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Canadian Sociology for Sale? Academic Branding in the 'Neo-Liberal Age'

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Abstract Narratives about the influence of neo-liberal forces on post-secondary education are legion within the contemporary literature. Some have recently argued that the promotional tactics used by Canadian sociology departments reflect the broader corporatization of the system, highlighting the vocationalization of the discipline at the hands of market forces. We conduct a mixed-methods analysis of the marketing practises used by English-speaking sociology departments in Canada and find only limited support for this argument. Instead, observed promotional tactics appear to be quite diverse, aimed at multiple stakeholders, and reflecting the complex institutional environment in which sociology departments operate.

Keywords Canada · Departments · Marketing

Introduction

Post-secondary education (PSE) has changed drastically over the last three decades, giving rise to competing polemics by politicians, academics and journalists about excessive corporatization, declining academic standards or the irrelevance and outdatedness of the modern research university (Côté and Allahar 2007, 2011). Research tells us that waning government support has exposed universities across the globe to the vagaries of the market, forcing them to become more entrepreneurial, searching for and competing over alternative sources of financial capital (Slaughter and Leslie 1997, 2001; Slaughter and Rhodes 2004; Rhodes and Slaughter 1997). This is evidenced in

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part by the proliferation of partnerships between universities and corporate entities across North American PSE, including a long list of research centres that dawn donor names (Buchbinder and Newson 1990; Newson 1994). This hyper-competitive environment has also motivated PSE organizations to more aggressively and strategically market themselves to external audiences (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006; Kirp 2009; Marginson 2006). Whether through social media (Belanger et al. 2014; Constantinides and Zinck Stagno 2011) or more conventional promotional materials (Davidson 2015; Hartley and Morphew 2008; Hite and Yearwood 2001), contemporary PSE institutions are playing a more active role in the management of their reputations.

Canadian PSE was initially described by scholars as lagging behind other English-speaking counterparts, such as the U.K. and U.S., with respects to the presence of these trends (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). Canadian researchers have most recently argued, however, that the PSE system north of the 49th parallel is "certainly no longer, and perhaps never was, the 'exception'" (Metcalfe 2010, p. 490; also see Quirke and Davies 2002). The system is said to be exposed to many of the same pressures, and institutions within it behaving in ways consistent with, counterparts across the world. In a nation with deep historical connections to the U.K., France and the United States, the Canadian landscape has been and continues to be shaped by diverse influences. In many ways, it looks like a modified version of American PSE, but with a generally 'flatter' hierarchical structure, no truly elite institutions and less overall institutional differentiation (Davies and Hammack 2005; Davies and Zarifa 2012; Weingarten et al. 2013). The system also has notable regional differences (Shanahan and Jones 2007). PSE in Quebec, for example, exhibits a distinct French 'flavour', particularly in Francophone colleges and universities. Despite these peculiarities, and like other public systems, Canadian PSE is also facing declining government support, increasing concern for labour market outcomes, student access and fiscal accountability.

Canadian sociology departments face a complicated legitimacy crisis in this broader context, for the discipline is not linked to specific labour market sectors, like engineering or nursing, and does not have 'scientific' status, like the natural sciences. Sociology is often seen as being an "impossible science," promoting left-liberal ideology and social reform as much as science, offering interesting and accessible but non-scientific material to masses of students (Turner and Turner 1990). This reputational dilemma is particularly difficult in Canada given that the discipline was only institutionalized in this nation during the 1960s and 1970s, unlike in the United States, where sociology has older roots (Turner and Turner 1990). Moreover, the 'flatness' of Canadian PSE means that the discipline is not protected from technical pressures (Meyer and Rowan 1977) in the same way that the elite status of Ivy League institutions, such as Harvard and Columbia, has sheltered the 'core' of American sociology. In the Canadian context, the discipline has also suffered highly visible attacks from the former Conservative Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, who famously argued that in a period where the country faced terrorist threats, now was not the time to 'commit sociology.'

The situation is not all bleak, however, for those concerned with sociology's disciplinary project. Sociology departments tend to have relatively healthy enrollments compared to other humanities and social science disciplines, and are also connected to a range of social issues (e.g. crime, race and immigration) that have practical and policy implications. In addition, within the Canadian context, with a stronger welfare tradition and less polarized politics, sociology is not exposed to the hostility that one sees in the

age of the Tea Party and Donald Trump within the United States. The 2015 election of the Liberal Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, has opened up new space for sociology in Canada, as he campaigned on the expansion of social spending and a broad commitment to the rights of women, sexual minorities, immigrants and indigenous people. Nonetheless, the broader politics of fiscal accountability and current economic conditions continue to feed pressures for sociology departments to provide students with applied skills and contribute to the economic prosperity of the nation. These environmental conditions have also placed a premium on 'selling' and branding sociology in Canada, as we have also witnessed in the United States and globally.

In this paper we examine how Canadian sociology departments are selling their services within this competitive and volatile environment. For some scholars in Canada, these external pressures are perceived to have led to an almost total capitulation to neo-liberalism, as sociology departments rush to abandon the traditional liberal arts and brand themselves as providing job training for the new economy (Carroll and Beaton 2000; Newson 1994). For other Canadian critics of PSE, the traditional power of tenured professors is said to remain unaffected by recent developments. Sociology and other social science departments are believed to remain inward facing, rather than sensitive to the needs of students or the broader public (Coates and Morrison 2013). Puddephatt and Nelsen (2010) have advanced the debate by carefully gathering empirical data on the marketing strategies undertaken by sociology departments on their web-sites, but their theoretical framework remains rooted to some extent in an overly abstract and insufficiently sociological critique of neo-liberalist influence on PSE. Looking beyond these polemics, we ask a number of empirical questions: what marketing strategies are sociology departments actually employing to communicate legitimacy to external audiences? And, how can we understand sociology's branding efforts in light of current organizational theories? We explore this issue by conducting a mixed-methods analysis of the home pages of all English-speaking departments within the country, combining a basic quantitative analysis of textual trends with more traditional forms of qualitative exploration.

Our findings show that despite ubiquitous concerns with the corporatization or vocationalization of PSE, Canadian sociology departments espouse marketing strategies that reflect a concern with signalling a range of messages, only one of which is links to the labour market. Although there are some differences across the range of institutional prestige that exists in Canadian PSE, sociology department websites appear primarily concerned with 1) communicating basic information, such as the size of their programs and areas of specialization, 2) providing the broader public with a definition of sociology and, 3) mostly strikingly, flashing research intensiveness. Contrary to narratives that suggest we live in an era of capitulation to neo-liberalism, it is only at the lowest rungs of the institutional hierarchy that we witness serious efforts being made to package sociology in a vocational sense, as a pathway to employment. We theorize that such promotional practises reflect not only the plurality of the discipline, but also, the complex institutional environment in which departments operate. Sociology, exposed to a variety of conflicting pressures, is forced to signal legitimacy to a host of external stakeholders, certainly including undergraduate students concerned with employment, but also, crucially involving competing academic

departments and the administrators who provide funding and new tenure track lines; graduate students searching for post-graduate academic training; and, the status hierarchies enforced by scholars in sociology and other disciplines and related research programs.

Marketing in PSE

There is a sizeable literature that addresses the topic of marketing within PSE (see Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006 for a review). It has examined marketing practises through diverse promotional materials, including "viewbooks" (Hite and Yearwood 2001; Hartley and Morphew 2008), promotional profiles (Pizarro Milian and Quirke in press), social media (Belanger et al. 2014) and television commercials (Clayton et al. 2012; Harris 2009; Tobolowsky and Lowery 2014). The variety of institutional types studied by this body of work makes it difficult to summarize the current state of knowledge within this sub-field. Broadly speaking, it can be said that PSE institutions, like individuals, put their 'best foot forward', strategically branding themselves by employing symbolic resources at their disposal. Thus, for example, those who possess impressive buildings or campus landscapes have been found to showcase them in promotional materials (Clayton et al. 2012; Harris 2009; Tobolowsky and Lowery 2014). Meanwhile, those who specialize in technical and expedited training, such as for-profit colleges, bring these distinct aspects of their services to the forefront in promotional materials (Pizarro Milian and Hicks 2014; Pizarro Milian and Quirke in press). This strategic flashing of appealing organizational features has often taken precedence over the communication of more functionally important information, such as tuition fees and course information (Hartley and Morphew 2008).

With few exceptions, the literature discussed above has focused on studying marketing practises at the institutional level, and thus, on universities and colleges as a whole. Hence, it is a less than ideal platform from which to launch an examination of academic sub-units, such as sociology departments. There are several important exceptions, though. Nicholls et al. (1995) and Heslop and Nadeau (2010) have examined the marketing practises of MBA programs. Opoku et al. (2006) and Argenti (2000) have also looked at the branding of business schools more broadly. Yet, across the existing literature, very limited attention has been devoted to the study of how sociology departments sell themselves to external audiences. To our knowledge, Puddephatt and Nelsen (2010) provide the only scholarly analysis of the promotional practises employed by this type of academic unit in Canada. As a result, our work draws extensively from, and attempts to build on, their relatively recent empirical findings. Below, we review important aspects of Puddephatt and Nelsen's (2010) work which have influenced our analysis.

The Promise of a Sociology Degree in Canada

Puddephatt and Nelsen's (2010) study attempted to examine the 'promise' of a sociology degree in Canada – the thoughts and ideas that were used to portray an undergraduate education in this discipline as appealing. To do so, they analyzed undergraduate program descriptions posted on the websites of all Canadian

English-speaking departments. They focused specifically on textual data, employing the QSR NVivo software to identify and document ways in which sociology departments framed "what the expressed purpose of a sociology degree is, and why students ought to enroll" (Puddephatt and Nelsen 2010, p. 411). A key element of their study was the exploration of potential distinctions that existed between sociology departments housed in universities designated as 'doctoral-comprehensive' and 'primarily undergraduate' by the popular *Maclean's* rankings. Their hypothesis being that different levels of institutional status or prestige would produce variations in the marketing tactics used on department websites.

Employing this methodological and conceptual scheme, Puddephatt and Nelsen (2010) produced several interesting findings (see their table on p. 413 for an overview). First, they found that departments at primarily undergraduate universities were more prone to framing their services as consistent with traditional conceptions of a 'liberal arts education' (see Kraatz and Zajac 1996). This included, among other things, emphasizing that they endeavoured to provide 'critical thinking' skills that would equip graduates with the tools to "challenge enduring social problems" (Puddephatt and Nelsen 2010, p. 415). Meanwhile, departments housed in doctoral-comprehensive universities tended to emphasize the provision of a more "elite" type of educational experience, one provided by leading researchers and emphasizing the inculcation of more concrete, market-based skills. Puddephatt and Nelsen (2010) lamented that, across all Canadian sociology departments, only a small proportion claimed to provide an intellectually 'stimulating' educational experience, one of the traditional goals of PSE.

Despite these insightful findings, Puddephatt and Nelsen's (2010) pioneering study does not allow us to answer a number of important questions. Firstly, they focused on a department's attempt to convey quality or legitimacy to a single external constituent: undergraduate students. This led them to ignore marketing strategies devised to influence the opinions of other important actors across the field of PSE who are similarly vital to the survival and reputation of an academic unit. For departments providing graduate-level education, this includes graduate students, who are subsequent flag-bearers for the department upon graduation. 'Wooing' the brightest of these individuals to enrol is key given that, as Clark (1983) once noted, PSE institutions are "assigned different levels of prestige" linked to their ability to place graduates in prestigious occupational roles (p. 63). A track record of placing Ph.D. graduates in departments at prestigious universities is a great sources of status, especially within the dire job market of the past decade. Faculty members at other institutions are also included among the group of important actors ignored by Puddephatt and Nelsen's (2010) study. They not only influence institutional performance on reputation-based university rankings (Dill and Soo 2005; Hazelkorn 2015), but also, serve as a potential labour pool for academic positions. These limitations in Puddephatt and Nelsen's (2010) work are not the product of a haphazard research design, but rather, flowed from their stated purpose of examining the promise of an undergraduate sociology degree. Nonetheless, such conceptual decisions do lead them to produce a truncated understanding of the marketing tactics employed by Canadian sociology departments.

In addition, Puddephatt and Nelsen (2010) focused on a small portion of textual data describing undergraduate programs. Modern web pages are increasingly multi-dimensional social spaces that communicate information through not only text, but also, still images, video and sound. At the time of writing, numerous Canadian universities were already capitalizing on the availability of these alternative means of communication. Trent University, for example, employed what appeared to be drone technology to film aerial videos of its campus. It used such video imagery as a dynamic background on its institutional home page. Granted, the web experience described above is far from the norm across PSE websites, yet it is not uncommon for department websites to employ a variety of still images of individuals and other symbols. These symbols have themselves been the subject of growing attention within the PSE literature (see Baruch, 2006; Holloway and Holloway 2005; Metcalfe 2010). In addition to targeting only one type of data, Puddephatt and Nelsen (2010) also focused on information typically located multiple "clicks" into a department's website. As a result, they focused on an organizational artifact that receives relatively less attention than a department's home page (Singh et al. 2005). Information studies research (Hölscher and Strube 2000; Jansen et al. 2000; Jansen et al. 2000) shows that most web searches are generally short, rendering pages not readily available to users, such as those studied by Puddephatt and Nelsen (2010), subject to less public attention.

Theory & Hypotheses

In this study, we endeavour to build on Puddephatt and Nelsen's (2010) work by infusing our analysis with traditional (see Meyer and Rowan 1977) and contemporary (Quirke 2009, 2013) insights from the sociology of organizations. The former tells us that within highly institutionalized fields, such as PSE, there are strong isomorphic pressures that produce homogeneity within organizational populations. Typically, this entails the mimicking of forms adopted by peers perceived as successful (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Mizruchi and Fein 1999). Within the context of PSE, this means transitioning towards greater research intensiveness. As contemporary research (Brint et al. 2006; Hermanowicz 2005) shows, research intensive forms are viewed as ideal by many administrators and academics, and even privileged by scholars of PSE themselves, receiving the lion's share of their attention (Kirst and Stevens 2015). As Lacroix and Maheu (2015) note, at the organizational level:

> … the research university has become a point of reference and a standard with strong ideological overtones. In most societies today any university that takes itself seriously claims to be a research university… It is not surprising, then, that most, if not all, of the institutions in a given national academic system will attempt to pass themselves off as research universities (p. 7–8).

This line of thought posits that isomorphic pressures should motivate attempts to signal research intensiveness (e.g. grants, publications) among department websites. This strategy will render departments legitimate in the eyes of academics. It will also

serve the purpose of keeping PSE administrators at bay, especially those engaging in 'downsizing' efforts. Both of these stakeholders greatly value research due to its positive association with prestige.

> **H1**: Departments will signal research intensiveness.
> **H2**: Departments will cater to alternative audiences.

We posit, though, that sociology departments operate within a complex institutional environment (see Quirke 2009; 2013) that is home to *multiple stakeholders*. As such, department websites should also exhibit diverse promotional practises that correspond with multiple interests. There is, for example, the broader public, from which departments draw undergraduate students, and thus, the majority of their funding via tuition and government subsidies. The broader public also consists of voters who support politicians who provide the public funding for the institution, a secondary but increasingly important external audience as fiscal pressures increase in contemporary Canada. Moreover, sociology departments are also competing with other academic units within the university, as resource constraints force competition between various disciplines, interdisciplinary units and non-academic priorities (e.g. student services, sports and recreation). There are also employers or industry, to which departments must cater if they wish their graduates to be competitive in the labour market. Pleasing this last stakeholder has become increasingly important in Canada, where some provincial governments have begun to track and make public the employment, satisfaction and loan default rates of each institution's graduates. Catering to both of the abovementioned stakeholders (public/industry), of course, is something that some observers have lamented for its detrimental effect on academic freedom. It is also said to lead to the demise of the liberal arts and the vocationalization of the university. We expect that departments, especially those located in lower-status teaching universities, will be more prone to engage in promotional practises geared towards these alternative stakeholders. This strategy will likely be adopted due to the inability of these departments to compete with larger counterparts when it comes to signalling research productivity. Similar forms of anticipatory subordination have been previously observed within American PSE (see Brint and Karabel 1991). Institutions higher up the hierarchy will likely be more prone to signalling status to potential graduate students and to administrators concerned with establishing priorities as various faculties and disciplines compete for faculty positions and various resources.

Data & Methodology

Our methodological and empirical strategy deviates from that employed by Puddephatt and Nelsen (2010) in a number of ways. Given that we are interested in the broader, department-level marketing practises employed to communicate the legitimacy of the unit to a variety of external actors, we analyze the content present on department home pages. As scholars (Bucy 1999; Geissler et al. 2001; Ha and James 1998; Singh et al. 2005) have long noted, home pages serve as virtual 'gateways' to organizational web sites, being the site of first contact for many visitors. It is thus no surprise that they have been the unit of analysis for several existing marketing studies (Yoo and Jin 2004; Liu

et al. 1997; Thelwall 2002). In turn, we examine not only textual data, but also, the graphic content of home pages. This includes not only still images, but also, the occasional videos. These decisions were made in order to more holistically account for marketing practises adopted by departments.

To examine the empirical data mentioned above, we adopt a mixed-methodological strategy that includes both a basic quantitative analysis of text and a more traditional qualitative exploration of web pages. We began the former by using *Rapidminer Studio* in order to scrape the textual content of all 55 English-speaking sociology departments listed on the Canadian Sociological Association website. This procedure generated a data set of profiles that is 68 % larger than Puddephatt and Nelsen's (2010), containing a total of 28,642 words. That translates into approximately 70 single spaced pages of material using standard sized (12 point) font. We then used *Rapidminer Studio* to calculate the number of times each word and two-word n-gram (e.g. cultural_sociology, job_market) appeared across home pages. This first step of our analysis allowed us to develop a basic bird's eye view of the textual content of home pages and to develop an a priori list of themes, based on high and low usage words, to examine further during our qualitative analysis of home pages.

The second step of our analysis consisted of a more traditional and laborious qualitative inspection of the content of each home page. From December, 2015 to February, 2016, we visited and inspected the websites of each English-speaking department in the country on six separate occasions. Each round of analysis took just over 4 hours to complete. During these visits, we took detailed notes as we read the textual content contained on home pages, examined images and watched videos. We also manually tracked the presence of themes within each page using a spread sheet. This allowed us to later produce basic descriptive statistics for identified trends. We chose this more traditional form of qualitative analysis over more modern NVivo-assisted coding because home pages regularly contained information that was dynamic, only visible through user interaction or designed to randomly vary from one visit to the next. For example, the department home pages at the universities of Victoria, Calgary, Lethbridge, and other institutions, had a series of announcements and images set to automatically rotate during a user's visit. The background images and quotes on the department home page at the University of Alberta, for example, also varied from one visit to the next. Had we simply captured and coded screenshots of these home pages in QSR NVivo we would have not been able to observe the information contained in these dynamic website components. Through this second step of analysis we were also able to read textual content and develop a more nuanced understanding of how popular themes identified through the quantitative component played out on websites. A visual inspection of home pages also allowed us to examine graphical data to which our first step of analysis was entirely insensitive.

As several methodologists (Creswell and Clark 2007; Jick 1979) have argued, mixed-methodology of the type employed in this paper, including both quantitative and qualitative components, has the advantage of allowing researchers to triangulate their empirical findings, ensuring that they are not artifacts of specific methodological lenses. Given the multiple approaches used to develop an understanding of marketing practises, we are confident in the validity of the findings presented in this paper.

Findings

Basic Descriptive Statistics

A basic quantitative analysis of the textual data was useful in allowing us to identify rudimentary word and n-gram usage patterns across the entire set of home pages. There were no surprises when it came to 'high usage' words (see Table 1 below). For example, a high percentage of home pages regularly referred to "students" and "faculty". References to "research" were also quite popular, providing preliminary evidence that this may be a popular theme across department home pages. We also paid attention to the presence of keywords associated with Puddephatt and Nelsen's (2010) earlier findings. This included, for example, terms associated with employment, including "careers", "skills" and "jobs". Most of these employment-related terms were used relatively infrequently on home pages.

Pooling home pages by the *Maclean's* (medical-doctoral/primarily undergraduate) category of their institutions[1], as done by Puddephatt and Nelsen (2010), revealed few notable differences in word or n-gram usage. First, the websites of departments at primarily undergraduate universities seemingly gave more attention (71 % vs. 40 %) to "courses". References to labour market associated terms like "careers" (57 % vs. 19 %), "skills" (39 % vs. 19 %) and "employment" (29 % vs. 11 %) were also more common on the websites of departments at primarily undergraduate institutions. Despite observing these differentials at this stage, we do not interpret them as definitive findings. We believe that reviewing word and n-gram usage, in the manner done above, can be useful for identifying basic textual trends, but it is not a methodological tool that is sensitive to more complex language. For example, though we were able to query the data for the phrase "liberal arts", the sentiment of this idea could be communicated in ways that do not employ this exact term. Similarly, usage rates tell us nothing about the information conveyed on websites through images or videos. Developing a nuanced understanding of the presence of trends across home pages thus required a complementary and more in-depth qualitative inspection that we undertake in the next section.

Qualitative Analysis

A qualitative inspection of home pages allowed us to develop a more refined understanding of how Canadian sociology departments sold themselves to different stakeholders (Table 2). In several cases, our preliminary quantitative analysis proved useful in identifying meaningful trends. In others, observed strategies were found to be unrelated to the a priori list of themes developed through word usage rates. The latter occurrences attest to the utility of our mixed-methodological approach for producing a more accurate and reliable understanding of empirical trends. Prominent promotional themes identified included: 1) providing functional information, 2) defining sociology and 3)

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[1] At the time of writing, *Maclean's* did not rank the institutions in which 13 of our departments were housed. We thus, like Puddephatt and Nelsen (2015), used our judgement, as well as data on enrollments (undergraduate/graduate) and research intensiveness (tri-council Funding), to categorize institutions in a manner similar to comparable counterparts that were ranked by *Macleans's*.

Table 1 Select terms and n-grams in department home pages: percentage presence by Maclean's category

Term / N-Gram	Doctoral-comprehensive ($N = 27$)	Primarily undergraduate ($N = 28$)	Total
"research"	23 (85 %)	23 (82 %)	46 (84 %)
"students"	18 (67 %)	24 (86 %)	42 (76 %)
"faculty"	22 (81 %)	24 (86 %)	46 (84 %)
"courses"	11 (41 %)	20 (71 %)	31 (56 %)
"careers"	5 (19 %)	16 (57 %)	21 (38 %)
"skills"	5 (19 %)	11 (39 %)	16 (29 %)
"employment"	3 (11 %)	8 (29 %)	11 (20 %)
"liberal_arts"	3 (11 %)	3 (11 %)	6 (11 %)
"jobs"	3 (11 %)	2 (7 %)	5 (9 %)

Percentages are rounded

flashing research intensiveness. Below, we discuss these trends by drawing on typical examples from department home pages .

Functional Signalling

Our qualitative inspection revealed that many departments (31/55–56 %), especially those at doctoral-comprehensive schools (19/27–70 %), provided descriptions of their internal environments. In some cases, this consisted of specific references to the size of the department, measured as the number of faculty or students housed within the academic unit. Thus, the department at the University of Toronto, for example, proudly proclaimed that their "community of scholars includes almost 60 faculty members, outstanding postdoctoral scholars and creative and engaged graduate students". It also drew attention to the fact that it was "growing, with six new faculty hires to be made this year", as well as incoming cohorts of 13 Masters' and 11 Ph.D. students. Mount Royal also emphasized its modest yet growing group of faculty and students.

Descriptions of departments also consisted, at times, of references to their areas of specialization. This included not only specific sub-fields (e.g. race, gender), but also, methodological approaches and audiences (e.g. policy, public). Though plainly stated on many websites in a list-like fashion, these discussions of areas of "strength" were

Table 2 Manually coded themes in department home pages: percentage presence by Maclean's category

Coded themes	Doctoral-comprehensive (27) Pages Present In / %	Primarily undergraduate (28) Pages Present In / %	Total (55) Pages Present In / %
Definition of sociology	11 (41 %)	20 (71 %)	31 (56 %)
Functional information	19 (70 %)	12 (43 %)	31 (56 %)
Research intensiveness	19 (70 %)	4 (14 %)	23 (42 %)
Labour market	4 (15 %)	13 (46 %)	17 (31 %)

also usefully embedded in broader narratives in others. At times, references to specialization were entwined with institutional histories or descriptions of current academic 'prowess'. The department at Western University, for example, proclaimed itself to have a "historic strength" in "Population Dynamics and Social Inequality (Fig. 1)."

Departmental descriptions also included signals of their ideological leanings or traditions. Consider the passage observed at Brock University's sociology department website. It plainly stated that the academic unit was "committed to a critical, social justice approach", one that entails researching and teaching students about "significant social issues." Similarly, the department at York University emphasized their "critical approach", one that challenges the status quo and promotes "greater social justice" (see screenshot provided below) (Fig. 2).

This advertising of internal characteristics likely plays an important function. References to size, for example, communicate the vitality of the department and its standing vis-à-vis others within the institution. Some departments are able to 'beat their chests' about their swelling professorship and enrollments, signalling to administrators, competitors and potential future members alike, including both established researchers and potential graduate students, that this is a place 'on the up'. References to ideological leanings, combined with the informal reputation of departments, are also likely to facilitate self-selection processes. Consider the example of the department at Brock University, which is certainly not unique in this respect. Knowledge of the ideological leanings of a department may allow what Burawoy (2005) would describe as aspiring "professional" or "policy" sociologists to avoid such a place in favour of more "mainstream" departments (Davies 2009), just as "critical" and "public sociologists" would look for programs that fit their intellectual self-concept (Gross 2002). Similar types of self-selection could also be informed by the signalling of departmental specialization. Graduate students wishing to specialize in quantitative methods, for example, may gravitate towards academic units that showcase it as a main departmental strength and shy away from those that flash conflicting characteristics (e.g. qualitative methods, anti-positivist epistemology).

What is sociology?

A second notable feature of sociology department websites was that a sizeable group (31/55–56 %) provided simple definitions of what the discipline is or does. This was particularly common among departments housed in primarily undergraduate

WELCOME TO SOCIOLOGY AT WESTERN

Western Sociology has a historic strength and commitment to research excellence in the field of **Population Dynamics and Social Inequality**. Our productive and internationally recognized faculty publish in the discipline's most prestigious journals. We offer outstanding research training for graduate students at both the M.A. and Ph.D. levels in the theoretical and empirical study of various dimensions of Population Dynamics and Social Inequality. Western Sociology is also home to award-winning teachers and offers undergraduate programs in both Sociology and Criminology. Check out the above links for more information about our academic programs and faculty.

Fig. 1 Screenshot of Functional Signalling from the Sociology Department at Western University. Retrieved from http://sociology.uwo.ca/

Fig. 2 Screenshot of Ideological Signalling from the Sociology Department at York University. Retrieved from http://soci.laps.yorku.ca/

universities (20/28–71 %). Such definitions were often partnered with graphical representations of 'society' (e.g. a globe), or topics that sociologists are known to study, such as poverty in the developing world, political protests or elections (Fig. 3).

We found this activity consequential for a number of reasons. First, judging by the plain language used, it was apparent that definitions were aimed at a broader public audience. There was no disciplinary jargon which would otherwise signal a more specialized academic audience. Secondly, and perhaps not surprisingly, it is worth noting that there was no standard definition of sociology. In most cases, definitions consisted of generic references to the study of "society", or listed a number of topics (e.g. crime, culture), which are not the exclusive domain of sociology and also studied by adjacent disciplines (e.g. anthropology, criminology). In other occasions, sociology was framed in a more rigid sense, as either a "science" or "systematic" method of observation. The latter was far from common, though. This variety of definitions neatly corresponds with the theoretical, methodological and political plurality that characterizes North American sociology (Burawoy 2005; Davies 2009; McLaughlin 2005; McLaughlin 2014; Puddephat and McLaughlin 2015).

It is useful to theorize what this promotional strategy says about the broader state of the discipline *vis-à-vis* its counterparts. It seems logical that attempts to communicate

Fig. 3 Screenshot of a Graphical Representation of Sociology from the department at the University of Waterloo. Note: Retrieved from https://uwaterloo.ca/sociology-and-legal-studies/

definitions are triggered by the perceived lack of familiarity that the public has with what sociology is and does. In the absence of such suspicion, there would appear to be little benefit from advertising such information on prime web space. It seems unlikely that colleagues in other departments, such as mathematics, history or economics, would engage in similar promotional behaviour. Each of these disciplines is strongly institutionalized across the different tiers of most educational systems. Virtually anyone who has experienced organized schooling in an English-speaking country has been exposed to these fields through compulsory classes. As such, for math, history or economics professors, providing self-definitions may be perceived as unnecessary. The observed tendency of Canadian sociology departments to define the discipline is likely indicative of its less than institutionalized condition.

We perceive these two empirical trends presented thus far to be interesting, but largely predictable. Surely, departments can be expected to put their best foot forward, presenting their areas of strength and distinguishing characteristics. It is also no secret that we are a highly fragmented and diverse discipline composed of factions espousing contradictory views about what sociology is and how it should be carried out (Davies 2009; McLaughlin 2014; Puddephatt and McLaughlin 2015). Below, we present our most novel and consequential finding.

Research & Labour Market

We found that a sizeable group (23/55–41 %) of Canadian sociology department home pages engaged in what we perceived to be explicit status signalling through citing the research accomplishments (publications, grants, awards) of their faculty members and graduate students. Like Puddephatt and Nelsen (2010), we found attempts to signal elite status to be concentrated (19/27–70 %) among departments at doctoral-comprehensive institutions, with their presence being rare (4/28–14 %) among those in primarily undergraduate institutions. Consider the case of departments at McGill and McMaster, where professional status is informally known to be emphasized. Both of their home pages possessed large sections dedicated to the recent publications and grants of their members. Such lists include a variety of accolades that differ in their prestige. For example, articles advertised ranged from those placed in flagship generalist journals, such as the *American Sociological Review*, and leading specialty journals, like *Gender & Society*, to chapters in edited handbooks. Similarly, the books ranged from those published by reputable academic presses to largely unheralded works published by low-status presses. Across other department pages, (UBC, Western, Calgary, etc.) where specific sections such as these were not present, publications, grants and awards were nonetheless given 'centre stage.' Departments normally announced the acquisition of grants or release of publications in 'news' sections. These announcements were often accompanied by professional snapshots of researchers to which the accomplishment was related (Fig. 4).

Our qualitative inspection also revealed an associated tactic employed within our sample exclusively by departments at doctoral-comprehensive schools. At a number of high status departments (9/27–33 %), the media attention garnered by researchers, including interviews with newspapers and television channels, was meticulously documented. The department at the University of British Columbia (UBC) had a particular section of its home site devoted exclusively this type of activity. Departments at other

Fig. 4 Screenshot of Grant Announcement from the sociology department at the University of Victoria. Note: Retrieved from http://www.uvic.ca/socialsciences/sociology/

institutions, such as Memorial, Victoria, Waterloo and others, also communicated this type of information through their news sections.

The attention given to research intensiveness by departments at doctoral-comprehensive institutions was contrasted by that given to labour market-related issues by those at primarily undergraduate institutions (13/28–46 %). This tactic often entailed providing a list of labour market sectors, such as "government" or "non-profit organizations", where sociology graduates were said to be employed. It also regularly included a brief discussion of the set of skills developed through a sociology program.

> A degree in Sociology helps prepare students for a range of possible careers - including government work, teaching, research, social services and social work, criminology and various types of community work. (Acadia)

A notable characteristic of these passages on home pages was how ambiguous they were. There was little indication of what sociology graduates would be doing in highlighted labour market sectors (e.g. government). In addition, the skills (e.g. analytical/critical thinking) that were associated with a sociology degree were often entirely generic and likely acquirable through any other program. There was never a discussion of how learning Marx and Weber would pay off in the labour market. This, of course, reflects the reality that sociology is not a vocational degree. It is not a concrete pathway into a specific labour market sector or role. Attempts to sell it as such among departments at less prestigious, primarily undergraduate institutions, are likely triggered by an inability to otherwise sell the program through alternative means. Unable to tap into the cachet of research, grants and media attention, these departments tap into this alternative source of legitimacy.

We interpret the presence of these contrasting logics at opposite ends of the system to mean that, within the core of Canadian sociology, meaning departments located in prestigious doctoral-comprehensive institutions, pressures to align structures with the whims of the market have achieved limited penetration. Departments within the core operate by a 'business as usual' mentality, signaling conformity with traditional

academic norms by emphasizing their research intensiveness. Moreover, they possess the necessary financial and reputational capital to succeed in this status game, attracting the top 'stars' of each hiring cycle and providing them with the ideal conditions (e.g. low teaching loads, limited service) in which to succeed. Their individual success, of course, only further advances the broader departmental 'status-project'. Departments located in the periphery, at primarily undergraduate institutions, face a very different reality. They lack the prestige and financial resources to attract leading researchers or provide them with advantageous working conditions, and thus, cannot achieve research intensiveness. This likely forces them to attempt to acquire legitimacy through alternative means, drawing on currently ubiquitous discourses of employability and skills.

It is important, however, not to oversell or sensationalize the latter trend. Though Puddephatt and Nelsen (2010) found that "pressure to satisfy student anxiety in relation to future career paths is felt equally across sociology departments in both the doctoral-comprehensive and primarily undergraduate universities" (p. 414–415), we find that a preoccupation with vocationalism across department home pages is not only limited (17/55–31 %), but also concentrated almost exclusively among primarily undergraduate institutions (13/28–46 %). Beyond this small group of low-status departments, there is little effort to sell sociology as a 'pathway to employment'. Such conclusion may not be palatable to those (Buchbinder and Newson 1990; Newson 1994; Giroux 1999, 2013) that have raised alarms about the ongoing 'corporatization' and 'vocationalization' of PSE at the hands of sinister neo-liberal interests. Nonetheless, it reflects the empirical reality of current promotional practises across Canadian sociology department home pages.

Conclusion

Our analysis reveals that sociology departments employ a variety of promotional practices. At a general level, we posit that these practises reflect the complex institutional environment within which departments are presently situated. Each caters to an important external stakeholder, whether it be the public, academics or administrators, which are vital to a department's survival. The data analyzed through this study show that departments devote much energy into a more 'functional' type of signalling, framing themselves as better 'fits' for particular types of students, and indirectly, faculty. This includes the signalling of department size, substantive areas of specialization and methodological strengths. On occasion, it also includes emphasizing the department's ideological leanings, such as dispositions towards public and critical sociology. We posit that this information may facilitate self-selection processes within the discipline.

An examination of the content and form of these promotional practises also tells us much about the current state of the discipline. For starters, many departments, especially less research intensive ones, lack faith in the public's awareness of what the discipline is or does. In turn, they devote prime web space to defining the discipline in layman's terms. This is fascinating given the lack of internal consensus or plurality that characterizes the discipline when it comes to theoretical or methodological issues. This proclivity to define ourselves also likely reflects the less than institutionalized status of the discipline, especially when contrasted with fields

such as mathematics or history or economics, something that suggests the need for a follow-up comparative research design looking at competing disciplines, including interdisciplinary programs.

Beyond these basic observations and the broader questions they raise, our analysis also reveals an interesting image of the penetration of vocationalism into Canadian sociology. We find that departments, particularly at doctoral-comprehensive universities, appear relatively insulated from pressures to package themselves as 'pathways to employment'. Rather than reflecting some ominous market or corporate logic, as theorized by Puddephatt and Nelsen (2010), we find that their marketing strategies seemingly conform to professional norms, consisting of the flashing of status through research intensiveness. References to labour market training are limited to a small group of departments at lower status, primarily undergraduate institutions. Among this group, this alternative logic is certainly more visible, guiding the way in which sociology is being packaged and sold to external constituents. We surmise that this strategy is likely far from voluntary and perhaps triggered by the unavailability of resources required to produce the symbolic capital (e.g. research, grants) needed to engage in alternative forms of signalling.

Some of these findings may, in part, be attributable to the unique characteristics of Canadian PSE. The vast majority of this system is government-funded, with institutions receiving a steady flow of financial support proportional to the number of students that they teach. There are no designated 'flag-ship' universities, with institutional parity being the norm across both the public university and college sectors (Davies and Hammack 2005; Davies and Zarifa 2012). As a result, there is also no true national market for PSE, with few if any students crossing provincial borders (Davies et al. 2014). These system features may be sheltering Canadian institutions from competitive pressures that have driven sections of the more privatized American PSE system towards increasing vocationalization (see Kraatz and Zajac 1996; Brint et al. 2005). Further evidence of the role that government funding can play in 'sheltering' PSE from competitive forces, and drastic organizational change, is provided by a forthcoming study on the marketing practises of for-profit colleges in Canada's most populous jurisdiction (Pizarro Milian and Quirke, in press). This study found that for-profits in Ontario render themselves appealing to potential customers by promising modern, in-demand and hands-on skills – the very type of rhetoric that some believe has become central to selling sociology in our universities.

With no foreseeable return to the funding levels which characterized the 'golden age' of Canadian PSE during the 1960s, one has to question what influence increasing financial austerity will have on the character of sociology. It appears as if departments housed in the upper strata of universities are poised to ride out current fluctuations, at least in the medium term. But, how long will that last? One of the distinctive aspects of the Canadian PSE system is the absence of the elite and resource-rich private universities, akin to Harvard, Yale and Princeton. This likely means that sociology departments across Canadian PSE, even those at research intensive institutions, may be more responsive to the demands of career-oriented undergraduate students than American counterparts. They may also be more likely to employ the labels of "public sociology" and "policy sociology" to position themselves as relevant and valuable to university administrators concerned with signalling community engagement, economic value and connections to local communities. If organizational sociology has taught us anything,

however, it is that institutions are stubborn and durable. They persist, often in decoupled forms (Weick 1976; Davies and Pizarro Milian, 2016; Pizarro Milian, Davies and Zarifa, 2016), long after the functional demand for their existence has subsided. The same durability exists for the professional disciplinary norms driving certain promotional practises on Canadian sociology department websites. Our analysis indicates that a certain 'moral panic' may exist among factions of Canadian sociology, who blame neo-liberalism for the disappearance of the liberal arts tradition. Though the modern university is gradually evolving, transitioning from the liberal arts tradition into something new, alarmist visions of "corporate encroachment" (Puddephatt and Nelsen 2010, p. 406) are likely off-base. Our data show that status-signalling, isomorphic tendencies and professional norms continue to be primary drivers behind the promotional tactics found across department websites.

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