percent drop in the benchmark price for detached houses in Vancouver over the period of August 2016 to April 2017. This, as has been reported, was due to a drop in the number of foreign buyers in the aftermath of the tax, and prices dropped due to fewer high-end property sales, though the drop was still predominantly happening in the more expensive detached house segment of the market.²⁸⁶ Prior to the tax being introduced, a poll conducted by the Angus Reid Institute showed that of the Vancouver residents surveyed, 90 percent of them supported the tax,²⁸⁷ believing it to be a good idea for regulating the market. Initially, the tax was only applied to the Metro Vancouver region, but was later

²⁸⁵ Xiao Xu, "Tax avoidance poses challenge for NDP: The foreign-buyer real estate levy has intended effect in cooling the market, but it hasn't stopped attempts at workarounds." *The Globe and Mail*, 7 Oct. 2017, p. S.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

²⁸⁶ Brent Jang, "Detached houses in GTA approach \$1-million." *The Globe and Mail*, 4 Feb. 2017, pg. B.2. *Canadian Newsstream*.

²⁸⁷ Jeff Lee, "Metro Vancouver foreign buyer tax: New poll shows high support." *The Vancouver Sun*, 29 July 2016. <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/metro-vancouver-foreign-buyer-tax-new-poll-shows-high-support>. Accessed 28 Feb. 2020.

expanded to include more of the province. In spite of this widespread support for the tax, Shaw suggested that people wanted the tax, but ultimately ended up caring very little about it. “The funny thing about the foreign buyer tax is it was great short-term politics, because it looked like it was targeting wealthy Chinese people, and then whether it succeeded or not, no one really cared, you know?” Shaw says, “The public just kind of shrugged after that. There wasn't a lot of media reporting on ‘is the tax succeeding?’ and if you asked if it was succeeding, they would tell you ‘it's going to take a long time to be able to tell, there's not a lot of data.’ There was that – I think – an unfair assumption that it was wealthy Chinese people, so the tax was intended to punish, essentially, but God, you'd never catch a politician saying that in a million years, right? But it was their response to public grumbling about that that sparked the tax.”²⁸⁸ The data I have examined tells me that the tax ultimately had no lasting effect on controlling housing prices. As mentioned, the benchmark price for detached houses dropped in the immediate aftermath of the tax's introduction before it slowly began rising again, and large increases in the price of townhouses and condos were observed as well. In October 2017, the benchmark price of condos had risen 22.7 percent, and townhome prices had climbed 19.5 percent compared to September 2016, which was the month after the foreign-buyers tax took effect. Similarly, in 2018, professional services network PricewaterhouseCoopers and the Urban Land Institute released a report titled “Emerging Trends in Canadian Real Estate 2018,” which states that from August 2016 to August 2017, representing the foreign-buyers tax's first full year in effect, detached house prices increased 2.2 percent.

²⁸⁸ Shaw, Phone Interview.

Shaw called it a good political move in the short term, seeing as how there was an election in less than a year's time from when the tax was first introduced.²⁸⁹ The Liberals wanted to hold onto power, and they had been blamed by the populace of British Columbia for not taking action sooner. Recall that it was in 2015 when then-premier Christy Clark and her party refused to take any measures to regulate the market, stating there was not enough evidence to suggest that any measures were needed.²⁹⁰ It could also be that in 2017, there were new reports surfacing that there was more to the housing and affordability crisis than just foreign buyers. By Shaw's reckoning, this happened when the newly-elected New Democratic government under John Horgan changed their tactics, and began pointing out the money laundering happening through British Columbian casinos, as well as less-than-ethical real estate practices started to emerge, shedding light on an industry that was capitalizing on the heated market.²⁹¹ These real estate practices include, according to Shaw, agents instigating bidding wars, double-ending sales – meaning one agent represents both the buyer and seller – and shadow flipping, which is a process in which a land title is transferred at increasing prices several times before the deal is closed, with none of the profits going to the original seller and the agent is able to pocket more than one commission. All of these contributed to the distortion of the market, meaning that foreign buyers were one piece of a puzzle, just like all of these other issues now accepted to be part of a larger problem plaguing the province.

²⁸⁹ Shaw, Phone Interview.

²⁹⁰ Jeff Lee and Tiffany Crawford, "PM vows foreign home ownership study; Conservatives, if re-elected, would spend \$500,000 to gather data on housing market." *The Vancouver Sun*, 13 Aug. 2015, p. A.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

²⁹¹ Shaw, Phone Interview.

Considering the sudden change in the tone of the coverage, as well as the decline in the mentions of Chinese buyers within the housing market, I came to think that 2017 would not be a good year in which to study the possibility of media bias. With much of the coverage being focused on the promises that politicians were making, there was nothing to suggest that there would be any skewing of the narrative, intentional or not. However, part way through the research process of coding the articles, I began to notice something. I started noticing that the same names kept appearing in articles, the names of people who were being quoted as real estate experts. Once I started seeing this, I recalled something that Shaw told me during our interview.

When I asked him if he ever felt the coverage being done was ever biased or skewed in some way, such as showing prejudice towards the Chinese community, he mentioned that he felt the coverage was skewed in the limited number of voices that were represented. In this regard, he was referring to the people called on to provide their perspective on developments within the housing market. On the notion of the conversation being dictated by a select group of people, Shaw says: “It became a very ‘ego-driven’ discussion. It's probably not the best way to describe it, but there are a lot of loud voices, with particular viewpoints, and particular agendas, and particular kinds of ideas that dominated the discussion. There was a group of academics at SFU and UBC, who got together and put together a housing plan for the government. They wanted the government to follow this idea of an incredibly complicated flow-through tax credit program. I remember when they proposed it, the Liberals were in power and had trouble figuring out what it was. I think part of the problem in the coverage was that the

academics were so vociferous in their explanation of what was going on, and the politicians were so insistent on their version of what was going on.”²⁹²

He adds that it was not just academics who were proposing their solutions for the affordability crisis: “The real estate sector had its own statistics and very outspoken people like Cameron Muir, from the BC Real Estate sector, who had a high profile, and then you had Ottawa at the time, the federal government, also having a particular agenda and getting involved and kind of getting dragged into it in different ways. All of those things skewed the coverage. I think when we look back on it now, we see that they were all part of maybe a larger solution, but talking to people at the time, they were insistent that their focus was the correct focus. So, you can talk to an academic, like Tom Davidoff from UBC, he has a very particular emphasis on his idea that property taxes should increase, and that’s the best way to kind of deal with some elements of housing and that other taxes are not as fair and targeting certain groups isn’t fair.”²⁹³

When I asked him if he could remember any other prominent voices who were featured often in the local news coverage in British Columbia, the two of us both began recalling prolific figures who had been frequently interviewed and given comment on the housing issue. So, to better understand the coverage of foreign buyers issue in the time after the foreign buyer tax was introduced, I decided to double back on the articles I had already examined and track all the mentions of some these prominent voices Shaw and I had discussed. For this, I started coding for what I decided to call “Notable Figures” within *NVivo*, creating a separate node for three years, 2016, 2017 and 2018. With 2016

²⁹² Shaw, Phone Interview.

²⁹³ Shaw, Phone Interview.

being the year the tax was introduced, 2017 was the year of the election, and 2018 being the year where we could examine the aftermath of many major changes, these would be the years most likely to feature these voices giving comments on said changes that had been made. The list of I compiled was made up of six very prominent individuals who had offered comment on the housing issue. Those six were University of British Columbia economist Tom Davidoff, urban planner and adjunct professor Andy Yan, who also did research into demographics when he started researching the housing market, the current BC Attorney General David Eby – who had also been the Chief Housing Critic for the NDP when the party was still in opposition – the BC Real Estate Association’s then-chief economist Cameron Muir, real estate agent Steve Saretsky and Bryan Yu, the deputy chief economist for Central 1 Credit Union.

In tracking how many times these people were featured, I coded articles in which at least one of these six individuals was quoted. In 2016, three articles out of 25, or 12 percent, featured one of these voices. There were 13 articles out of 67, or roughly 19 percent, in 2017, and 20 out of 46 (43.4 percent) in 2018 in which the journalist interviewed at least one of these people. While the numbers seem insignificant, the six individuals I was coding for were still featured far more prominently and far more often than any other voice that was represented. This is not necessarily a good thing. Every single one of these individuals had their agenda and their own thoughts on what was happening to the real estate market, like Tom Davidoff’s insistence that property taxes need to be lowered to help fix the crisis, or David Eby, who shared figures from his own research which revealed several high-end homes in Vancouver with land titles registered to “homemakers” or “students,” which meant it was wealthy foreigners who were the

reason why locals could not afford homes.²⁹⁴ These differing views would send a lot of mixed messages to news consumers. None of the experts agreed on any one issue, and they all had vastly different opinions on how to regulate the market and get it to a point where it could be more affordable for the less-well-off residents of British Columbia.

“Everybody, I think, staked out a position on it, and because it was such a high profile story, because it defined an election,” Shaw says. “And because everyone was upset, people made names and careers for themselves and none of them – *none of them* – are correct, unless you put them all together in their totality, and it took a while for that to happen. There were fewer than 10 people, maybe, who kind of dominated the discussion. From housing academics, to real estate officials, to politicians on all sides, it just kind of bounced around between them depending on who was shouting loudest.”²⁹⁵

In my interview with Ian Young, I also asked him if he felt that the conversation about the housing and affordability crisis was dominated by a small cohort of voices, he mentioned he agreed with that notion to a degree, and that he specifically took issue with the prominent featuring of people he referred to as “real estate boosters.”²⁹⁶ “We all went into a slavish devotion to the big names in the real estate industry. Why was Bob Rennie [a prolific realtor and founder of one of Vancouver’s largest real estate marketing firms] front page news? A real estate marketer?” he says. “Why was front page coverage afforded to a speech the real estate marketer would give to fellow real estate development figures? Why do his opinions matter so much? I also had a big problem when we saw certain academics, without a body of evidence, who’ve been repeatedly cited with

²⁹⁴ Shaw, Phone Interview.

²⁹⁵ Shaw, Phone Interview.

²⁹⁶ Young, Phone Interview.

opinions – not research but opinions – that ran counter to the results of peer reviewed research.”²⁹⁷ When I asked him if he could think of any figures that fit this criteria, he mentioned UBC Sauder School of Business professors Michael Goldberg and Tsur Somerville, who he called a “rent-a-quote” for the real estate industry.²⁹⁸

“[They] were very closely wedded to the real estate industry, which was in fact funding their school, and it was all a big happy party because so many people were making so much money off this, that they forgot that this was fundamentally a story about affordability. When someone is making a million bucks flipping a condo or whatever, or housing prices are doubling, that might be great news if you’re a homeowner, but it’s not great news if you’re someone earning a living here in BC, struggling to buy a home,” Young says.²⁹⁹

Each of these prominent experts came from different backgrounds and fields, and offered differing opinions on what could be done to help cool Vancouver’s heated housing market, which could be interpreted as an attempt to show a balance in viewpoints within the news coverage. However, these experts all have one thing in common: they all represent one side of the issue. Each of these experts were quoted specifically to get their take on what could be done to fix the problem, yet they cannot represent the other side of the issue. None of them could be considered “foreign buyers” and cannot represent the voices that have been excluded from coverage. This is precisely the slant I brought up in earlier chapters of the thesis. The frequent featuring of this cohort of experts highlights

²⁹⁷ Young, Phone Interview.

²⁹⁸ Young, Phone Interview.

²⁹⁹ Young, Phone Interview.

the shortage of a voice of someone who could be considered a foreign buyer, or someone from the wealthy Chinese buyers community.

Simply because these voices were featured quite prominently in the news, it does not mean that they will be the ones who have the best solutions for how to address the housing crisis. For example, Andy Yan was one of several people who were part of the Mayor's Task Force on Housing Affordability that was mentioned in previous chapters, the same task force that ultimately concluded there was not enough evidence to suggest foreign buyers were having any impact on the housing market, and that there was nothing that proves affordability was becoming an issue in Vancouver. Additionally, Yan was also asked by then-NDP Housing Critic David Eby to take the lead on a study that examined housing ownership in the West Point Grey neighbourhood; a fairly well-to-do neighbourhood within the Greater Vancouver Area. For this study, Yan examined about 200 land titles, provided by Eby, regarding the sale of single family homes in those neighbourhoods between August 2014 and February 2015.³⁰⁰ In summary, Yan's study was based on the idea that land titles listed under a "non-Anglicized Chinese name," such as "Wong San Fung," was likely to be owned by someone who is fairly new to Canada, and likely paid for their home with money overseas, due to an "academically accepted" correlation between a non-Anglicized name and less time spent in a Western country.³⁰¹ While Yan admits to the one obvious flaw in his study, which is the fact that a name can in no way explicitly prove whether or not someone is "foreign," he forgets one other flaw, which is that a name likely should not have been the focal point for a study like this. The British Columbia government defines a foreign buyer on its web page detailing the

³⁰⁰ Joanne, Lee-Young, "Bags of Cash." *The Vancouver Sun*, 2 Nov. 2015, p. A.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

³⁰¹ Lee-Young, "Bags of Cash."

foreign buyer tax as any foreign individual, corporation or trustee looking to buy property in BC who is not a permanent resident or Canadian citizen. On a personal note, my own family has been living in Canada for over 20 years now, and we have been naturalized Canadian citizens for 17 years. While I go by an “ethnic Chinese” name, Steve Zhang, both my mother and father do not. They have English names that they use amongst colleagues and friends, as well as in day-to-day interactions, but all of their official documents – their passports, bank cards, as well as the title to their house – are registered under their “non-Anglicized” birth names. By the BC government’s definition, my parents would not be considered foreign buyers, yet by Yan’s reckoning, they must have purchased their homes with money earned overseas. The use of a non-Anglicized name is not a sign of less time spent in Western society, but is merely a reflection of a choice made by the individual to retain their birth names. Attempts to reach Yan for an interview were not returned, although the journalist who wished to remain anonymous mentioned in our interview that they speaks with him quite often, saying Yan has been quite open about the flawed nature of his study.

Though I have disparaged the use of anecdotal data in this thesis, I felt one of my own experiences would be appropriate in this case simply to illustrate the fact that there was one flaw Yan did not account for. This is not to say that academics are all unreliable and no one should ever pay them or their views any attention. It is a way to say that even accomplished experts are fallible, and prone to the same human mistakes as any other person. Therefore, it would be wise for the public and the media to treat their views and positions with a healthy amount of skepticism. The fact that two-thirds of 200 land titles in a handful of relatively wealthy neighbourhoods are registered under owners who did

not change their original Chinese given names,³⁰² is not a reliable indicator that there is a wave of foreign buyers from China arriving in Vancouver with wealth earned overseas and buying homes.

In some ways, it is studies like this that further push the perception that people of Chinese descent are foreigners. By suggesting that a refusal to change their names is somehow indicative of not living in Canada for a substantially long time, it reinforces the stereotype of Chinese people – and Asian people in general – as perpetual foreigners; people who will never fully adapt to and assimilate into the culture and society around them, and therefore do not belong. While the basis upon which the study was conducted was logically sound, looking at land titles to determine if there are any buyers who are foreign, the focal point through which it was conducted was dangerously flawed. People who do not have as deep an understanding about Chinese culture as Yan himself are more willing to take his word for what it is rather than approach it in a way that displays the sort of skepticism needed to interpret it fully.

Yan and the other experts quoted extensively by the media are all people with their own ideas and their own opinions, hence why each of them has staked out their own positions on what is at the root of the housing and affordability crisis. However, each of them is likely to take a strong stance on one particular issue, and can be highly immovable on what they themselves believe and accept to be true. As has been established, there are a great number of factors that contributed to the crisis in Vancouver, and it is very hard to tell if anyone of them is more to blame than the others. Therefore, I would venture to say that the outsized focus of a small number of voices and

³⁰² Lee-Young, “Bags of Cash.”

perspectives also created bias within the media coverage. By limiting the number of perspectives given a platform within media, the level of useful information that can be disseminated to the public is also restricted. If we accept it as true that human beings are inherently biased creatures, and in many cases, will pick to share information and opinions that suit their own interests, then the experts that are quoted in media are not exceptions to this rule.

Experts are also given a level of credibility due to their station. Davidoff and Yan are both university professors, and very academically accomplished within their respective fields. Eby is a lawyer and was initially the Housing Critic for the New Democratic Party when the Liberals were still in power. Their stations come with a certain degree of privilege, and they have the ability to say what they personally believe, and have members of the public accept their views as truth due to that privilege. This privilege is also elevated inadvertently by the media. By constantly giving them a platform, they are elevated even further, as their views are legitimized by the prolific mastheads of news publications like *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Globe and Mail*. This would then be another case of bias created by circumstances largely outside of the control of media. It is not that the media set out to tell a slanted story, but the slant was hidden behind a veil of legitimacy, despite the inherent bias of source information.

Concluding Thoughts

When I first embarked on this project, my goal was to prove that the news coverage of the housing crisis and the highly contentious issue of foreign buyers, especially those from China, was largely biased. Whether it was because the media believed it was the easiest way to get the public to engage with its work, or simply

because it truly believed Chinese people were the root of Vancouver's housing woes, the over-emphasis on the ethnicity of the buyers was a result of preconceived notions about people who were perceived to not belong. After examining the evidence from my own research, as well as the scholarly works of David Ley, I feel confident in saying that the coverage was not biased in the sense that it was generated as a deliberate means of discriminating against the Chinese community. It was biased in the sense that the focus of such coverage was on the wrong aspect of the housing and affordability crisis. While the coverage I examined was focused on the foreign buyers as the cause of rising housing prices, sometimes drilling specifically onto the ethnicity of these buyers, it ultimately became clear that issue of unaffordability had little to do with where the people were coming from, and more to do with the fact that they were wealthy, and investing money earned overseas in local real estate.

The question of whether they felt news coverage was ever biased at any point during the height of the housing crisis was a question I posed to Shaw, Bula, Cheung, Young, and the journalist who wished to remain anonymous, and all five agree that, at least in the very beginning, there was an oversized focus on the ethnicity of buyers at the beginning of the crisis in relation to other aspects of the issue. Coincidentally, when Bula gave me her answer, she related to me what I had discovered while coding through the articles from 2015 and 2016: "It seemed that any anecdotal report from a real estate agent saying, 'Yeah, there are these crazy rich Asians, and they're buying everything up,' would get huge traction, much more so than any other dynamic that was in the real estate field at that time."³⁰³

³⁰³ Bula, Phone Interview.

In consideration of what all five of these journalists have shared with me, as well as all the evidence gathered through the primary research process, I would say, with confidence, that the media coverage of the foreign buyers through the course of the housing and affordability crisis, was not biased in the way that we as journalists normally think. The shortage of official data on the scale of foreign investing, as well as the presence of anecdotes of large numbers of Chinese buyers scooping up property, the stories and reports generated over the time period defined in the research can be attributed to the source information utilized by journalists to provide context to their work. Anecdotal evidence is hard to verify, owing to its nature as a personal account, and due to a shortage official sources that could provide similar data, journalists could only work with what they had access to. David Ley's paper on governments specifically courting foreign investing as early as 1986, if not sooner, details how governments of the past opened the door for foreign investing in local housing, which led to inflating housing prices that became so high, local incomes would never be able to afford them. However, how many members of the public have access to academic papers such as his? Additionally, Ley was also had a very low presence in the media coverage examined, having been quoted in only three articles out of 160 I examined, once in 2014,³⁰⁴ once in 2015,³⁰⁵ and the final time in 2018.³⁰⁶ This is compared to the viewpoints provided by a small number of experts, including individuals like Tom Davidoff, David Eby and Cameron Muir, who were collectively quoted in 36 articles from 2016 to 2018 which I

³⁰⁴ Iain Marlow and Brent Jang, "Vancouver's real estate boom: The rising price of 'heaven'." *The Globe and Mail*, 10 Oct. 2014. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/vancouver-real-estate-boom-the-rising-price-of-heaven/article21071391/>. Accessed 8 Aug. 2019.

³⁰⁵ Barbara Yaffe, "APF calls for meeting of minds; Property and policy." *The Vancouver Sun*, 16 Sept. 2015, pg. C.3. *Canadian Newsstream*.

³⁰⁶ Xiao Xu, "China pledges to exchange tax information with Canada." *The Globe and Mail*, 22 May 2018, pg. A.4. *Canadian Newsstream*.

examined. The coverage was skewed because each of them had a position that they individually accepted as true. Even if the journalist is making their best attempt to remain unbiased and objective, their stories begin to take on bias simply because the source information they used came from an opinionated place.

This is not an issue that cannot be remedied. In the following chapter, I will lay out my views on what solutions can be implemented by the media to prevent these inadvertent biases from finding a platform and legitimacy within media.

Chapter 5: “Both Sides”: Finding Solutions

While I was analyzing the arguments laid out in Stuart Hall’s essay on his theories behind the encoding/decoding model of communication, what stood out to me most was his thought behind the idea of a “dominant meaning,” which can be interpreted to mean an interpretation of certain media messages that holds a prominent position within a hierarchy of different messages and meanings. In other words, within a news media and journalism-centred world, it is the dominant narrative that is circulated to consumers of news, the “dominant narrative” being defined as an account told from the perspective of the dominant cultural group. Similarly, another thing that stood out to me was his reflections on the accessibility of broadcast media. In his essay, Hall writes “the professionals are linked with the defining elites not only by the institutional position of broadcasting itself as an ‘ideological apparatus,’ but also by the structure of *access* (that is, the systematic ‘over-accessing’ of selective elite personnel and their ‘definition of the situation’).”³⁰⁷ In his essay, Hall referred specifically to the access that certain people have to television media, though his theories and thoughts are applicable to all news media as a whole, even print, as both present a platform for views and information, and are both manners in which such views and information can be shared. What Hall wrote is a roundabout way of saying that there are certain people with a certain status who have an oversized level of access to media that others simply do not. On reflection, this is quite similar to what Rob Shaw shared with me during our interview, particularly his thoughts that news coverage of the housing crisis featured a handful of prominent academics, real estate industry figures and politicians – such as Tom Davidoff, David Eby and Cameron

³⁰⁷ Hall, 101.

Muir – far more than other voices.³⁰⁸ In coding for instances where a very select few voices were quoted in the news coverage I examined, I found that 36 out of a total of 160 articles quoted from at least one out of six notable figures; these six people being economist Tom Davidoff, urban planner and adjunct professor Andy Yan, who had done his own extensive research into demographics and the housing market, the current BC Attorney General David Eby, the BC Real Estate Association’s former chief economist Cameron Muir, real estate agent Steve Saretsky and Bryan Yu, the deputy chief economist for Central 1 Credit Union. Although 36 out of 160 is 22.5 percent of the coverage examined, these are still six voices that were featured far more frequently than any other voice. These particular moments from Hall’s essay reminded me strongly of something I once read in “*Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis*,” a book by the late Roger Silverstone, a professor of media and communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Specifically, it is his concept of the “mediapolis,” and what exactly that is.

The idea of the “mediapolis” comes from the Greek word “*polis*” which referred to a public space where the elite could engage in discourse in the form of face-to-face communication.³⁰⁹ However, the ability of this elite to engage in discourse and debate, within this space, was partly dependent on their “exclusion and exploitation” of a certain subset of the population.³¹⁰ One of the foundations of Silverstone’s book is his idea of “the other,” which is the concept of an unfamiliar stranger or outsider. In the context of the wider arguments of his book, “the other” is also someone who exists largely outside

³⁰⁸ Rob Shaw, Phone Interview. 4 Oct. 2019.

³⁰⁹ Roger Silverstone, *Media and Morality: On the Rise of Mediapolis*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 29.

³¹⁰ Silverstone, 29.

of our own sphere of existence within the Western world. In some ways, it is also the media that has a role in the creation of “the other.” Early on in the book, Silverstone uses the example of an Afghani blacksmith who was interviewed by *The World at One*, a radio program on BBC Radio 4.³¹¹ The interview aired in the immediate aftermath of the events of 9/11, and the subsequent invasion led by the United States and the beginning of the War on Terror.³¹² In the interview, the blacksmith was asked why he thought that the United States had invaded his country, and according to the translation, his response was that it was because they had “killed many Americans and their donkeys and had destroyed some of their castles.”³¹³ Though this summation of events is not true, it is also not entirely false. However, what was remarkable about this interview was not the somewhat uninformed nature of the blacksmith’s response, but his very presence within “Western media.”³¹⁴ The concept of “the other” is built on the idea of “us” and “them,” which is to say that there are many people out there who are different from “us,” and will never truly be like “us.” Therefore, they exist outside of the perceptions and discourses present within the Western sphere of thought. It is precisely this that makes the appearance of the Afghani blacksmith so significant. It is unusual, with the presence of this split between “us” and “them” for Western media to let us see, and even allow for, someone who is considered to be part of “the other” to define and describe people of the Western world in the way that the blacksmith did.³¹⁵ It is far more common for practices within media to be the other way around; that people and media in the West define and

³¹¹ Silverstone, 1.

³¹² Silverstone, 1.

³¹³ Silverstone, 1.

³¹⁴ Silverstone, 1.

³¹⁵ Silverstone, 3.

describe the experiences and existence of the other.³¹⁶ The concept of the mediapolis is a reflection of modern day media as being a space where engagement on issues of public significance can happen, but at the cost of excluding certain people who may not have the same level of access to it as others.

When considering the ramifications of this aspect of Silverstone's book, I immediately recalled the interviews I conducted for this project. The idea of the Western media taking part in defining the experiences of the other, but in turn, not allowing the other to define us, reminded me heavily of what Shaw shared with me regarding how the news coverage of the Vancouver housing and affordability crisis ultimately became a very "ego-driven" conversation, as he called it. This was because within the coverage, a very small number of prominent voices were disproportionately featured compared to other voices. While the other journalists I interviewed did not speak in terms as specific as Shaw did, both Christopher Cheung of *The Tyee* and freelancer Frances Bula echoed his sentiment that there was a distinct lack of representation of certain voices within the coverage. Cheung expressed similar frustrations with this practice, saying: "It just becomes these talking heads, saying whatever they like without analysis. It's really hard to find a low-income person who might be willing to speak about their experiences. You don't see somebody who is a foreign buyer quoted in the media very often."³¹⁷ Through my own research, I found that out of 160 articles coded for this thesis, only five, or 3.1 percent, featured at least one voice that belonged to someone who was a foreign buyer, though none of the articles featuring such a voice were published after the year 2016. Similarly, the sellers were also voices that were not featured prominently in the coverage

³¹⁶ Silverstone, 3.

³¹⁷ Christopher Cheung, Phone Interview. 26 Sept. 2019.

I examined. They were absent entirely, as none of the articles I had gathered featured a seller. This could be because they were some of the people who benefitted from the rising housing costs, having made a considerable amount of money. It is likely they were hesitant to be interviewed out of fear of being seen as part of the problem.

What each of these journalists said about this particular slant and shortcoming in the media coverage is, from my perspective, quite true. More often than not, the people who were quoted in the media were politicians, university professors, realtors and other “housing experts,” each of whom would provide their own ideas for what was at the root of the housing crisis and to what extent foreign buyers were an issue.

The term “foreign buyers,” upon further reflection after all the work completed for this thesis, is in and of itself, a strangely loaded term. The word “foreign” means something from a language or country that is not one’s own, but it could also be used as an adjective to mean “strange and unfamiliar.” I do not question the motives behind using this term; the term is a general descriptor for any non-Canadian person or entity looking to buy a property in Canada. However, I do believe that terms such as this do have an effect on the coverage and perception of the certain issues. Consider the idea of “the other,” something or someone that is inherently different, strange and unfamiliar, and it would not seem far-fetched to say that the term itself contributed to some of the division that was experienced within Vancouver between “locals” and “foreigners.” The dominant narrative, as the narrative told from the perspective of the dominant cultural group, in the coverage over the course of the crisis did revolve around the idea that there were wealthy people from overseas who were purchasing properties in Vancouver. Recall that it was Shaw who said that the foreign-buyers tax was introduced as a way of punishing wealthy

non-citizens for having money.³¹⁸ While it is difficult to confirm if any of these instances are examples of governments or people deliberately trying to make foreign buyers, specifically those of Chinese descent, into an embodiment of the concept of “the other,” there are parallels that can be drawn between this concept and what has been examined through the housing crisis. A tax designed to penalize wealthy buyers from overseas, a small cadre of housing experts given a platform to share their thoughts and their definitions on whether or not a specific group of people were a problem, and only five out of 160 articles that were examined for this thesis featured at least one voice from someone who could be considered a foreign buyer. This illustrates what Silverstone mentions early in his book; the notion that western media rarely allows the “other” to define us, but we frequently see the “other being defined by us.”³¹⁹ The creation of an “other” in the Vancouver housing crisis gave legitimacy to a select number of voices and failed to represent another subset of the population. This has identified a serious issue that should have been addressed during the housing crisis: the representation of more diverse, “human” voices. It could be that attempts were made to speak with someone like that, but they declined, or it could be that no attempt was made at all. There is no way to fully grasp the process that went into each piece without interviewing each individual journalist, but regardless, this lack of a crucial side of the story has resulted in that side largely being excluded from the conversation, as shown by the articles examined. Though this is an example of a systematic inaccuracy as a result of failing to represent more voices to speak from both, or all, sides of an issue, the idea of “us” and “them” is also where unconscious bias can be examined.

³¹⁸ Shaw, Phone Interview.

³¹⁹ Silverstone, 3.

Recall the stereotype of the “perpetual foreigner,” which is used to say that Asians, regardless of where they come from or how long they have lived in a “western” country, will always been viewed as outsiders, due to a perception they never adapt to their new surroundings, which includes the local language. In the journalistic paper “HOW IMPLICIT BIAS WORKS IN JOURNALISM: Avoiding the Pitfalls of Hidden Biases Can Lead to Better Story Selection and More Inclusive Reporting,” journalist Issac J. Bailey writes about how language can also play into unconscious biases. Bailey, who is African-American and has had to contend with a stutter since he was a child, saying of his speech impediment, it had “cost [him] more professional opportunities than the [colour] of [his] skin.”³²⁰ He writes about how multiple outlets, such as CNN, MSNBC and NPR, had rescinded offers for him to appear on their programs, writing that while the networks did not use words like “too dumb to talk” like the children who bullied him when he was young, “but the result has been the same: a broad-based silencing by a media infrastructure built, maybe unwittingly, to nearly almost always exclude voices that don’t sound quite... right.”³²¹ What he is saying is something that is quite common in the broadcast side of journalism: the excluding of voices deemed to not be “good talkers.” Bailey was excluded because broadcast producers were worried his stutter would get in the way. This highlights two particular issues within the coverage I examined for this thesis. In locating articles written by someone who could be reasonably believed to be a Mandarin Chinese-speaking journalist, I found only two out of 160 that were written by Xiao Xu of *The Globe and Mail*. This tells me that Mandarin-speaking

³²⁰ Issac J. Bailey, “HOW IMPLICIT BIAS WORKS IN JOURNALISM: Avoiding the Pitfalls of Hidden Biases Can Lead to Better Story Selection and More Inclusive Reporting.” *Nieman Reports* (2019), 73:2, pg. 26.

³²¹ Bailey, “IMPLICIT BIAS,” 28.

journalists are not being utilized as well as they could, especially considering how closely tied the housing and affordability has been tied to wealthy Chinese buyers from China, where Mandarin is the dominant language. The second issue is the lack of differing perspectives, likely as a result of this “unconscious bias.” Five, out of 160 articles, quoting at least one foreign buyer, specifically one who is Chinese, tells me very few attempts were made to speak to that community, likely due to a perceived language barrier, but translators do exist, and one of the journalists I interviewed, Frances Bula, credits a Mandarin-speaking journalism student for helping her report on a story on a community.³²² In a case such as this, the “unconscious bias” of a different reporter could potentially cause them to immediately assume they would not be able to communicate with a wealthy Chinese buyer, and instead pick a voice that is more easily accessible to them, but ultimately, is only representative of one aspect of the issue, resulting in a noticeable slant, and a bias; a bias in favour of the more accessible voice. This further associates “foreign” with “wealthy Chinese” and also contributes to the noticeable slant in the coverage.

Another one of Silverstone’s arguments was the idea of “morality,” and how that can apply to the media, as well as the topic of ethics. He differentiates the two by saying that “morals” relate largely to principles, which dictates and informs how we interact with the other.³²³ Additionally, the idea of morality also applies to the “judgment and elucidation of thought and action that is oriented towards the other,” which can determine

³²² Frances Bula, “Meet the wealthy immigrants at the centre of Vancouver’s housing debate.” *The Globe and Mail*, 30 July 2016. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/real-estate/vancouver/meet-the-wealthy-immigrants-at-the-centre-of-vancouvers-housingdebate/article31212036/>. Accessed 17 Nov. 2019.

³²³ Silverstone, 7.

the type of relationship we, as the media, have with the other.³²⁴ Ethics, then, would refer specifically to how we apply morals in practice when we engage with others in the world around us.³²⁵ Within his book, Silverstone refers to something that he called “morality of the media.”³²⁶ It was described as being a “generality of orientation and procedure within which the world is constructed by the media and within which the other appears.”³²⁷ It is a highly academic and theoretical method of saying that the media is responsible for creating a sense of the world that it then relays to the audience, and that this sense of the world is built upon the morality – principles, the judgment – of the media itself. Silverstone argues that this idea of morality of the media is more related – at least for journalists – with professional practice, and how we as journalists “go, don’t go, or should go, about [our] business.”³²⁸ Ultimately, the question that Silverstone attempts to raise and then answer through his writings on morality, is whether or not we as the media have more responsibility than most to be “moral”? I would argue that the answer is: yes, journalists and other members of the media do have more responsibility than most to be moral.

As has already been explored, the media has a unique position within society as information gatherers and truth tellers. The public looks to news and media to inform them of what is happening in the world around them and in their own communities. Similarly, the media also has the ability to create a sense and image of the world that then gets circulated to the audience. However, this is also where a flaw within the media also

³²⁴ Silverstone, 7.

³²⁵ Silverstone, 7.

³²⁶ Silverstone, 7.

³²⁷ Silverstone, 7.

³²⁸ Silverstone, 7.

lies. The editorial process of a newsroom – deciding on the angle of the story, the voices we as journalists could reach out to – a process that was designed to prevent bias through making sure “all sides” get a chance to give their account, could still unintentionally create bias. This is something that happened when generating coverage in years prior, according to retired journalist Mark Hume. During my interview with him, he spoke about how three decades prior, when he was still working for *The Vancouver Sun*, and Vancouver was experiencing a wave of immigration from Hong Kong and similar issues with rising housing costs and foreign buyers, he mentioned how he was given an assignment by the editors that was “pages long” and came complete with a preconceived angle.³²⁹ This, he said, was indicative of the fact that the editors already knew what they wanted to hear, and were asking reporters to get that preconceived story.³³⁰

“I think in the second go-around we had with the same issue, I suspect the same thing happened. People heard that anecdotal evidence, they jumped to conclusions, and then reporters are asked to go out and confirm it,” he says.³³¹ From 2013 to the summer of 2016, there was a shortage of reliable official data on the level of foreign buying that was happening in British Columbia, and many of the earlier articles I examined quoted from sources who could only offer anecdotal evidence. In one of the oldest articles, I examined, the story explains how “anecdotes abound about foreign investors scooping up Metro Vancouver real estate, driving up prices” and creating concerns among locals that housing prices might start rising.³³² This article was published before the government

³²⁹ Mark Hume, Phone Interview. 15 Apr. 2020.

³³⁰ Hume, Phone Interview.

³³¹ Hume, Phone Interview.

³³² Andrea Woo, “Scant evidence behind myth of Vancouver real estate's foreign buyers.” *The Globe and Mail*, 23 Feb. 2013. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/scant-evidence-behind-myth-of-vancouver-real-estates-foreign-buyers/article9000860/>. Accessed 19 Nov. 2019.

began tracking buyer data, and any information that would give a clearer picture of the impact foreign buyers were having would have been scarce. Figures offered by Cameron Muir of the British Columbia Real Estate Association suggested that foreign buyers made up anywhere from one to four percent of buyers.³³³ An article published in 2014 reported on how Dan Scarrow, the vice president of Vancouver real estate firm Macdonald Realty Ltd., had heard enough anecdotal evidence to convince him to open a company office in China.³³⁴ These cases do not overtly indicate that an editor was looking for confirmation that foreign buyers were an issue, only that anecdotal evidence was pointing to it being a possibility. Yet the quotes in these articles made it sound more like a certainty, which is an issue. If something cannot be corroborated or confirmed, it should not be presented as if it had been. This is an example of a slant that occurred not as a result of a journalist's personal positions on the matter of housing, but through a lack of more reliable evidence and limited perspectives being recognized.

The issue of unconscious or implicit bias can also come into play. By Hume's reckoning, anecdotal evidence was starting to seep into newsrooms, and journalists were asked to confirm what little information was available. The Metro Vancouver area is a very diverse, and by 2016, around 48.9 percent of the population identified as being part of a non-white ethnic group, with Chinese making up a majority of these residents at 19.6 percent of Metro Vancouver's population of over 2.4 million, according to the 2016 census. The same census also shows a big contrast compared to residents of Chinese percent making up just 5.1 percent of the population in 1981. Owing not just to an

³³³ Woo, "Scant evidence."

³³⁴ Brent Jang, "B.C. firm looks for luxury buyers in China." *The Globe and Mail*, 20 Jan. 2014, pg. B.3. *Canadian Newsstream*.

increasingly diverse population, but also all levels of governments courting investment from Asia since the 1980's, as well as the use of "foreign buyers" as shorthand for "wealthy Chinese buyers," this is where unconscious bias can be found. A journalist, or any member of the public, could see their surroundings, see increasing numbers of Asian faces, rising housing prices, and come to a conclusion that it is wealthy Chinese buyers who are at the root of the housing crisis. From there, a journalist could pick and choose sources to confirm this preconceived notion.

The public looks to journalism and media not just to be deliverers and finders of fact, but to also be explainers and leaders of the wider public discourse. There is a certain degree of trust that is put in media, and the morality of media is something that should be considered if we want to preserve that trust. I would also propose a reframing of the question of does the media have more responsibility than most to be moral, and pose a question to the local media in its coverage of the housing crisis: have we been responsible? If we accept the framework that Silverstone proposes, which is that media needs both ethics and morals in order to be responsible, and in order to guide how we interact with "the other," then I would venture to say: no, media has not been responsible. Recall that only about 3.1 percent of the coverage examined for this thesis featured at least one person that could be considered a foreign buyer, though all the people quoted were of Chinese descent. Contrast that with the 36 articles out of 160 – or 22.5 percent – that made at least one mention of buyers of Chinese descent.

As covered in the previous chapter, my search for official foreign buyer data from the provincial government yielded only finance ministry data containing general numbers of how many real estate transactions involved a foreign party. So, if we are to accept a

report from *Richmond News* published in November of 2016 – which says that Chinese nationals constituted roughly 90 percent of foreign buyers involved in real estate transactions that took place from June 10 to August 1 of 2016 – as true, then there was an underrepresentation of those voices in the coverage.³³⁵ According to the British Columbia Ministry of Finance’s data from 2016, a total of 3,114 “foreign involvement transactions” took place over the months of June and July (1,494 in June, 1,620 in July), which means that as many as 2,802, which is roughly 90 percent, of those transactions involved a buyer from China. That contrasts heavily with five articles out of 160 examined which featured at least one interview with a foreign buyer, and of those five, only three were published in 2016. In covering an issue so closely tied to race, the journalistic principle of ensuring all sides of a story get a fair chance of giving their perspective. On this point, Bula said: “I haven’t really talked to anyone about it, but I just am still curious about why people felt it was okay to write about this group as a sort of faceless, evil people in a way that you would never do with another group.”³³⁶

Ian Young of the *South China Morning Post* explained in my interview with him that while it is hard to separate race from the housing issue, more scrutiny should have been placed on the money foreign buyers were bringing over, saying: “The fact that the people happened to be Chinese wasn’t as important compared to where the money was coming from, the legalities, and how the money flowed. For instance, the fact that China prohibited cash exports of more than \$50,000 a year, yet, at the same time, was exporting very large numbers of millionaires who were going back and forth between the two

³³⁵ Graeme Wood, “Foreign buyers bounce back.” *Richmond News*, 4 Nov., 2016, p. A.11. *Canadian Newsstream*.

³³⁶ Bula, Phone Interview.

countries. That's an interesting phenomenon that's very closely associated with driving unaffordability.”³³⁷ This, he says, is tied very closely to the fact that Canada takes in more “millionaire migrants” than any other country, thanks largely in part to the now-scrapped immigrant investor program.³³⁸

From the moment an aspiring journalist sets foot in a journalism school, one of the first lessons taught is the importance of being objective, fair and even-handed, which includes giving all sides of the story a chance to address their concerns. Overall, there were no attempts – or, at the very least, very few attempts – to reach out to the foreign buyer and mainland Chinese community and hear from them about their experiences navigating the housing market in an environment where many people are against them. This identifies another issue in the coverage of the Vancouver housing crisis which is that the media failed to be proactive, and was often more reactive to the changes in the housing market. To this point, Rob Shaw of *The Vancouver Sun* says: “There were some examples through David Eby; he would come out and say, ‘here’s a house in Point Grey, in Vancouver that was purchased for \$10 million and the person on title is a homemaker from China,’ and people would be like, ‘Oh, my God!’ There’ll be a whole bunch of stories about wealthy Chinese ‘homemakers’ and ‘how are they affording homes here,’ and it would run the coverage for a few weeks. So, you sort of lurch from thing, to thing, to thing, and everything would seem like it was the biggest thing.”³³⁹ This is a prolific journalist attesting to the fact that the media often followed what was happening in the

³³⁷ Ian Young, Phone Interview. 8 May 2020.

³³⁸ Young, Phone Interview.

³³⁹ Shaw, Phone Interview.

public sphere in its coverage, rather than take the lead in generating new information and new perspectives.

Similarly, Bula also reflected on the lack of differing voices in news coverage, saying: “If you try to write about First Nations people that way, there would be massive protests. I found it interesting that the normal, actual practice of modern day journalism seemed to not kick in quite as much on this issue. It was so one-sided that there really needed to be someone saying, ‘are we really covering this the way we would another issue?’”³⁴⁰

It should also be noted that this may not be the fault of journalists alone, but also of changing market circumstances that inhibit a journalist’s ability to do their work.

Cheung says that he believes the lack of time and resources that journalists suffer ultimately contributed to the reliance on so-called “expert voices” who may or may not offer their perspectives with any additional analysis. Therefore, Cheung says, the coverage ultimately suffers because of that, adding: “I think that by having the lack of that perspective, it kind of dehumanizes the topic a lot.”³⁴¹ However, during the 1980’s and 1990’s, the coverage was as problematic as it is now, despite being better staffed. By Bula’s estimate, 300 people worked for the *Vancouver Sun* during that time period, so resources were not the issue. The issue lay in journalistic practices being questionable, so newsrooms would need to examine how they operate as a whole to correct this particular issue.

On how media can work towards having more of those underrepresented perspectives in coverage, both Shaw and Cheung stated that media outlets could hire

³⁴⁰ Bula, Phone Interview.

³⁴¹ Cheung, Phone Interview.

more reporters who spoke the language of those communities to better tap into them, and understand the issues that matter to them. I agree that this is something that media outlets could do better on. Being able to speak a different language gives a new level of access that was not present there before, especially if the community media is attempting to access is not as comfortable with the English language. Young shared a similar sentiment, saying: “There is now quite a high awareness of the perils of affordability, and the need for a diverse range of voices. I think it's important to have ethnically Chinese voices. That is the one thing I would recommend to people if they want to talk about Chinese money, and I think that, inevitably, people will want to talk about Chinese money.”³⁴² Additionally, I would also argue that another solution that media can implement in avoiding the appearance of being biased in the future is increasing the diversity of its sources for stories of any kind. The larger focus on a small group of perspectives and voices led to coverage that relied heavily on the views of industry experts, all of whom have their own agendas. Combined with the small number of stories that featured members of the community under scrutiny, the lack of more “human” voices in the coverage suggests that there needs to be a concerted effort to represent a wider range of perspectives in news coverage. When one considers just how widespread the issue of foreign buyers became, the glaring lack of such perspectives is concerning. Another point that Cheung brought up during our interview was his concern that fewer and fewer people were approaching new journalism about the housing crisis with an open mind, believing, as he says, that many had “already made up their minds.” He further explains: “I just don't see it very often; people sitting down and opening a publication

³⁴² Young, Phone Interview.

with an open mind, and just be like, ‘Okay, I’m here not just to educate myself, but I’m here to try and see if I can see things differently today.’ A lot of the time when people are going out there looking for news stories, you see it used in a way as ammo for a point of view that they already hold.” Having additional perspectives makes one more skeptical of the wider narrative, and encourages them to ask more questions of themselves and of others, facilitating an effort to gain a better and more nuanced understanding of a particular issue.

Finally, I would venture to say that news media also needs to be more proactive in how reporters and editors pursue coverage of sensitive issues like the housing crisis. The fact that Vancouver media was more reactive when dealing with new revelations and developments in the housing market with “weeks of coverage,” then the reliability and efficacy of such coverage is called into question. If the coverage over the course of weeks introduced new evidence and new perspectives, then perhaps it could have some meaningful impact, but if the coverage is simply rehashing and reactions to the issue that started the frenzy, then there is little use to be found in such journalism. I would also add that there needs to be an understanding that meaningful coverage takes the appropriate amount of time and resources. Good coverage cannot be rushed, but with time constraints and a need to get as much of the latest information circulating to the public as soon as possible, it is understandable why journalists feel the need to rush through their stories, get an expert voice and move on. For many newsrooms, the journalists keep a list of contacts that they can reach out to and get quotes from when they are in need of a fast turnaround for a story. Most of the time, such contacts are academics and other such experts because they tend to be easy to contact, easy to book and are fairly skilled at

holding a conversation. However, none of these factors mean that they would be the most authoritative voice on any given issue. Newsroom leaders should therefore be more understanding of the needs of journalists and give them the space and resources needed to tell the most compelling stories for an audience, which includes encouraging the process of gathering and representing newer, diverse and more human voices in the coverage.

By working towards better accessibility and relatability to underrepresented communities, understanding that there are more than just a handful of experts qualified to comment on an issue and knowing that meaningful coverage needs the appropriate time and resources, journalism can continue to be a driving force in public discourse. All of these things, if applied, can help journalism better report on and reflect the complexities of issues of like the housing and affordability crisis. If the public is to continue relying on the news media and journalism for information about what is happening in the world around them, then the practices of that seemed to dominate the coverage from 2013 to 2018 cannot work. Though the issue does not have the same prominence now as it did during that period, it will not stop issues that are similarly complex and sensitive from arising in the future, and the same principles will still apply. Journalism is a uniquely powerful tool of public discourse, prone to the same shortcomings and mistakes as the people who are the driving force behind it. However, those mistakes, like any, can still be rectified.

Conclusion

When I first embarked on this thesis project, my goal was to track any possible bias on the part of journalists and news media. After examining and analyzing a decently sized body of work, I believe that I am accurate in saying that there was indeed some semblance of bias that was present in the work done by journalists in the time period identified. However, I would also add the caveat that the bias was not malicious, in the sense that it was a deliberate effort to cast a negative light on the Chinese community. Instead, it was biased as a result of several factors, including that the news coverage was incorrectly focused on the racial and foreign buyer aspect of the housing and affordability crisis. Journalists work extremely hard to conduct themselves in an even-handed and impartial manner, but that is not to say that everything is perfect. Journalism is an industry and an endeavour that is driven by information and people, and both can be flawed and inaccurate. People are also highly opinionated creatures, with their own thoughts and beliefs, and of course, their own biases, and to completely remove these things from a situation simply because it is demanded and expected is extremely hard.

Initially, my belief was that the coverage from the beginning of 2013 through to the end of 2018 was disproportionately focused on the ethnicity of buyers rather than any market factor that could also affect the price of housing. The issue of foreign buyers became a sort of focal point for the housing and affordability crisis in Vancouver, and was how I wanted to tackle the issue of media bias. The term “foreign buyers” is also quite interesting, as the very definition of the word is to indicate a buyer who is not a citizen of Canada. It is just general enough to maintain a certain degree of neutrality when addressing what was a highly sensitive issue, but was specific enough to be

considered a targeted term. I had a suspicion that there was a possibility that the term “foreign buyers” was being used as a shorthand, disguised way of referring to “wealthy Chinese buyers.” In order to find evidence that such a thing did indeed occur, I approached the primary research with the intent of locating distinct examples of media bias within the coverage, specifically bias meaning a noticeable prejudice against Chinese buyers, which resulted in negative coverage of that community.

In order to better track and sort through the amount of articles examined for this thesis, I used the *Nvivo 12* software to code the 160 newspaper articles I had procured for this project. The primary item I wanted to code for was mentions of the term “foreign buyers” as well as the contexts in which they were used. Additionally, since my suspicion was that the coverage was too focused on the specific ethnicity of buyers, I also coded for any specific mentions of “Chinese” and “China,” as well as the context in which these terms were mentioned. In spite of my best efforts, however, the journalism that I examined showed me that my suspicions were correct to a degree. My research demonstrated that in the years 2015 and 2016, more than half of the articles contained at least one specific mention of Chinese people and Chinese buyers, the term saw considerably less usage in the year 2017, before largely disappearing in 2018, the final year of interest for this thesis. Therefore, I cannot say with certainty that all the coverage contained an outsized focus on the ethnicity of the wealthy buyers. Despite the term seeing less representation in the later years of the crisis, the information that was gathered from both 2015 and 2016 were still useful in establishing the possibility of media bias in the existing news coverage. One notable instance in which the issue of foreign buying was attributed to one region of the world, as reported in one article from *The Province*,

which wrote that there was a “phenomenal surge of investment from Mainland China driving homes out of reach for locals.”³⁴³ This is an indication that there was definitely a presence of such buyers in the Vancouver housing market, and that they were likely having some degree of influence on housing costs, though did not get into specifics on how much of the total number of foreign buyers they encompassed. Such links between the terms “foreign” and “Chinese” creates the connotation that Chinese people are automatically foreign. Additionally, other examples I found particularly egregious were a handful of articles from the early years of the crisis that quoted largely anecdotal evidence and accounts about the issue of foreign buyers in Vancouver. These articles relied mostly on real estate agents and other players within the market who gave personal accounts of increasing numbers of buyers who had financial ties to China, who were arriving in Vancouver and purchasing real estate properties.³⁴⁴ Anecdotal accounts are personal accounts and can be influenced by personal perspectives, meaning that they can potentially be unreliable, though I understood why such articles may have been taken too seriously. Firstly, the information was provided by a notable and trusted news organization, like *The Globe and Mail*, and that goes a long way in lending credibility to a story. Secondly, real estate agents are people who work in the housing market and are frequently in contact with customers, and it is very possible they have insights into how the market is changing that most members of the public, including informed journalists, simply do not have. However, there is an issue with putting too much trust in information of this kind, even if it is in reputable news coverage. There is no indication that the

³⁴³ Sam Cooper, “Surge of foreign cash bucks trend; Greater Vancouver.” *The Province*, 15 Oct., 2015, p. A.4. *Canadian Newsstream*.

³⁴⁴ Brent Jang, “B.C. firm looks for luxury buyers in China.” *The Globe and Mail*, 20 Jan. 2014, pg. B.3. *Canadian Newsstream*.

journalists inquired as to how real estate agents know these things, and where their information is coming from other than “anecdotes.” What is the method for assessing whether or not someone is potentially a foreigner? Is it the source of their income, their citizenship, or their last names? Since we, as consumers of the news, do not know how real estate agents get such information, it adds to the unreliability of the source. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that such pieces quoting information were not the most reliable, as real estate agents stand to benefit from selling to wealthy people, so in that sense, the source information had some bias. Real estate agents are people who stand to gain from an influx of foreign money in housing market, and are more likely to try and frame the issue as a good thing. Journalists cannot control the quality of their source, and wrote reports based on the information. The early years of the housing crisis were also marked by a lack of more reliable official data on foreign buyers from governmental and other regulatory bodies, simply because there was no tracking being done at any level of governance, meaning there was a shortage of neutral, official data that could be used to fact check the anecdotal evidence being presented by realtors. Journalists and news agencies were limited in what they could do by a lack of more reliable sources, which was something that was outside their control.

In 2015, it was the former Premier of BC Christy Clark who refused to take any action to collect data on foreign home ownership.³⁴⁵ Similarly, it was the former Deputy Premier and Minister Responsible for Housing in BC who said, in response to a question from the opposition whether the government would track such data: “I will tell the

³⁴⁵ Jeff Lee and Tiffany Crawford, “PM vows foreign home ownership study; Conservatives, if re-elected, would spend \$500,000 to gather data on housing market.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 13 Aug. 2015, p. A.1. *Canadian Newsstream*.

member that it has virtually nothing to do with the Ministry for Housing at all. Government doesn't have any policy around this, we do not discriminate against foreign ownership. The reason it [housing] is attractive internationally is because it's pretty reasonable compared to other cities like London, Singapore, Tokyo. There's no initiative at this time in government to go and interfere in the marketplace with regards to housing."³⁴⁶ This was in spite of evidence from organizations like the Royal Bank of Canada saying housing was far from reasonable in Vancouver,³⁴⁷ as well as in spite of academic data showing that governments of all levels have been courting foreign investment from Asia since the 1980's.³⁴⁸

In subsequent years, when the usage of the terms "Chinese" and "China" started fading from the wider public discourse, my attention turned to how the similar term "foreign buyers" was being used. More often than not, the term foreign buyers was used together with the word "tax" in order to describe a levy introduced by the government on all real estate transactions involving a non-Canadian buying party. What stood out about this change was the abrupt nature of it; the use of more pointed terms simply stopped. It was one of the journalists I interviewed, Rob Shaw, the legislative reporter for *The Vancouver Sun*, who mentioned that the tax was largely introduced as a way to punish overseas buyers. According to him, the tax was introduced based on little more than the fact that the public was outraged due to a perception of these large droves of wealthy buyers from China who were buying up properties and their children were speeding through the city in expensive luxury sports cars. Shaw says that after it was introduced,

³⁴⁶ Ley, "Global China," pg. 29.

³⁴⁷ Ley, "Global China," pg. 29.

³⁴⁸ Ley, "Global China," pg. 15.

people largely stopped caring about the issue, and let it fade from their thoughts.³⁴⁹ It could be that the more general nature of its name, as a “foreign-buyers tax,” led media to adopt the more neutral term for the sake of accuracy, or it could truly be that the public lost interest in the subject and, therefore, the media also moved on to reporting on housing issues that people were more concerned about. Initially, it was my belief that the term “foreign buyers” became a euphemism to allude wealthy, offshore Chinese buyers, something which had also been alluded to by journalists I interviewed, such including Shaw,³⁵⁰ though ultimately, I found that my research into the news coverage from 2013 to 2018 could not conclusively prove that was what happened.

This left me at a loss, as there was no overt signs of bias in the conventional sense that could be found in the use of a term steeped in generality and neutrality. That was when I recalled something else Shaw told me in our interview. When he was asked if he ever felt the coverage of the housing issue and foreign buyers was skewed, he said that he personally felt it was initially skewed towards the ethnicity of the buyers, before later transitioning into what he called a very “ego-driven” conversation.³⁵¹ When asked what that meant, he said it was because the coverage of and the wider conversation about the housing crisis became dominated by a small handful of notable housing experts, like academic Tom Davidoff, urban planner Andy Yan, and British Columbia’s current Attorney General David Eby. He explained that he felt, that at a certain point, the public should have stopped listening to them, and that the media should have done more to control their prominence in news coverage.³⁵² He said it was because each of them had

³⁴⁹ Rob Shaw, Phone Interview. 4 Oct. 2019.

³⁵⁰ Shaw, Phone Interview.

³⁵¹ Shaw, Phone Interview.

³⁵² Shaw, Phone Interview.

their ideas of what the problems were, and what the solutions should be, but none of them, as individuals on their own, were correct.³⁵³ Based on Shaw's explanations, I went through the coverage from 2016, 2017 and 2018 a second time, this time coding for a series of names of prominent housing experts, like Davidoff, Yan and Eby. While the overall number of times they were quoted varied from year to year, the handful of notable figures appeared more frequently than any other person quoted in the news coverage, and from the year 2016 to 2018, appeared in a total of 36 articles out of 138 from those three years combined, or around 26 percent. This is where a skewing of the coverage can be found. Although these experts come from a range of expertise and backgrounds, and each of them has their own thoughts on what can be done to fix the housing crisis, they all have one thing in common. None of them are what could be considered "foreign buyers." Their presence in news coverage highlights a glaring lack of differing voices. They represent one part of the wider housing issue as people offering solutions, but they are not representative of the voices that news media and the government, through its foreign-buyers tax, have identified to be part of the problem. This is a case of bias not as a result of overtly creating coverage that is negative towards wealthy Chinese buyers or the Chinese community, but it is a slant owing to its limited scope.

Every person has their own opinions and biases, even if they do not always make them known and try to take a more even-handed approach. The overrepresentation of a select few number of voices in comparison to other voices, while underrepresenting one crucial voice, that of the buyers themselves, meant that the news coverage was very much lacking a diverse range of opinions and perspectives, something which media is more or

³⁵³ Shaw, Phone Interview.

less expected to do in the interests of impartiality. The roughly half dozen names that I coded for are not the only housing experts in the Greater Vancouver region, yet they were constantly in the news. As Shaw said, these people became “like rock stars.”³⁵⁴ Ian Young, the Vancouver correspondent for the *South China Morning Post*, agreed to this statement to an extent saying that he took particular issue with how much media was focusing on people he called “real estate boosters,” people who were speaking out on behalf of the real estate industry without any real peer-reviewed data to back up their statements.³⁵⁵ These people, he says, include certain academics like Tsur Somerville from the University of British Columbia, as well as Bob Rennie, the founder of the one of the largest real estate marketing firms in Vancouver.³⁵⁶

This overrepresentation of “expert voices” highlighted a distinct lack of more human, ground-level voices. Very few people from the Chinese newcomer community were interviewed, and there were only a handful of articles I examined that showed the journalist spoke to someone who could have been considered a foreign buyer. While coding for any articles that quoted at least one person who could be considered a foreign buyer, I found only five out of 160. Again, this also points to the fact that the coverage produced was not overtly biased in that it was deliberately prejudiced towards people of Chinese descent, but noticeably slanted owing to the limited scope of the voices being represented. If journalism truly is about being balanced and objective, because that is what the public expects, then the balance was missing, as only one aspect of a highly nuanced and complicated argument was given a platform, which is contrary to one of the

³⁵⁴ Shaw, Phone Interview.

³⁵⁵ Ian Young, Phone Interview. 8 May 2020.

³⁵⁶ Young, Phone Interview.

basic tenets of journalism. Not only is this failure to represent differing voices a sign of systematic inaccuracy, this is also where unconscious bias can come into play. That only five out of 160 articles featured at least one voice from a foreign buyers, specifically one who is also Chinese, this suggests that relatively few attempts were made to speak to that community, as a result of a perceived language barrier. This is unconscious bias in its purest form, making assumptions about a community based on a stereotypes and preconceived notions. However, journalists might also have little to be blamed for in this situation. Newsrooms around the world are struggling with an increasing need to be fast in an increasingly digital and online world, as well as a decline in available resources.

It could be that time constraints and other shortages in the industry are forcing journalists to turn to the experts rather than other voices. Academics such as Davidoff are usually highly accessible, easy to book for interviews, and tend to be good talkers as well, making them attractive options if a journalist is in need of something to meet a tight turnaround time. Therefore, the gravitation towards a small number of prolific individuals is also a way of pushing a bias, since it is prominently featuring the opinions and perspective what truly is an elite few; people who have access to media and are in turn more accessible by the media, and enjoy the privileges of being considered an expert in the real estate field. Although, owing to the problems journalists are increasingly starting to face, I would argue that this biased coverage is also not malicious, and more or less unintentional.

Similarly, when I asked Young if he had ever felt that the term “foreign buyer” was being used as shorthand to refer to “Chinese buyers,” he said he got that impression that certain members of the public were doing that, which he says caused two problems,

the first of which he says was that it allowed people to incorrectly label all “Chinese buyers” and “immigrant buyers” as “foreigners.”³⁵⁷ “The greater confusion was that it allowed a misleading representation by industry boosters. It allowed them to correctly downplay ‘foreign buyers’ while conveniently ignoring the much more substantial role of ‘foreign money,’” he says.³⁵⁸

Through an examination of the work of David Ley, as well as the interviews with Young and the anonymous journalist, it became clearer that the focus of the stories was on the wrong aspect of the issue. The coverage I examined for this thesis was largely focused on the ethnicity of these wealthy foreign buyers, rather than the fact that they were wealthy. Ley’s paper, “*Global China and the making of Vancouver’s residential property market*,” examined how governments in the past had directly courted offshore investing since the 1980’s through the now-scrapped Business Immigration Programme, which allowed for wealthy individuals to immigrate to Canada if they were willing to invest \$800,000 Canadian in the country, which would be returned after five years.³⁵⁹ His work details how many of these people were coming from the Greater China region, first from Hong Kong and Taiwan up until the late 1990’s, and then Mainland China from then on.³⁶⁰ What Ley’s work, and the journalist who requested anonymity’s interviews focused on was the notion that where a foreign buyer comes from has no bearing on housing prices, but it is the fact that they are wealthy, and that their money, which is not earned or taxed in Canada, is being invested in real estate that was the biggest driver behind the rising costs of housing. What has the most impact on real estate is not the fact

³⁵⁷ Young, Phone Interview.

³⁵⁸ Young, Phone Interview.

³⁵⁹ Ley, “Global China,” pg. 20.

³⁶⁰ Ley, “Global China,” pg. 20.

that many of these wealthy offshore investors are Chinese, but the fact that they have money that local incomes simply cannot compete with. On the news coverage's focus on race, the anonymous journalist says: "[It] actually takes away from the more important issues. Not only is it ugly, but they're actually a distraction from what we're really trying to talk about here which is a decoupling of housing from [local] incomes which has really tragic consequences."³⁶¹ Those consequences include, but are not limited to, "difficulty in retaining key employees," younger workers leaving the city, as well as the "crowding and the downsizing of condominium units to microsuits."³⁶² In researching for this thesis, I found 139 out of 160 articles examined contained at least one mention "foreign buyers" in the body of the article. Within these 139 articles, through a word frequency search in *NVivo 12*, the terms "wealth" and "wealthy" appeared a combined total of 30 times, whereas the terms "China" and "Chinese" were seen a combined total of 106 times. This suggests that, in addressing the issue of foreign buyers, there was an outsized focus on where they were coming from, as opposed to the fact that it was their money impacting local housing prices.

Though my original theory was proven to not entirely be true, it was in some way heartening to know that the media coverage was not overtly done in a way as to present Chinese buyers in a negative manner. Regardless of how strongly people may have felt about foreign buyers, it is reasonable to say that the coverage focused too much on where they were coming from rather than their wealth. Ultimately, I have concluded that the news coverage retained a sense of bias not as a result of overt, malicious attempts to cast wealthy Chinese buyers and the wider Chinese community in a negative light, but from a

³⁶¹ Anonymous Journalist, Phone Interview. 1 May, 2020.

³⁶² Ley, "Global China," pg. 27.

shortage of reliable official data from governments, meaning it was more difficult to corroborate early use of anecdotal evidence from realtors, a reliance on a small collection of voices for commentary that were not representative of the entirety of the issue, as well as misplaced story focus. This is not to say that the bias in the coverage is unpredictable or that the news media was biased independent of other factors, but that this bias is a noticeably limited slant as a result of representing only a small number of voices and perspectives. Housing is a basic necessity for leading a safe and stable life, and the prospect of possibly losing it scared and worried many locals. However, in times of uncertainty, people will look to the media to provide information, and it is the duty of the media to be accurate and truthful. While the media coverage of the housing and affordability crisis was most likely truthful, I would hesitate to say that it was the most accurate. Since it has been established that sources that were not the most reliable were used to help contextualize the reporting, the story suffers as a result. The underlying issues of a shortage of reliable data, leading to a reliance on anecdotal evidence in earlier coverage, as well as the lack of representation for a wider range of perspectives contributed to what I have ultimately concluded about the news coverage, in terms of unintentionally including and creating bias. In some ways, this sort of bias is also unconscious. With a shortage of resources and the data needed to better fact-check potential stories, a journalist could form their own conclusions and find voices to confirm those conclusions. Similarly, perceived language barriers mean a journalist who only speaks English is less likely to engage with voices that they think they would have

problems communicating with. As a result, they gravitate towards voices that seem “right,”³⁶³ voices that can confirm or help push their own perceptions forward.

However, these are issues that can be fixed. It is not likely that the media is completely unaware of its own shortcomings, and much praise should go to journalists like Christopher Cheung, Frances Bula, Rob Shaw, Ian Young and the journalist who wished to remain anonymous for recognizing and acknowledging that these were and are issues that journalists face in the current media era. Journalists and the journalism industry as a whole are able to get ahead of issues like this by recognizing the importance of having a diversity of opinions and perspectives, even something as simple as “having both sides of the story,” a basic practice of journalism, can be a meaningful way of enacting change. Approaching anecdotal evidence with more skepticism and making it more obvious within the coverage will also aid in contextualizing the information provided in the news coverage. Additionally, there needs to be wider recognition that the journalism industry is one that benefits from having time to do the proper work. In a media era defined by a constant need to feed the information system due to social media and the instant transfer of information via the internet, journalists are under more time constraints than eras previously. As has been noted by Cheung, so many times journalists find themselves assigned to a story with a mandate to have it completed by the end of the day.³⁶⁴ As a result, many do not spend as much time chasing down more unique or contrarian perspectives, choosing to book experts because of their reputation and accessibility. However, such coverage, as Cheung says, often does not contain any additional analysis, and often allows the expert to say what they wish without context or

³⁶³ Bailey, “Implicit Bias,” pg. 28.

³⁶⁴ Christopher Cheung, Phone Interview. 26 Sept. 2019.

questioning.³⁶⁵ Newsroom leadership should recognize the value in having good representation. Diversity of opinions and perspectives makes people more inquisitive, simply by virtue of having seen a differing perspective. Though there will be those that have already made up their minds before even opening a newspaper, or turning on the radio or television, the act of leading the conversation through fresh voices is one other thing that can push our industry forward.

Media is constantly being accused of being biased, partisan or any other synonym for taking a side. Though I believe that the media coverage of the Vancouver housing and affordability crisis is biased, I maintain that it was not intentional nor done in an effort to smear any one community within Vancouver. There are issues at play that interfere with the journalism industry's ability to operate, some of them beyond the control of any player within the industry, such as opinions of our sources, or the specific things they will say when we ask them questions. However, there are things that journalists can control, such as the choice to pursue new sources and new leads, as well as the leadership's ability to encourage journalists to find and represent new perspectives, and give journalists the time they need to complete their reporting in a meaningful way. Journalism has the ability to lead the public discourse. I believe it also has the ability to take the lead and enact change in our communities as well as within itself, so that the coverage done will not only be able to drive the conversations further, but also be fairer to the communities we serve.

³⁶⁵ Cheung, Phone Interview.

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Appendix 1 - Newspaper Archive Search Strategies

For searches conducted in the Canadian Newsstream archive, all search keywords were found in the body of the newspaper articles. Terms following “NOT” in each search were filters used to exclude articles from areas unrelated to British Columbia and Vancouver, the region of focus for this thesis, as well as any editorial or opinion pieces owing to such articles largely being built on personal views and perspectives.

Database: Canadian Newsstream <January 1, 2013 to December 31, 2018>

Search Terms:

Search 1 (5,483 citations)

(foreign buyers) AND (housing prices) NOT (Other Sources AND Magazines)

Search 2 (1037 citations):

(housing prices) AND (foreign buyers) AND vancouver AND (pub.exact("The Globe and Mail" OR "The Vancouver Sun" OR "The Vancouver Sun (Online)" OR "The Province" OR "Richmond News" OR "The Province (Online)") NOT at.exact("Commentary" OR "Editorial") AND stype.exact("Newspapers") AND pd(20130101-20181231)) AND pd(>20130101)

Search 3 (190 citations):

(housing prices) AND (foreign buyers) AND vancouver AND (pub.exact("The Globe and Mail" OR "The Vancouver Sun" OR "The Vancouver Sun (Online)" OR "The Province" OR "Richmond News" OR "The Province (Online)") AND loc.exact(("Canada" OR "British Columbia Canada") NOT ("United States--US" OR "Montreal Quebec Canada" OR "Calgary Alberta Canada" OR "Australia" OR "Singapore" OR "New York" OR "Quebec Canada" OR "India" OR "San Francisco California" OR "Quebec City Quebec Canada" OR "California" OR "Florida" OR "New Zealand" OR "Saskatchewan Canada" OR "Abbotsford British Columbia Canada" OR "Gulf Islands" OR "Los Angeles California" OR "Arizona" OR "Denmark" OR "France" OR "Georgia" OR "Iran" OR "Israel" OR "Mexico" OR "Middle East" OR "South Africa" OR "Toronto Ontario Canada" OR "United Kingdom--UK" OR "Alaska" OR "Burrard Inlet" OR "Cyprus" OR "Detroit Michigan" OR "Germany" OR "Great Bear Rainforest" OR "Greece" OR "Lake Ontario" OR "Las Vegas Nevada" OR "Luxembourg" OR "Manitoba Canada" OR "Netherlands" OR "Newfoundland & Labrador Canada" OR "Niagara Falls" OR "Nova Scotia Canada" OR "Palm Desert California" OR "Portugal" OR "Powell River" OR "Russia" OR "Switzerland" OR "Texas" OR "Ukraine" OR "Vietnam" OR "Virginia" OR "Washington DC")) NOT at.exact("Commentary" OR "Editorial") AND stype.exact("Newspapers") AND pd(20130101-20181231)) AND pd(>20130101)

Search 4 (177 citations):

((housing prices) AND (foreign buyers) AND vancouver AND (pub.exact("The Globe and Mail" OR "The Vancouver Sun" OR "The Vancouver Sun (Online)" OR "The Province" OR "Richmond News" OR "The Province (Online)") AND loc.exact(("Canada" OR "British Columbia Canada") NOT ("United States US" OR "Montreal Quebec Canada" OR "Calgary Alberta Canada" OR "Australia" OR "Singapore" OR "New York" OR "Quebec Canada" OR "India" OR "San Francisco California" OR "Quebec City Quebec Canada" OR "California" OR "Florida" OR "New Zealand" OR "Saskatchewan Canada" OR "Abbotsford British Columbia Canada" OR "Gulf Islands" OR "Los Angeles California" OR "Arizona" OR "Denmark" OR "France" OR "Georgia" OR "Iran" OR "Israel" OR "Mexico" OR "Middle East" OR "South Africa" OR "Toronto Ontario Canada" OR "United Kingdom UK" OR "Alaska" OR "Burrard Inlet" OR "Cyprus" OR "Detroit Michigan" OR "Germany" OR "Great Bear Rainforest" OR "Greece" OR "Lake Ontario" OR "Las Vegas Nevada" OR "Luxembourg" OR "Manitoba Canada" OR "Netherlands" OR "Newfoundland & Labrador Canada" OR "Niagara Falls" OR "Nova Scotia Canada" OR "Palm Desert California" OR "Portugal" OR "Powell River" OR "Russia" OR "Switzerland" OR "Texas" OR "Ukraine" OR "Vietnam" OR "Virginia" OR "Washington DC"))) NOT at.exact("Commentary" OR "Editorial") AND stype.exact("Newspapers") AND pd(20130101-20181231)) AND pd(>20130101)) NOT (at.exact("Feature" OR "Commentary" OR "Editorial") AND stype.exact("Newspapers") AND pd(20130101-20181231)) AND pd(>20130101))

Appendix 2 - Interview Questions

1. How long have you been covering the Vancouver housing crisis?
2. What are some of the changes you have noticed in how the media covers this issue over the years you have covered this issue?
3. Was there ever a time that you felt the coverage and reportage you were doing was skewed, even just a little bit?
 - a. If so, in what way?
4. 'Foreign buyers' is an extremely complicated and nuanced issue. However, there seems to be an attitude in Vancouver that "'foreign' equals 'Chinese'." What has your experience covering the housing market told you about the influence of foreign buyers?
5. Was there ever a time you felt pressure to cover the housing market in a certain way? Perhaps from an editor or a senior producer, or to keep in line with the overall tone of coverage established in Vancouver?

**participants will be reminded that they can choose not to answer a question should they feel uncomfortable at any point*
6. Media messages are powerful in the way they can influence people's thinking, attitudes and perspective of the world around them. Have you ever been worried that media coverage of the housing crisis has reinforced biases towards immigrants (particularly those from China), or inflamed existing prejudices towards minority groups?
7. How would you say the media practices in covering the Vancouver housing crisis needs to change, maybe to become more fair and/or balanced?