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To cite this article: Delia Dumitrica (2017) Fixing higher education through technology: Canadian media coverage of massive open online courses, *Learning, Media and Technology*, 42:4, 454-467, DOI: [10.1080/17439884.2017.1278021](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2017.1278021)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2017.1278021>



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Published online: 26 Jan 2017.



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Fixing higher education through technology: Canadian media coverage of massive open online courses

Delia Dumitrica

Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

The popularization of massive open online courses (MOOCs) has been shrouded in promises of disruption and radical change in education. In Canada, official partnerships struck by higher education institutions with platform providers such as *Coursera*, *Udacity* and *edX* were publicized by dailies and professional magazines. This print coverage of MOOCs captures the contemporary ideological struggle over the meaning of both technology and higher education. By means of a thematic analysis of the English Canadian print coverage of MOOCs (2012–2014), this paper shows that both online educational technologies and higher education are constructed through an economic frame. However, this frame does not go unchallenged. Where newspapers construct MOOCs as an easy fix for an allegedly inefficient and outdated higher education system, professional magazines question the relationship between technology, higher education and money. These different representations point to the efforts of academic communities to develop alternative social imaginaries of education as public good within a dominant neoliberal framing of MOOCs and of the higher education system. In conclusion, the paper reflects on how the academic community can create alternative discursive spaces by shifting the discussion of MOOCs from economic concerns to civic goals.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 July 2016

Accepted 27 December 2016

KEYWORDS

Massive open online courses; education technologies; online education; discourse and technology; neoliberalism

Introduction

This paper investigates the discursive construction of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and education in Canada. It focuses on massive open online courses (MOOCs),¹ one of the most recent and popular topics in public discussions on the state and future of higher education. Touted as innovations that will disrupt a seemingly ailing higher education system, MOOCs were initially praised for their potential to democratize learning (Kucirkova and Littleton 2015). Although faculty members have experimented with online courses for quite some time, MOOCs' popularity exploded in 2011 with the launch of three Ivy League associated online education platforms (MITx, currently *edX*, *Udacity* and *Coursera*) (Kovanović et al. 2015). By 2012, these platform providers had entered Canada, striking formal, largely mediatized agreements with large research universities, with newspapers enthusiastically claiming that MOOCs were 'shaking up the world of education' (Grundy 2013). MOOCs are among the few educational technologies that have captured the attention of news media and their audiences. This mediatization provides an opportunity to map and assess the symbolic construction of the social role of higher education and of the place of

CONTACT Delia Dumitrica  dumitrica@eshcc.eur.nl

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technology within it. Media coverage of MOOCs represents a site where the meaning of both higher education and technology is articulated and negotiated. In a 2015 editorial for *Learning, Media and Technology*, Neil Selwyn draws attention to the ideological work that hyped discourses accompanying the arrival of new digital educational technologies perform, arguing that the symbolic articulations of what technology is supposed to do, and for whose benefit, are ‘powerful means of advancing the interests and agendas of some social groups over the interests of others. As such, this limited linguistic base is a serious problem for anyone concerned with the democratic potential of digital technology in education’ (2015, 2).

Attention to this struggle over the meaning (Hall 2013) of MOOCs is important in the context of the current questioning of the increased corporatization of the university and commodification of education (Collini 2012). These social dynamics are part of the growing dominance of neoliberalism in the Canadian post-secondary sector (e.g., Bauder 2015; Brownlee 2014, 2015; Magnusson 2000; Malcolmson and Lee 2004; Webber 2008). Scholarly work on the rise of new managerialism in higher education (Deem 2008) or of academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie 1997) points to the forces pushing for conceptualizing higher education through the lens of its market relevance and for running the university as if it were a business.

The MOOC craze peaked at a time when universities were confronted with the consequences of austerity measures following the 2008/2009 economic crisis (Jones 2015). As public funding decreased, interest in MOOCs grew. But MOOCs, along with other trends such as the rising power of academic publishers, are inevitably enmeshed within and shaped by the struggles accompanying the growing corporatization of the university (e.g., Hall 2015; Weller 2014). In Canada, educators and students are debating the effects of public funding cuts, the perception of higher education as a skills-enhancing educational package purchased by students to ensure access to the job market and the growing decision-making power of higher education bureaucracies. Although higher education does occasionally become a topic of mainstream newspaper coverage (particularly during the announcement of public budgets), these debates are largely mediated in professional spaces. MOOCs put higher education on the agenda of the newspapers, and as such their coverage presents an opportunity to further scrutinize how these debates are articulated. In discussing the promises and dangers of these digital technologies, the articles also propose an image of higher education in general and of the Canadian system in particular. The vocabulary they use to talk about MOOCs and the issues they highlight are, however, not innocent: they symbolically construct problems and legitimize solutions, empowering particular social actors to act upon and shape the system. In this article, this print coverage is approached as a site of ideological struggle over ‘what educational technology is, and what educational technology does’ (Selwyn 2013, 16; also Selwyn 2015). Through this articulation of technology, the articles propose a vision of the future format of the university. The critical examination of these discourses is important, for it enables academics, students, journalists and beyond to become aware of the distribution of power and of the discursive silences in current discussions of MOOCs. Ideally, such an awareness will lead to more complex representations of both digital technologies and universities that acknowledge and perhaps even challenge the hegemonic economic logic through which we are constantly pressured to understand and relate to higher education.

By means of a thematic analysis of the English-language coverage of MOOCs in Canadian newspapers and professional magazines (2012–2014), this paper adds to a small corpus of research on media coverage of MOOCs (Brown 2015; Bulfin, Pangrazio, and Selwyn 2014; Deimann 2015; Kovanović et al. 2015; White, Leon, and White 2015). Canada represents an interesting case study in this context: the adoption of new technologies in the field of education has been vigorously supported by the federal government. The close proximity to the United States has often resulted in a hurry to emulate American innovations, but also adapt them to the requirements of the Canadian social landscape. Thus, the integration of MOOCs was done against the background of a largely public and non-profit higher education system.

The paper begins with a brief background on MOOCs in Canada, followed by an overview of existing research on media coverage of MOOCs. The paper moves on to a description of the methodological tools employed in this project and a summary of the key findings. It will be argued that an economic framing of both online educational technologies and higher education is dominant but not unchallenged. Where professional magazines focus on the relationship between technology, higher education and profit, newspapers symbolically construct MOOCs as an easy fix for an allegedly inefficient and outdated higher education system. These different representations point to the efforts of academic communities to resist the dominant neoliberal framing of the university in terms of its economic utility by developing alternative social imaginaries of education as a public good.

MOOCs in Canada

Contemporary Canadian higher education is confronted with soaring costs of degrees and deep cuts in the public funding model (Jones 2014). Against the background of an economic recession in 2013, universities had to cope with a dramatic slash of their public funding. Since most Canadian universities are public and non-profit, dependent on funding from their financial governments, this has resulted in increased class sizes, hiring freezes, over-reliance on sessional academic labor and, consequently, increasingly disgruntled students and faculty members (Bauder 2015; Brownlee 2015; Magnusson 2000; Webber 2008). Increasingly, student access to higher education is limited by the ability to pay hefty tuition fees (Malcolmson and Lee 2004). In 2014/2015, the predicted average annual tuition fee for undergraduates was almost C\$6000 (with dentistry going as high as C\$18,187) (Statistics Canada 2014). When textbooks and living expenses are factored in, the annual average cost goes up significantly: for example, the University of British Columbia's online calculator indicates an annual cost of C\$21,408 for an undergraduate degree in Media Studies (UBC 2015).

The advancement of neoliberalism in Canadian policy-making has strengthened the corporatization of higher education, but a full review of these policy trends is outside the scope of this paper. Depending on the ideology of the government in power, provincial governments took different approaches to funding higher education institutions (Shanahan and Jones 2007). Against this context, Canadian university administrators took note of the Ivy League universities' investment in MOOCs. Seemingly novel, such courses were by no means unfamiliar in a country with a history of distance education. With most of the population concentrated in the south, distance education was traditionally seen as a means for smaller and geographically dispersed communities populating the vast Canadian North to access educational opportunities. The first initiatives – Athabasca University in Alberta and TéléUniversité in Québec (now TÉLUQ) – date from the 1970s and still offer degrees today. The Canadian government saw online education as a means for the professionalization of the workforce, channeling money into the development of this sector through its two federal initiatives – SchoolNet (1994–2007) and TeleLearning Network of Centres of Excellence (TL-NCE) (1995–2002). These programs furthered the commercial approach to education as enhancement of professional skills (Gutstein 2004).

The first MOOC experiments came from within this existing online education infrastructure. Long before the Ivy League universities took an interest in such courses, Canadian educators were offering them; yet, they did not manage to attract institutional endorsement. One of the first MOOCs worldwide – CCK08 – *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge* – was developed in 2008 by George Siemens and Stephen Downes at the University of Manitoba. It was offered to both for-credit students and anyone in the world interested in participating. The course focused on education, proposing the notion of connectivism as a pedagogical model (Downes 2012). This model largely refers to an educational environment where students learn from each other (for a more elaborate discussion of connectivism, see Bell 2011 or Tschofen and Mackness 2012).

While CCK08 was not the first of its kind (other similar courses were being offered as early as 2007), it is often credited with popularizing the acronym MOOC (Rodriguez 2012). Another Canadian university, the University of Regina, was also leading the way to MOOCs: in 2007–2008, Alec

Couros offered a graduate course in education (*Social Media and Open Education-EC&I 831*) to both for-credit and non-credit students. The course consisted of recorded presentations from various guest speakers (EC&I 831 About, n.d.). Additionally, *Personal Learning Environments, Networks and Knowledge* (PLENK2010) was offered at Athabasca University at the beginning of MOOC craze.

These MOOCs did not garner the media attention as that brought by the rise of *edX*, *Coursera* and *Udacity*. This is not surprising. These platforms were backed by important initial investments, which made them interesting to economic and mainstream publications (Yuan and Powell 2013). In the summer of 2012, the University of Toronto announced a formal partnership with *Coursera*. A few months later, other agreements with the University of British Columbia and McMaster University followed suit. The University of Alberta initially formed an alliance with *Udacity*, but the proposal fell through and the university switched to *Coursera* as well. McGill University and the University of Toronto also entered into agreements with *edX*. The details of these partnerships remain clouded in secrecy (for an exception, see Young 2012).

The picture of MOOCs in Canada painted here remains, however, incomplete, partly because it is reconstructed based on a skewed media attention to this problem.² For example, at UBC, Dr Erika Frank is involved in developing *NextGenU*, a free online learning platform offering access to medical and health-related education for students in low-income countries. In Québec, *Edulib*, an initiative of the École des Hautes Études commerciales de Montréal, offers online free courses in business and engineering. The University of Prince Edward Island had experimented with a Facebook-delivered MOOC entitled *XPU* for first-year students. At Thompson Rivers University, Dr Ashok Mathur developed an online course on art and reconciliation (*rMOOC*). Such initiatives receive less media attention, as they do not have the formal institutional backup but are largely faculty-driven, public education-oriented initiatives. Nonetheless, they speak to a diverse appropriation of online education tools that remains largely local.

Media constructions of MOOCs

The contours of the media discourses of MOOCs were already sketched by previous research focused on dailies and educational magazines from the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Australia. Sources such as *The New York Times* or *The Guardian* have an international reach, while professional publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* often stir debates subsequently taken up in Canadian media. As such, it is highly likely that Canadian discourses on MOOCs will engage with these media discourses.

One of the patterns of the coverage across different countries is the a-historical portrayal of MOOCs (Deimann 2015). This effectively masks the conflicts and tensions within which such courses are embedded – for instance, conflicts over the intertwining of the digitalization of educational resources and their commodification (think, for instance, of the outrageously expensive textbooks or academic databases). The failure to recognize these tensions legitimizes the view of MOOCs as ‘tools’ with no agenda behind them. When presented as just ‘technological innovations’, MOOCs become a symbol of the alleged democratic nature of the internet, rather than part and parcel of existing ideological conflicts in education (Bulfin, Pangrazio, and Selwyn 2014, 302).

Academic circles have engaged in multi-faceted and critical debates of MOOCs.³ Such discussions were also held in professional blogs and magazines (Bulfin, Pangrazio, and Selwyn 2014; White, Leon, and White 2015). A study of three major higher education magazines found that the most important themes discussed in relation to MOOCs were: impact on teaching, change in universities and business models (White, Leon, and White 2015). MOOCs were generally portrayed as a form of change: they were described as ‘disruptive’, ‘path breaking’, ‘game-changer’ or a ‘revolution’ in higher education (Bulfin, Pangrazio, and Selwyn 2014, 295; Deimann 2015). Newspapers from Australia, Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States focused their coverage of MOOCs on the free aspect of these courses, their size and scale, and their relation to top research universities (Brown 2015; Bulfin, Pangrazio, and Selwyn 2014). By 2014, media’s interest shifts to the government

interest in MOOCs and the Big Data generated by these courses (Kovanović et al. 2015). This may signal a shift in the types of actors who are now interested in exploring the potential of these courses, making the critical investigation of discursive constructions of MOOCs ever more salient.

Existing research suggests a general pattern in the mainstream media's portrayal of MOOCs. Such courses are presented as revolutionary tools, providing free of charge education at the best universities of the world. The critical approach to MOOCs, deconstructing their embeddedness within existing networks of power, profit and privilege, remains largely absent.

Methodology

The representation of reality through language is intertwined with the distribution of resources in society. As such, representation becomes an arena of struggle between competing groups with different agendas (Hall 2013). The texts analyzed in this paper reveal competing discursive articulations of MOOCs advanced by social actors such as policy-makers, higher education administrators, technology enthusiasts and/or producers, faculty members, intellectuals at large or students. In mapping the symbolic construction of MOOCs, this paper brings up their underlying vision of higher education and the distribution of resources that it legitimizes.

The methodological approach here consists of a thematic analysis informed by critical discourse analysis (CDA) principles (Fairclough, Mulderigg, and Wodak 2011). From a CDA perspective, each of these discursive constructions is shaped by social actors and structures, while also constituting and legitimizing them (Fairclough, Mulderigg, and Wodak 2011). In this paper, the different constructions of MOOCs in the selected corpus of texts are identified, paying attention to both recurrent and marginal discourses, as well as silences.

The data consist of a set of 48 news stories on MOOCs published between July 2012 and March 2014 by English-language national and local newspapers,⁴ along with two Canadian higher education magazines: *University Affairs* and *Academic Matters*. Articles were retrieved from the Canadian Newsstand database as well as from the websites of the education magazines using the keyword 'MOOC'. One article was retrieved from the website of TVO, an Ontario-based educational television station. The article was included in the corpus because it was published in the online blog of TVO and referenced in one of the other articles in the corpus. The mix of national/ local newspapers (provided by the Canadian Newsstand database) and professional magazines allows us to not only capture the 'struggle' over technology, but also to speculate on the relation between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discursive constructions of MOOCs. The inclusion of these magazines enables a more nuanced analysis of the newspaper coverage, by providing a basis of comparison for the symbolic construction of MOOCs for professional versus wider audiences. To what extent the debates taking place in professional spaces overlap with or spill over into mainstream newspapers?

The texts were thematically coded in Dedoose. Thematic analysis is a methodological tool allowing researchers to identify discursive patterns across texts (Braun and Clarke 2006). A manifest coding approach was adopted, where 'the themes are identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data, and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond ... what has been written' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 84). Each article was coded on a sentence or paragraph level for the different MOOC-related themes identified by the researcher by using the terms chosen by the article's author (e.g., assessment, learning tools, accreditation, students, faculty members). In the second stage, the coded sections were re-read and the themes were grouped together under larger themes: access, conflict, credentials, digital divides, educational research, faculty, institutional support, money, pedagogy, platform, quality, students and different types of MOOCs (see Table 1).

In the third stage, the researcher engaged with the thematically coded sections to understand the overall story about the relationship between technology and education proposed across each theme. Attention was paid to the diversity of discourses, quantitatively assessing the dominant versus the marginal ones. This stage represented a shift from a mere description of the distribution of themes

Table 1. The distribution of themes across the corpus of texts.

Themes	Money	Access	Pedagogy	Credentials	Faculty	Institutional support	Quality	Students	Conflict	Platform	Educ. research	Types of MOOCs	Digital divides
Number of articles where the theme was present	42	33	28	21	20	20	17	14	13	11	7	4	2
Percentage of total number of articles	87	69	58	44	42	42	35	29	27	23	15	8	4

Note: Percentages were rounded up to the next digit when the decimals were over 0.5.

across the articles to ‘interpretation, where there is an attempt to theorize the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications (Patton 1990), often in relation to previous literature ...’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, 84).

The findings below explore the discursive construction of MOOCs in two of the dominant themes across the corpus of texts: access and money (see Table 2). These themes are related, as they are part of the wider narratives of digital technology as ‘levelling the playing field’ in higher education by removing barriers such as time, space, race, class, disability. Over the past 30 years, digital educational technologies have been discussed as tools enabling learner-centered learning, enhancing efficiency and empowering students by allowing them to make educational choices irrespective of barriers such as time or space (Selwyn 2013). Access to education and the question of money are thus brought up in the discussion of MOOCs as barriers that technology overcomes.

Democratizing access to higher education

Dominant discourses

The theme of access appears in 69% of the articles analyzed here. MOOCs are presented as making quality education available to everyone, by removing spatial, traditional/cultural and economic barriers. This vision of MOOCs as a democratizer of access to higher education effectively legitimizes a neoliberal understanding of education as a result of individual choices empowered by digital technologies.

Across the texts in this theme, MOOCs are repetitively described as open to everyone: they are ‘a great equalizer in access to education’ (Seidman 2013), that seek ‘to democratize higher education using the power of Internet connectivity’ (Butosi 2012). Over the past 30 years, educational technologies have been discursively constructed as inherently progressive, widening student participation in education

Table 2. The dominant and counter-dominant discourses on MOOCs across the two analyzed themes.

Theme	Discourses
Access	<p>Dominant: MOOC-education for everyone.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removing spatial barriers. • Removing traditional/cultural barriers. • Removing economic barriers. <p>Counter-dominant:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural imperialism through MOOCs. • Recovering socioeconomic barriers of MOOCs. • The corporatization of the university through MOOCs.
Money	<p>Dominant: The economy of MOOCs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The prevalence of the economic vocabulary. • Removing economic barriers to students. • The MOOC business model. <p>Counter-dominant:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The commodification of MOOCs. • The cost of MOOCs to faculty members.

(Selwyn 2013). In the case of MOOCs, this is achieved through references to numbers (56% of the excerpts in this theme). Impressive figures such as ‘20,000 people from 150 countries’ (Schwarcz 2014) add credibility to the claim that MOOCs are making higher education available to anyone interested.

Technologically enhanced access also invokes a vision of globalization, as the texts reference various countries or regions from where these students join in the higher education sector. Three of the coded excerpts for access mention specific countries such as Britain, Bhutan, Canada, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Malaysia, Pakistan, South Africa, Sudan, Tunisia and United States. Two reference Europe, Africa, Latin America and the Arab world. Ten other refer to the student body as global, worldwide or across the globe. MOOCs thus become a globalizing phenomenon. Geographical distance, along with traditional/ cultural understandings of who can be a student and cost (discussed next) are now rendered obsolete:

There are 30-somethings who never went to university and never earned a degree, and are searching for skills that might lead to a job. There is an octogenarian with a curious streak and a stable of retirees looking for a chance to buck the stereotypes of a generation that grew up without computers. And there is a student from Malaysia. (Bradshaw 2012)

These texts are written from a Canadian viewpoint. The student from Malaysia is both unconventional, illustrating the opening up of education beyond traditional gender norms or national borders, and an exotic symbol of a diverse world, where space or gender are no longer limiting access to education. This image of MOOCs as means of ‘opening up the world’ and alleviating inequalities is reinforced by a column by globalization guru Thomas Friedman, reprinted in a Canadian newspaper. Friedman recounts the story of an Israeli Arab professor whose faith in the power of MOOCs to offer disadvantaged groups access to high-quality education is strengthened by emails he receives from ‘students registering for his MOOC from all over the Arab world’. Not surprisingly, given Friedman’s celebratory view of technologically mediated globalization, MOOCs get praised as an opportunity for Arabs to continue the democratization process that has begun with the Arab Spring (Friedman 2014).

Finally, MOOCs also level the plane by enabling access to quality education. References to terms such as quality, elite or top education come up in 13.5% of the excerpts in this theme. MOOCs are depicted as ‘drastically chang[ing] distance learning, breaking down the barriers of geography and fees, while connecting students across the globe with each other and with some of the world’s top teaching talents’ (Bradshaw 2012). Another article presents Salman Khan’s (the creator of Khan Academy, an online educational resources repository) vision of a ‘future where the world’s poorest have access to the world’s most renowned experts’ (Singh and Adelman 2013). Importantly, based on the universities referenced across the corpus of texts analyzed here, it is only the major research universities in the United States (Harvard, MIT or Stanford, mentioned 59 times) and Canada (the University of Toronto, the University of Alberta, McGill University and the University of British Columbia, mentioned 43 times) that seem to be providing this ‘quality education’.

Counter-dominant discourses

This vision of access to ‘quality education’ is problematized by a few articles published in professional magazines. The counter-narratives bring up the implicit cultural imperialistic vision professed by MOOC supporters, the socioeconomic barriers associated with MOOCs, and the intersection between MOOCs and the corporatization of the university.

Across the corpus of texts, MOOC-enabled education unproblematically flows from the West – particularly North America – to the rest of the world. This is a cultural imperialistic framing of knowledge, where the West/North America not only provides, but also produces and classifies knowledge of relevance in today’s world: ‘Students from as many as 196 countries, from South Africa

to Pakistan and India, log into *Coursera* to learn from professors at Stanford, Princeton University and even the University of Toronto, among others' (Bradshaw 2012).

Two articles in higher education magazine *University Affairs* bring up the unequal distribution of resources across the world, as well as the local relevance of information. Canadian MOOC pioneer George Siemens reminds readers that while MOOC students come from non-Western parts of the world such as China and India, African students are not well represented, as internet access remains a major barrier in the region. Furthermore, MOOCs currently on offer may lack relevance for the African educational setting:

I'm hoping that [eventually] there will be an African MOOC portal that will serve the needs of African learners, rather than just importing the pedagogy and the knowledge that's coming out of Harvard or Stanford. And I think, more importantly, these local hubs have to export their knowledge as well so that we have a better understanding of the issues that might exist in Africa, Latin America, China or India. (Tamburri 2012)

The relationship between local context and knowledge is also highlighted in another *University Affairs* article. Pointing to the difference between knowledge and information (e.g., Rowley 2007), the author suggests that MOOCs should be understood as a form of information – rather than knowledge – provision. In that sense, MOOCs are part of the wider commodification of education processes, where education becomes conceptualized as a universally appealing content (information) delivery service. 'The desire to "free" the university from its constraints in place and time is also a desire to duplicate the process that has happened with information, and the "information/knowledge" conflation seems to run parallel to the "content delivery/education" one' (Fullick 2012).

Another article brings up socioeconomic barriers to online education. Supporters of MOOCs fail to see how such forms of education serve primarily 'students from the posh suburbs, with 10 tablets apiece and no challenges whatsoever – that is, the exact people who already have access to expensive higher education' (Schuman 2013). While the dominant narrative on MOOCs presents them as the great equalizer in education 'via the magic of multimedia' (*Edmonton Journal* 2013), structural constraints affecting one's opportunity and ability to become educated are rendered invisible. Beyond the obvious impact of financial means, such structural constraints may include: general and technical literacy; perceived usefulness of higher education and the knowledge it provides for the individual, the family and the community; race and gender; time availability and so on.

The counter-narratives reviewed here remain confined to professional spaces. Overall, the discourse on MOOCs as enablers of access to education remains overtly optimistic.

Money-matters

Dominant discourses

Money is a recurrent theme across 87% of the analyzed articles. Attention to financial aspects stems from and further reproduces an economic framing of MOOCs and of the higher education system. This framing is enacted through the use of terms such as: costs, revenues, venture capital, returns on investment, revenue streams, customers, budgets or zero marginal cost. These terms effectively construct the picture of education as a market where producers compete for customers.

This is the perspective outlined by an article in the national magazine *The National Post*, introducing MOOCs as a progressive force that can 'revolutionize' higher education. This potential, however, can only be achieved when such courses are developed through free competition among universities. Education should follow the market logic:

The best policy is to let the competition roar and not try to direct it. The same is true for the universities. We should stop running them from the top down and instead free them up and let them compete. (Watson 2012)

Although such a strong neoliberal framing of MOOCs is not explicit in any other texts in the corpus analyzed here, two related ideas reproduce this profoundly economic view of higher education in

Canada: the free of charge nature of MOOCs and the viable business models that can sustain them. Around 66% of the excerpts coded for ‘money’ bring up the cost of MOOCs. Out of them, 47% make formulaic references to courses’ free of charge nature for students, generally in the context of explaining what MOOCs are. This further solidifies the vision of the democratizing potential of technology, able to decrease the cost of access to knowledge.

This celebratory representation of MOOCs as dealing away with the inequality inherent in prohibitive, tuition-based models of higher education avoids engagement with the thorny issue of the commodification of education. MOOCs simply ‘fix’ the problem of cost to students who may not otherwise afford it. The question of why people have to pay for education never comes up. Rather, tuition-based models become a problem only in the context of the soaring costs of universities. These costs are explained as the result of the inefficiency of gigantic ‘brick-and-mortar’ institutions (a description whose negative connotations become clear when juxtaposed with the versatile, open-to-all, accessible internet), ivory towers or ‘sleeping giants’ (Bradshaw 2012). Although never explicitly stated, such descriptions of universities suggest they are (financially) inefficient, passing their financial losses on to students in the form of increased tuition costs. In this articulation, MOOCs become the solution to prohibitive tuition, infrastructural or labor costs:

MOOCs might cut the ground out from under complaints that tuition costs represent a barrier to pursuing one’s education: Students in a few years might have the option of taking very inexpensive courses from profs at France’s renowned *grandes ecoles* or Harvard. (Aubin 2013)

The question of the cost of MOOCs to universities or platform providers is present in 27% of the excerpts coded for money. At the heart of these references is the problem of the MOOC business model: can such courses bring a ‘return on investment’? Some articles point out that the business model is unclear: ‘none of the providers has devised a way of making money from a MOOC although they have floated some ideas’ (Tamburri 2012). Among these ideas, we can discern several proposals:

- offering courses for free, but charging for credentials;
- charging small fees per course;
- attracting students from less prestigious universities who will pay per course;
- monetizing the content developed for the course, by selling it to other interested parties;
- charging potential employers for access to lists of top students;
- adopting a sponsorship model, where corporate sources pay for developing the MOOC.

In spite of this uncertainty over the business model (e.g., Weller 2014), MOOCs are described as having the potential to bring in the following economic advantages:

- cut down on the cost of adding extra students;
- increase brand recognition and international reputation, which eventually attracts students who will pay for their education;
- cut down the costs of labor (i.e., faculty members) or of infrastructure (i.e., classrooms).

There is, of course, no mention of the cost of the necessary technology and technological expertise for offering MOOCs. As a result, technology appears as an economically efficient tool, cutting down operating costs and boosting revenue streams. Only two articles make reference to the fact that MOOCs are just too expensive to produce and they do not, at least for now, bring in any revenue. Others argue that although the business model is unclear, universities cannot afford to miss this boat – a clear rehearsal of the technological imperative trope: adapt to new technologies or be rendered irrelevant! As such, MOOCs are discursively positioned as ‘disruptive innovation’: a new and unavoidable tool that will reconfigure the way in which universities operate and learning is being done.

Counter-discourses

Five articles published in professional magazines and one opinion piece re-printed from *Slate* magazine by local newspaper *Winnipeg Free Press* (and written by a faculty member) question this economic narrative:

The logic that is being used to justify the development and adoption of online education is part of the context of neoliberal politics and policy. Signs of this context include the emphasis on cost reduction; demands for efficiency and productivity including more ‘flexibility’ from workers (faculty) and better ‘delivery’ of the educational goods; the eager expectation of unlimited markets in educational products and services; and the commodification of knowledge. (Fullick 2012)

Engaging with the limitations of the economic narrative, one scholar analyzes *Coursera*’s terms of use, arguing that they are meant to commodify academic labor: ‘the intermediary role *Coursera* plays, between instructor and student, does not open educational processes, but encloses it by imposing rights of ownership over content and control over communicational flow’ (Butosi 2012). Another article points out that elite universities are the ones who will rip off the benefits of MOOCs. The author challenges the assumption that ‘the current elite universities (and professors) are elite because they are simply the most excellent’, pointing to the ‘global historical, political-economic contexts that may have enabled them to be so’ (Fullick 2012).

In these counter-discourses, the profit-making agendas behind the MOOC movement is reflected upon:

The MOOC revolution, if it comes, will not be the result of a groundswell of dissatisfaction felicitously finding a technology that naturally solves problems, nor some version of the market’s invisible hand. It’s a tsunami powered by the interested speculation of interested parties in a particular industry. MOOCs are, and will be, big business, and the way that their makers see profitability at the end of the tunnel is what gives them their particular shape. (Bady 2013)

Yet again, such counter-discourses remain confined to professional publications (only 13% of the excerpts coded for money published in 6 out of 48 articles). The critique of the techno-capitalist framing of education cannot be considered impactful beyond academic debates, particularly when compared to the reach of an explicitly neoliberal framing of higher education, such as the one articulated by the *National Post* story discussed above.

Another fracture in the dominant discourse is introduced by suggesting that far from simply cutting down on costs, MOOCs are themselves extremely expensive to produce. These types of costs receive substantially less coverage – only 5% of the excerpts coded for ‘money’. The cost to faculty members – enormous time and emotional demands – gets mentioned only twice across the corpus of texts. Not only are faculty members giving up any free time when running a MOOC (including evenings and weekends), but they might also have to deal with aggressive, challenging or otherwise disruptive student activity in the online educational spaces. This view is, of course, absent from newspaper coverage. Only two articles mention the possible impact of MOOCs on faculty:

a small number of star professors earning hefty MOOC royalties and an army of lower-paid teaching assistants without job security who will do the lesson prep and delivery. (Johnson 2013)

“From an administrative point of view, the beauty of MOOCs is that they provide an easy opportunity to drastically cut labour costs by firing existing faculty members or simply hiring poorly trained ones – whom they won’t have to pay well – to help administer the class,” Prof. Rees wrote in a recent *Slate* article. ‘Why should I hire a new PhD when I can get the best professors in the world piped into my university’s classrooms?’ (Yakbuski 2013)

The second quote, however, is part of a wider frame of the cost to faculty members as a conflict between the old, traditional and allegedly technologically suspicious generation (i.e., the professors) and the new generation, embracing change and technology. Faculty members, it is argued, are suspicious of MOOCs, while students are ‘cool’ with them. Yet, as the article points out, MOOCs are ‘one way universities are seeking to bring down costs for themselves and their students’ (Yakbuski 2013).

Discussion

The concluding section of this paper engages with the ideological implications of the dominant articulations of MOOCs in the English-language Canadian print. The ways in which we come to imagine technology are themselves an arena of struggle between competing interests. In imagining MOOCs as economic objects, our attention is directed to matters of financial efficiency. Money-matters and universities do need it to function. The problem, however, is when financial matters become the major locus of imagining and relating to education. While it is fair to acknowledge that there are other themes present in the Canadian coverage of MOOCs not discussed here (see [Table 1](#)), they are overshadowed by the overarching theme of a technological Band-Aid for an allegedly inefficient higher education system. The public discussion of MOOCs focuses on a technological solution to soaring tuition fees and to budgetary needs/ deficits of universities. In this light, the question is not how MOOCs they will ‘revolutionize’ universities, but whether sustainable business models for these courses can be created. Weller (2014) suggests that such a narrow articulation strips higher education of its bundle of social functions and MOOCs of its educational and civic potential. Universities may be involved in teaching, but they are also part and parcel of the social fabric: an independent and trusted public voice, an agent of social change, a galvanizer of public engagement and civic education, a repository of old and a producer of new knowledge, and so on. The use of the ‘rhetoric of crisis’ – the crisis of the post-secondary sector – ‘suggests that the incumbents cannot be trusted and that external agents are required to make sweeping changes’ (Weller 2014, 123).

Technology – and the powerful economic actors producing it, primarily Silicon Valley – becomes legitimized as the solution to this crisis. But technologies are value-laden and contested terrains among different interest groups: producers of educational technologies, policy-makers, university administrations, technology enthusiasts occupying different positions within the system of higher education (Hall 2015; Jones 2015; Selwyn 2013). The economic framing of MOOCs further legitimizes the role of administrators as the problem-solvers within the context of a perceived ‘failure’ of the university system. Producers of educational technologies also benefit from this framing, increasing their symbolic capital. Educational technologies are often presented as addressing the (economic) inefficiencies of the higher education system, and, as such, their producers are granted access to and influence over the format and content of the learning process. Contemporary higher education is interwoven with and has come to depend upon digital technologies from PowerPoint to Blackboard – yet the financial, pedagogical and human cost of this reliance upon technology is never unpacked.

Once MOOCs remove barriers to access, getting an education becomes an individual responsibility/ choice. When articulated with the utopian idea of the democratizing potential of digital technologies, this vision effectively leads to an individualized take on education aligned with a neoliberal vision of public goods. MOOCs become a symbol of an education system that looks more like a catalogue of products, allowing individuals to pick their favorites and build the ‘knowledge’ profile that best suits their needs. Furthermore, MOOCs are free of charge, at least for now: in itself, this feature appears to render obsolete long-standing complaints that the format of the education system reproduces socioeconomic inequalities. While a choice-driven view of education is empowering, it is primarily so for those who are already specialized and in a position to assess their own gaps in knowledge or to afford the luxury of expanding their horizons. The existence and consequence of digital divides is never featured in the dominant discourses. Such divides overlap with historical structural inequalities, yet the perceived ubiquity of ICTs in Western societies often blurs the lines between structural inequalities and choice.

This is particularly interesting when considering that the Canadian higher education system is largely public and non-profit and that in Canada, the provision of social services is a central part of the construction of national identity. The prevalence of the economic frame is, of course, part and parcel of the growing grip of neoliberalism upon the social imaginary that goes beyond the boundaries of a single country. Yet, the lesson here is that this economic framing of education cannot

and should not be left unchallenged. Indeed, dissent to this narrative is present in Canada and stems primarily from within the ranks of faculty members themselves, who propose counter-discourses drawing attention to the techno-capitalist agenda behind the MOOCs craze. They also bring up the possibility that MOOCs are imagined not (only) in economic terms, but also as civic spaces where individuals, by learning from others, begin to recognize and, ideally, learn to respect our necessarily positioned perspectives and knowledges.

This points to a tension between the efforts of academic communities to develop alternative social imaginaries of education as public good within the dominant neoliberal framing of MOOCs and of the higher education system. Unfortunately, in the case of the newspaper coverage of MOOCs, the opportunity to shift the discussion of MOOCs from learning as acquisition of knowledge to learning as a civic enterprise is not brought to fruition. This finding can serve as a reminder of the need to create alternative frames of higher education, by shifting the discussion of MOOCs from economic dimensions to civic goals. The struggle over the meaning of MOOCs is also a struggle over the meaning of higher education: should it serve the market, or should it fulfill a civic function? The discussion on MOOCs needs to stop revolving around the problems of access and money. Instead, faculty members, students, administrators and journalists need to re-shift the public discourse by focusing on the possibility that MOOCs contribute to enabling continuous personal development, disseminating academic knowledge and fostering of civic responsibility based on ideals of social justice. Such efforts to shift the social imaginary away from the prevailing economic framing of higher education may not automatically result in a change in the technological infrastructure (and the networks of power within which they are embedded and produced). Nevertheless, re-focusing the debate on higher education as public good and discursively recovering the multiple social functions of universities entails legitimizing new social actors and creating the opening where alternatives can become conceptualized, as well as acted upon.

Notes

1. MOOCs are real-time, online courses offered by faculty members at accredited higher education institutions that bring together tens of thousands of interested students. Faculty can use a wide range of existing tools to connect to their MOOC students (e.g., *YouTube* videos, blogs, social networking sites).
2. For interested readers, more information on these MOOCs is available on their respective websites: *NextGen*: <http://www.nextgenu.org/>, *EduLib*: <https://cours.edulib.org/>, *XPU*: <https://www.facebook.com/experienceu2013/?ref=nf>, *rMOOC*: <http://rmooc.ca/>.
3. See, for instance, the 2014 special issue *MOOCs: Emerging Research* published by *Distance Education*, or the 2015 special issue *Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs): 'Disrupting' Teaching and Learning Practices in Higher Education* published by the *British Journal of Educational Technology*.
4. The full list of newspapers consists of: *Calgary Herald* (Alberta), *Edmonton Journal* (Alberta), *Kamloops Daily News* (British Columbia), *National Post* (national), *Star-Phoenix* (Saskatchewan), *The Gazette* (Quebec), *Telegraph-Journal* (New Brunswick), *The Globe and Mail* (national), *The Sooke Mirror* (British Columbia), *The Spectator* (Ontario), *The Vancouver Sun* (British Columbia), *Times-Colonist* (British Columbia), *Toronto Star* (Ontario), *Trail Times* (British Columbia) and *Victoria News* (British Columbia).

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the contribution of Dr Amanda Williams, Mount Royal University, Canada in formulating the coding book for this project. This paper is part of the joint project with Dr Williams aimed at mapping MOOCs in Canada.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Dr Delia Dumitrica examines the discursive construction of digital technologies in education, public policy and politics. Another contribution on MOOCs in Canada (co-authored with Dr Amanda Williams) has appeared in the edited

collection *Education and Society* with Oxford University Press. Dr Dumitrica is also studying the use of digital technologies in grassroots civic mobilization in Canada and in the Netherlands.

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