

# KICKING ARSES, TAKING NAMES

Jesse Brown's media criticism podcast *Canadaland* is ruffling feathers among media heavy-hitters. And that's the point.

Canadaland's Jesse Brown says a lot of the political coverage he reads and watches is 'all horse-race stuff,' which is not particularly compelling. 'None of it tells me what is substantive about this: why should we care and how will it affect me?'

Photograph courtesy of Debra Friedman

BY KATE MALLOY

**C**anadaland's Brown is kicking arses and taking names. The 37-year-old veteran freelance journalist, who started his *Canadaland* media criticism podcast with a bang in October 2013, helped break the sensational story about Jian Ghomeshi's sexual abuse and harassment allegations against him last year with the *Toronto Star* investigative reporter Kevin Donovan. As a result, Mr. Ghomeshi, once the country's celebrated host of CBC Radio's popular *Q*, faces seven criminal charges, a number of CBC executives have left the show, and sexual harassment and sexual assault have been foisted into the national dialogue.

Mr. Brown also broke the story last year that *The National's* anchor Peter Mansbridge had been paid \$28,000 to speak at a Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers event. Mr. Mansbridge defended his speaking engagements at the time, saying he had never offered his opinion on issues that dominate the news nor has he publicly promoted or opposed oilsands development. But the CBC changed its policy and now bans journalists from paid speaking engagements.

Mr. Brown initially pitched his media criticism show to CBC News Network and *Maclean's*. Today, *Canadaland* gets 60,000 downloads a week. Funded by sponsorship and crowdfunding initiative, Patreon, Mr. Brown is also talking about hiring more freelancers, creating a podcast network, and starting a weekly politics show, unlike any other out there. *Huffington Post Canada* says Mr. Brown is "revolutionizing Canadian media criticism." He is, but not without detractors. The *Globe and Mail's* Simon Houpt wrote a critical piece on him saying that Mr. Brown has a "track record of playing fast and loose with facts." Mr. Brown says Mr. Houpt is wrong and the two fought about the story on Twitter.

Mr. Brown's friend, *Toronto Star* food and wine writer Corey Mintz, described Mr. Brown in his Fed column as "a smug, loud-mouthed, know-it-all who is easy to dislike," and who has "become a social and professional pariah, thanks to his bridge-burning, media criticism podcast *Canadaland*."

On the air and over the phone, Mr. Brown is smart, funny, and edgy. He also has a clear vision: he wants to publish and broadcast unvarnished coverage of media and, now, politics. He says he reads a wide range of publications every week, including lots of Canadian media as well as *Slate*, *The New York Times*, *Tablet*, *Al-Jazeera*, *The Drudge Report*, and *Fox News*. Married to children's TV writer Katie Minsky, they live in Toronto with their two children.

**You played a major role in breaking the story about Jian Ghomeshi with the *Toronto Star* last October, which resulted in seven counts of criminal charges laid against Ghomeshi, a number of CBC executives leaving the show, CBC being scrutinized, women coming forward publicly to tell their stories about sexual harassment and sexual assault and, on Parliament Hill, two unidentified female NDP MPs alleging they were sexually harassed and sexually assaulted by two Liberal MPs. Did you ever think your story would result in this chain of events?**

"No, not in a million years. I couldn't help but speculate on what the impact would be and I had a lot of anxiety and

trepidation about a lot of negative impacts. I was afraid of getting sued, being discredited, and I was very concerned for my sources being exposed, being sued, being harassed and being abused online. So, that it would spark a national conversation about sexual harassment and sexual assault, is beyond my wildest dreams in terms of a real positive outcome."

**The *Huffington Post Canada* says you're "revolutionizing media criticism" in Canada and that you break "the kind of stories about Canadian journalism usually talked about over stiff drinks at the bar." Is that accurate?**

"I think so. That was the motivation. I just noticed a huge discrepancy between what I was talking about with colleagues and friends and what we found interesting, and then what we would actually go ahead and publish and write about."

**Are you surprised at how *Canadaland* has taken off?**

"I am. I'm not surprised that people are interested. That is what I gambled. I thought people would be interested. What I did not anticipate was how many untold stories there are in this country and the appetite for having a frank and unvarnished conversation. So people come to me with stories that have nothing to do with media criticism, just because they think no one else is interested or willing to run these stories."

**You're blazing trails on reporting on big media. How do the big media respond to your stories? Did you ever hear back from Mansbridge, for instance, even down the pipeline?**

"Yeah, Mansbridge got his nose out of joint and everyone asked him for comment when that story broke and all the different media went to Chuck Thompson, the CBC's official spokesperson. Mansbridge later complained that nobody came to him and Thompson said Mansbridge wasn't giving interviews on this. So Mansbridge later complained that 'Nobody came to me.' He didn't deny he took money from CAPP, but he complained that nobody came to him. I thought that was a dishonest response.

"There was a piece in the *Star* where he gave an interview and he had a bunch of justifications that he gives a lot of talks for free and he doesn't say anything to support the petroleum industry and he just talks about journalism, all of which completely misses the point. The point is: who's paying you and why didn't you tell your audience?"

**Have you ever felt you've been threatened by the big media you report on?**

"Well, I think I've been threatened and I think it was probably a joke, but I've never felt threatened."

**What do you say about Simon Houpt's piece in the *Globe and Mail* when he wrote that you have a "track record of playing fast and loose with facts"?**

"I think it's not accurate and Simon failed to substantiate it. It suits him for me to be sloppy or unprofessional, but the fact is that all of *Canadaland's* stories have held up. His critique amounted to a handful of minor quibbles."

**You've said "nobody in Canada criticizes the media like [the now late] David Carr did in *The New York Times*, or Jon Stewart's *Daily Show*, or *On The Media*." Who inspires you? Do you consider yourself Canada's David Carr?**

"No, David Carr [was] a much better David Carr than I could ever be and Jon Stewart is a much better Jon Stewart than I could ever be. I think these people did different things. I'm an admirer of both. And I'm a huge admirer of [NPR's] *On The Media*, Jack Shafer, and there is tons of great stuff out there that I draw from. I'm doing something different than all those. There are aspects of satire and there are aspects of investigative news. I'll present hard news stories. I also do commentary. I also do interviews. I also do jokes and satire. So it's becoming its own weird thing and it's sometimes tricky to balance all that, but that's the project."

**Why do you think there's a dearth of critical media coverage in Canada?**

"I feel like the media are very small, and getting smaller. We all know each other and we all date each other and we all marry each other because no one else would have us and there have been practical considerations that have

affected me as well. It's been uncomfortable for me, too, in my social circles at times, but it's difficult to speak critically of the work of the people who you are not only socially connected to, but also, in this era of lay-offs, you don't want to say anything bad about the other guy's shop because you might be looking for a job there tomorrow. So the media in Canada have become more of a club than an industry.

"It's incredible when you're talking to somebody and the shift from the kind of fun, gossipy, catty, but some of it isn't from a negative place, and sometimes people just wish things could be better and they have a real problem with what their outfits are doing. And when you say, 'Can I quote you on that?' it's, 'Absolutely not, leave my name out of it, I don't want a hint of this on me.' So people are afraid."

**Do you have a lot of friends who are reporters? Are you married or dating a reporter?**

"I'm married to a writer, but she's not a journalist. I'm okay there, but a lot of our friends are in the industry. But I think a lot of people understand and it's an interesting thing where there's a resistance to sort of breaking the ice and doing this stuff. But

**“ This is our job, to ask unflinching questions. So you know, it can be uncomfortable asking it of each other. It's a professional thing. It's not personal.”**  
—Jesse Brown

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once you do it, we're not babies, we're not children. We understand that this is what we apply to politicians, this is what we apply to business, this is our job—to ask unflinching questions. So you know, it can be uncomfortable asking it of each other. It's a professional thing. It's not personal."

**You're using Patreon to raise money. You now have 2,030 patrons and \$10,126.66 per month and say you'll hire a roster of freelance journalists, create a podcast network, and a weekly politics show "once you find the perfect host." Is that going to be enough money? Or are you getting money from somewhere else?**

"We're getting a little bit of money from sponsors, companies that advertise on the show, and the vast majority of the money comes directly from the audience, so yeah, we're doing this on a shoe string and I think we can make it work."

**But aren't you the perfect host?**

"No, not for politics. I'm ignorant when it comes to Canadian politics. I probably know more about American politics than Canadian politics and that's because I like the coverage better, both the serious coverage and the satirical coverage. I just enjoy spending time with it and I don't think it's because American politics is inherently more interesting than Canadian politics. I want to start a show that is the show that I want to listen to, not the show I want to host."

**And what makes a good political show?**

"I think it's about applying some of the values of politics that *Canadaland* has applied to media—having a very frank, human conversation in an unvarnished language about why this stuff actually matters. I feel like a lot of the political coverage that I read, and especially in broadcasting, you're listening to people inside the bubble and they have their own dictionary, their own lexicon, and it's all about the strategy or the optics of different things, and none of it tells me what is substantive about this: why should we care and how will it affect me?"

"It's all horse-race stuff and Canadian politics as a sport. I don't find it to be a particularly compelling sport, so I'm looking for a host or co-hosts who will kind of decode this into a way that I think we do have an engaged and active citizenry here in Canada. We have people who want to know more about what's happening in their country. I think they've been actively discouraged from finding out more."

**Do you find the coverage sort of staged, canned and superficial?**

"Yeah, and I feel a great sense of distrust when I'm watching those shows. I feel like: who's the pollster? Who's the strategist? What are their affiliations? I don't want to say anything too indicting. I think there are also journalists trying to do their jobs as best they can, but there is a culture of spin and once you're inside that culture, inside that bubble, it's really hard to advocate."

**You've got your disclosure page up now on your website. What's the idea behind doing that and should all journalists do this?**

"I've never presented myself as some knight on a white horse of journalistic purity. These are thorny issues. And it's one thing when you've got a full-time salary from the CBC and you're topping it up by moonlighting. I've always been a freelance journalist so you piece your income together through multiple sources and everybody I know who's a freelancer does all sorts of things; they teach, they do some corporate writing, they do some ad copy, and so it gets complicated. I think that there is a basic principle that you shouldn't take money from people you cover. ... I can't think of any good reason not to. If you're not willing to disclose, you probably shouldn't be doing it." **P&I**

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