Race and Real Estate:
How data informed public debate on
BC’s Foreign Buyer Tax

by
Sophia Han

BA (Communications), Concordia University, 1998

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Approval

Name: Sophia Han
Degree: Master of Arts (Communication)
Title: Race and Real Estate: How data informed public debate on BC’s foreign buyer tax

Program Co-Directors: Dr. Zhao Yuezhi, Dr. Adel Iskandar

Stuart Poyntz
Senior Supervisor
Associate Professor

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Abstract

This capstone references works and theories surrounding the 2016 debate over causal factors of Vancouver’s inflated real estate market. Where and how this discussion has been informed by data will be examined through a case study supported by an analysis of mainstream media headlines. This case study will lead to an examination of data as concept, a tool for making disorder “legible” (Scott, 1998), after which Checkland’s model of dare and capere is referenced to further break down the interpretive nature of data. Both theories are discussed when I revisit Bill 28’s Property Transfer Tax (PTT) form amendment alongside a few observations about the use of data in policy narratives.

Keywords: Vancouver real estate; BC legislature Bill 28; BC foreign buyer tax; data collection; policy narratives; racism in Canada;
Acknowledgements

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In a way, all these journeys have informed my choice of research topic so without these past enablers, I wouldn't be where I am now and my writing probably would have taken a very different course.
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![Property Transfer Tax Return Form](image)

- **Are you claiming an exemption?**
  - YES [ ]
  - NO [ ]

- **Percentage interest acquired**: %

- **On the date of registration, are you a Canadian citizen or a permanent resident as defined in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (Canada)?**
  - YES [ ]
  - NO [ ]

- **Country of citizenship**

- **If you have not continuously resided in BC for at least one year prior to the registration date, list any two years that you filed income tax returns as a BC resident during the six years before the date of registration.**

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**Note:** The image of the form includes a circled area highlighting specific fields.
# List of Acronyms

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>BIP</td>
<td>Business Immigration Program</td>
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<td>BTA</td>
<td>Bing Thom Architects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBoC</td>
<td>Conference Board of Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>CMHC</td>
<td>Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>CREA</td>
<td>Canadian Real Estate Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>GVBT</td>
<td>Greater Vancouver Board of Trade</td>
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<tr>
<td>IIP</td>
<td>Immigrant Investor Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMDB</td>
<td>Immigrant Data Base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPPA</td>
<td>International Public Policy Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTSA</td>
<td>Land Title and Survey Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIDS</td>
<td>Landed Immigrant Data System</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAR</td>
<td>National Association of Realtors (US)</td>
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<td>PTT</td>
<td>Property Transfer Tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REBGV</td>
<td>Real Estate Board of Greater Vancouver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RBC</td>
<td>Royal Bank of Canada</td>
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<td>NAR</td>
<td>National Association of Realtors (US)</td>
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## Glossary

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bill 28</td>
<td>BC legislature that was passed on August 2, 2016 that was intended to curb foreign investment in the local housing market. It includes amendments that enable the City of Vancouver to impose a vacancy tax, the creation of a foreign buyer tax, amendments to the BC Real Estate Services act and the creation of a Housing Priority Initiatives fund. Full title: “Bill 28 - 2016 Miscellaneous Statutes (Housing Priority Initiatives) Amendment Act, 2016.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTAworks</td>
<td>The internal research and innovation division of Bing Thom Architects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary report</td>
<td>A presentation of early findings from a study based on sampled data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadow flipping</td>
<td>A sales practice that allows the realtor to sell or transfer the contract to another party. Contracts with assignment clauses often have longer closing periods, allowing the realtor to flip the property multiple times for additional commissions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White paper</td>
<td>In government, the term white paper is applied to official documents presented by Ministers of the Crown which state and explain the government's policy on a certain issue. The term can also refer to documents produced by corporations, public institutions, and non-governmental organizations that are intended to be authoritative and informative in nature.</td>
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Chapter 1. Real Estate in Vancouver

1.1 Introduction to the controversy

On November 30, 2016, Evan Siddall, president and CEO of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) addressed the Greater Vancouver Board of Trade (GVBT) on the matter of Vancouver’s housing crisis.\(^1\) The controversy over Vancouver’s real estate bubble has seen various iterations over the last 30 years but Siddall’s presentation, “Housing in Canada and the Imaginary City: Addressing Vulnerabilities, Data Gaps and Affordability” provided a year-end overview of current issues, particularly those areas that were thought to have been addressed through property tax reforms passed in August, 2016.

Chief among these issues, was the question of foreign ownership. After the widespread circulation of a November 2015 report by Andy Yan for Bing Thom Architects (BTA), causal factors for the real estate bubble included a theory that Vancouver was being bought out by speculative investors with “non-Anglicized Chinese names.”\(^2\) The resulting debate led to a call for data collected through the amendment of Property Transfer Tax (PTT) Form (Version 26). This change ultimately took effect on June 10, 2016. After a preliminary report was publicized in July, Bill 28 was drafted and passed through the BC legislature in an 8-day process. Siddall’s presentation to the GVBT takes note of this amendment and refers to the obtained data as “transactions-based administrative data.” He also observed the following: “As you are no doubt aware, factual information on the scope and influence [of] foreign investment in

\(^1\) “Housing in Canada and the Imaginary City: Addressing Vulnerabilities, Data Gaps and Affordability,” was presented at the Westin Bayshore in Vancouver, November 30, 2016 to an audience of GVBT members.

\(^2\) Full title of the report: “Ownership Patterns of Single Family Home Sales on Selected West Side Neighbourhoods in the City of Vancouver: A Case Study.” Yan’s report is singled out here because it was one of the most cited works in mainstream media during the months leading up to the PTT amendment.
local housing markets in Canada is notoriously scarce and challenging to obtain” (Siddall, 2016). It is an interesting observation to make four months after Bill 28’s passage, particularly as these tax reforms were rationalized based on the “conclusiveness” of the data obtained through the amended PTT.³

This account suggests the importance of data in informing public debate. Were there aspects to the collection, interpretation and presentation of the PTT data that should have called into question its “conclusive” nature? The question is important given the way in which data can be used by governing institutions to shape debate, classify groups, or inscribe an overly simplistic narrative on complex situations. What follows in this extended essay is an examination of data as concept, with specific attention to the way data can operate as a tool for making disorder “legible” (Scott, 1998). Checkland’s model of dare and capere is referenced to further break down the interpretive nature of data. Both theories are discussed through an investigation of Bill 28’s Property Transfer Tax amendment with a view to understanding the use of data in policy narratives.

³ The use of “conclusive” is a reference to the media portrayal of the Property Transfer Tax Report. The report itself does not make explicit statement linking foreign investment and price inflation. It is a preliminary study comprised of 4 pages of mainly aggregated data and highlighted summations expressed as percentages and averages. The full title of the preliminary study is “Property Transfer Tax Report: June 10 to July 14, 2016” (Conference Board of Canada, 2016).
Chapter 2. Background to the Issues

2.1 Racial tensions

Since the mid-1980s numerous theories have arisen regarding the causes for Vancouver’s inflated real estate market, from suggestions of an unholy alliance among public authorities with neoliberal economic agendas, to the role of stakeholders in the real estate, banking, and construction industries. Other factors include the legacy of the Business Immigration Program (BIP) that is now defunct in all provinces except Quebec (Malcolm, 2016).

Ethnographers have also noted the role of “Confucian capitalists” who have been accused of exploiting global financial flows through “passports of convenience” (Todd, 2013). Globalization itself can been seen as a principle actor: faceless, formless and as accountable as a tsunami or other Act of God. In this sense, globalization has been used as a nominal term in mainstream media to describe a complex alchemy of geopolitical and economic forces that increasingly limits the domestic population’s access to local resources.

While globalization is formative to the discussion, racism and classism underlie popular responses to changes in the local real estate market. Racism touches on the issues in a number of ways, from its appearance in newspaper

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4 Ley outlines these as causal factors in the introduction to Millionaire Migrants.
5 Inaugurated as the Business Immigration Program, it was updated in 2010 and became the Immigrant Investor Program.
6 A conflation of Confucian ethics and Asian economic success. Donald M. Nonini and Aiwa Ong in their introduction to Ungrounded Empires, discuss Confucian capitalism as a discursive trope, but also part of a larger discourse that constitutes “Chineseness” in transnationalism (Nonini, Ong, 1997). Ong’s research focuses on behaviours related to the circular migration of Hong Kong immigrants in the US.
7 Mitchell referencing Ulrich Beck on characterizing globalization as an actor (Mitchell, 2004).
accounts of vandalism, arson\textsuperscript{8} and confrontations on public transit as reported in the \textit{Vancouver Sun}, to more subtle uses of the “race card” to circumscribe discussions in public forums.\textsuperscript{9} It is the touchstone for those who interpret current debate in light of a troubled history of land use that has excluded, marginalized and contained groups (Mitchell, 2004; Ley, 2010), and the reason why any discussion of a foreign ownership tax is problematic for groups who identify most closely with the category of Asian or Chinese buyer.

How data can be used to circumscribe public discussion about race is the premise of this work but to understand the reasons why avoiding a discussion on race was important to the successful passage of Bill 28, it may be helpful to briefly recap some relevant points in the history of Chinese immigration and conflicts related to land use.

\textbf{A brief history of racism}

In the 19th century, some 15,000 Chinese labourers were recruited to build the Canadian Pacific Railway but from 1885 to 1923, a $50 head tax was imposed on Chinese immigrants, and the Chinese remain the only ethnic group ever to have paid a tax to enter Canada. From 1923 to 1947, there was a ban on Chinese immigration altogether. Immigration from East Asia as a whole spiked periodically during the ‘70s and ‘80s with the passage of the 1976 Immigration Act, as well as the adoption of a federal multicultural policy that became legislation in 1988 under the Canadian Multiculturalism Act. During the 1980s geopolitical factors in China and Hong Kong, as well as the popularity of a federal

\textsuperscript{8} Ley describes an account of an attempted arson near Arbutus Ridge (Ley, 2010).
\textsuperscript{9} In “There’s nothing racist about Metro Vancouver housing study,” Todd reports that in the mid-‘90s, accusations of racism were used to silence critics concerned by the rise in housing prices (Todd, 2015b). Mitchell explores related issues in \textit{Crossing the Neoliberal Line: Pacific Rim Migration and the Metropolis} (Mitchell, 2004).
business immigration program (BIP), led to further intakes. At 4 percent of the nation’s total population, Chinese immigrants now represent the third-largest immigrant group in Canada, after immigrants from Great Britain and Europe.

The BIP was a federal program launched with the cooperation of the Quebec government in 1986, when the early phenomenon of transnational migration appeared to sit in perfect alignment with a neoliberal agenda that welcomed financial and human capital from across the Pacific (Ley, 2010). It was updated in 2010 and renamed the Immigrant Investor Program (IIP). Since the program’s inception, Vancouver has increasingly been seen as a “gateway” to the economic frontiers of the Pacific Rim (Mitchell, 2004; Ley, 2010), but it is also a city that sits on the edge of a former British colony and reminders of this history still crop up in public speech. In a 2014 budget report, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty announced the cancellation of the Immigrant Investor Program, observing, “There is … little evidence that investors as a class are maintaining ties to Canada or making a positive economic contribution to the country” (Carman, 2014). At the time, two-thirds of the IIP’s 16,340 backlogged applications were from Chinese nationals.10 In Flaherty’s remark, there are curious echoes of the same anti-Chinese sentiment that was reported to the 1885 Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration: “[It] is charged that the Chinese do not emigrate to foreign countries to remain, but only to earn a sum of money and return to their homes in China” (Canadian Parliament, 1885).

**Are the Chinese homo economicus or circular migrants?**

The main criticism of Chinese immigrants is that they do not contribute to the long-term economic well-being of Canada as their migration path tends to be of a circular nature. (Todd, 2013). But have the majority of Chinese business

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10 The cancellation of the program in the midst of so many backlogged applications would lead to a class-action lawsuit. “Wealthy foreigners to sue Canada over end of visa plan” (Gordon, 2014).
immigrants since the 1980’s been circular migrants? Social geographer David Ley researched census, CRA and airport databases to address this question in *Millionaire Migrants*.

David Ley’s work on wealthy business migrants solicited through the BIP is a seminal examination of factors affecting the perceived success/failure of the program and provides an interesting background to the collapse of the IIP in 2014, four years after Ley’s *Millionaire Migrants* was published.

Ley observes that the program’s policy narrative cast the Chinese businessman as a neoliberal hero, a *homo economicus* gifted with a business acumen particularly suited for the new global economy. In the global recession of the early 1980s, *homo economicus* was supposed to invigorate the local economy, moving his talents and financial capital across borders and cultures in a manner perfectly in line with Thomas Friedman’s view of a flattened geography (Ley, 2010; Friedman, 2005). In line with a traditional view of migration, the move would be permanent. On describing the relationship between transnationalism and neoliberalism, Ley concludes that “[i]t is no accident that transnationalism across the Pacific [arose] during a neoliberal period that so powerfully directed Canada’s Asia-Pacific strategy” (Ley, 2010). From the start, transnational migration was part of a neoliberal economic agenda and back in 1986, it was a narrative that attracted thousands of citizens from Pacific Rim nations and recast them as immigrants in a story of permanent settlement.

Ley suggests that this linear narrative of migration, from country of origin to settler nation is disrupted by the contrast between spaces that are liveable and spaces that are actually conducive to business. The qualities that attract economic migrants to Vancouver (safety, slower lifestyle, environment, quality of education) are those which make economic integration difficult (business and environmental regulations, high taxes, low salaries, low profit margins). Alongside the attendant barriers of language and education (with 39% of
economic migrants having nine years of education or less), Ley questions whether many of the BIP participants can be said to have evolved much beyond emigrant to immigrant.

Indeed, suggesting that the Asian business immigrant is “rational economic man” (Ley, 2010) is a form of reductionism that marginalizes the individual circumstances of BIP participants. Millionaire Migrants recounts many difficulties faced by Chinese immigrants enrolled in the BIP’s entrepreneur stream, from the unrealistic timeline for meeting conditional residency requirements, to the difficulty of seeking entrepreneurial success in a market largely confined to the boundaries of a competitive Chinese enclave. Implicit in his arguments is a critique of policies that were operationally difficult to implement and opaque to the program participants. It could be argued that the BIP finally folded under the weight of its 16,340 backlogged applications.

Ley’s conclusions are based on data from focus groups, interviews and surveys, as well as an empirical study of statistics from census surveys, the Landed Immigrant Data System (LIDS) and the Immigrant Data Base (IMDB). His findings are contextualized by the biographies of respondents often stressed and demoralized by the dilemma of working in one nation but supporting a family in another. Although Ley does not detail episodes of mismanagement within the BIP, the selected transcripts evoke a sense of frustration and abandonment. While focused on the economic activities of BIP immigrants, Ley also examines the impact of transnational living conditions on family life. He presents a sympathetic portrait of a group oppressed by economic imperatives, having to migrate and reconstitute family structure with each life stage. Far from describing the journey of a neoliberal hero, his account describes the typical BIP entrepreneur as a fallible protagonist, often stranded by bureaucracy and

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11 While those who entered the investor stream experienced similar obstacles to social and economic integration, these applicants did not have to meet the same stringent conditions as BIP entrepreneurs, often listing their occupational status as “retired” on Canadian tax returns. (Ley, 2010)
transnational economic commitments. To what degree were the program’s executors responsible? The BIP served as a vehicle for the intake of financial and human capital; yet governments at all levels did not appear to take into account the need to create infrastructure to facilitate successful integration.\textsuperscript{12}

The circumstances of BIP participants contradict the "entrepreneurial ethos" of the mid-1980s that created the program (Ley, 2010). In the late ‘80s, this same neoliberal spirit was celebrated through the Expo 86 World Fair and spawned another trans-Pacific enterprise: the landmark sale of the Expo lands to Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-shing. The historical significance of this purchase would be brought up during the World Fair’s 30-year anniversary in May 2016, coinciding with contemporary discussions over real estate and a proposed foreign buyer tax.

**The Monster House Saga: An example of late 20th century systemic racism?**

In *Millionaire Migrants*, Ley tells us about circular migrants from the late 1980s and 1990s, but what of the immigrants who chose to settle? In *Crossing the Neoliberal Line: Pacific Rim Migration and the Metropolis*, Mitchell examines how transnationalism affects national narratives of place, culture and identity. Mitchell’s ethnographic examination of neighbourhood transformation in Vancouver addresses issues of race, class and the social constructs of home and citizenship in the 2000s. Her research is relevant in two ways:

1. The amount of choice/agency she ascribes to the immigrant as a participant in neoliberal markets. This is a view she shares with Aihwa Ong (although

\textsuperscript{12} Although a federal program, it is not clear what support was expected from the provincial and municipal governments; the dichotomy between federal policy and local implementation is a common theme in Canadian politics (Johal, 2017).
she attributes Ong’s focus on government to a “top-down” view; her own approach reflects the “bottom-up” agency of the resistant subject.  

2. The distinction between a narrative of economic liberalism as opposed to a narrative of social liberalism.

Mitchell supports her argument through an account of the Monster House controversy of the early 1990s. In summary, the Monster House saga refers to a public controversy over the allowable scale of renovation to Tudor-style homes in the south Shaughnessy and Kerrisdale-Oakridge areas on Vancouver’s West Side. Residents of First Shaughnessy had earlier been successful in achieving designation as a protected neighbourhood, incorporating new bylaws in the First Shaughnessy Official Development Plan (now the Heritage Conservation Area Official Development Plan after a 2015 status upgrade to heritage conservation area). The residents of South Shaughnessy sought to emulate the success of their northern neighbours by incorporating similar bylaws. However, the movement was blocked by the actions of an ad hoc committee composed of South Shaughnessy residents with Chinese family names. The result was a series of six public hearings.

Mitchell and Ley situate the conflict within the context of tensions arising from differing notions of private property rights, aesthetics (both topographical and architectural), and community. While Ley provides a nuanced overview of the issues, reflecting more on the historical significance of an immigrant group speaking collectively for the first time in a public forum (albeit through interpreters), Mitchell focuses on the conflict between economic liberalism (a narrative that invites immigrants into a community on the basis of financial capital and market demand) and social liberalism (a narrative that reflects a pluralistic, multicultural view of society). In interviews with long-term residents of

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13 Mitchell references Louis Althusser’s definition of subject here: the subject in a capitalist, neoliberal state society (Mitchell, 2004).
Shaughnessy, Mitchell detects a class-based resistance to the internalization of the social liberal narrative.

In the local media, the Monster House saga grew from a nuanced public debate to a conflict over land use along the axis of East vs. West, Asian vs. White. Ley, however, points out that the resolution of the controversy involved the cooperation of members from both associations, resulting in a joint-committee report.\textsuperscript{14} In this sense, the saga highlighted a new role for the Asian immigrant, that of an agent of social change. For in taking collective action and engaging with the public at large, the Chinese residents of South Shaughnessy not only announced their presence as homeowners with a vested interest in their private property, they also positioned themselves as members of a community from whom consent or dissent are expected participatory modes.

In the Monster House saga, we see early versions of themes that would recur in subsequent discussions on race and real estate. The story was picked up by international media as an example of systemic racism in Canada (Ley, 2010) and would later be referenced in articles explaining the controversy over Andy Yan’s 2015 study for BTAworks (Cheung, 2015, Fung, 2016).

\textsuperscript{14} In spite of the headlines, the resolution was peaceful, even amusingly phlegmatic. The municipal response was salient in that its final decision was largely empirically-based: in the end, the number of briefs submitted by the South Shaughnessy Property Owners’ Rights Committee (residents with Chinese family names) outnumbered those put forth by the Shaughnessy Heights Property Owners Association (an established neighbourhood society composed mainly of residents with Anglo-Saxon names). Ley does not specify if the Chinese residents consciously intended to outdo the SHPOA in terms of the number of briefs but if they had then it would have indicated a sophisticated understanding of regional politics and notions of democracy.
2.2 Concerns over housing unaffordability

Historically, Chinese Canadians have been in the difficult position of being wanted for their labor and financial capital but are seen as less likely to maintain ties to Canada or contribute positively over the long-term.

No wonder, then, that the issue of immigration status and property ownership became a sore point among the Vancouver Chinese diaspora in 2015 when calls for government intervention in the housing market included a request to investigate the extent of foreign ownership (Todd, 2015a).

However, concerns over the impact of foreign capital on the local economy were increasingly being legitimized by rising home prices. In the 2010s, the trend could be attributed to increased market demand, as the population of Metro Vancouver rose nearly 25 percent from 1.9 million in 2001 to 2.5 million in 2014. By January 2015, however, Vancouver ranked as the 2nd least affordable city (after Hong Kong) on the Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey. An RBC Economics report stated that the cost of an average two-storey home in Vancouver had jumped 12 percent to $979,600 while The Globe and Mail reported that the average selling price for a single detached home had soared 30 percent higher than the city’s 10-year average (Dyck, 2015). With one in five Canadian renters spending more than half their income on housing, the call for government intervention was growing louder. However, in response to prompts for government regulation, Minister of Housing Rich Coleman stated a position of non-intervention: "There is no initiative at this time in government to go and interfere in the marketplace in regards to housing" (Slattery, 2015).
2.3 Neighborhood transformation and Chinese new money

The majority of economic migrants studied in *Millionaire Migrants* were those who arrived prior to the 1997 handover of British Hong Kong to China. In 2014, a *National Post* article characterized a new wave of immigrants from mainland China as “brash newcomers… who bring with them significant sums of cash” (Hutchinson, 2014). That a sense of resentment had entered the local discourse could be seen at public forums over all-Chinese signage in Richmond (Chau, 2015). *National Post* also featured interviews with Kevin Li, creator of the web series, “Ultra Rich Asian Girls,” Ian Young, journalist with the *South China Morning Post*, and Andy Yan, an urban planning researcher mapping the extent of foreign ownership in West Vancouver. All expressed concerns over the impact of recent mainland Chinese capital on the local economy and culture.

**Summary**

Racial tensions due to a long history of discriminatory practices, conflicts over neighborhood transformation, cultural tensions between different communities in the Chinese diaspora, as well as recent spikes in pricing (against an overall rising trend) were just some of the factors that made for heated public discussions on real estate in 2015. On June 24th, when the creators of the hashtags #donthave1million and #giveusdata organized a protest at the Vancouver public library, the call for data was really a call for government action. In August, Prime Minister Stephen Harper included a promise to investigate foreign ownership in his election platform while an Angus Reid poll found that 70\% of respondents welcomed more political action on the issue of real estate and housing affordability.
As to how this action might be undertaken, little was known; and while the impact of global capital on Vancouver real estate was clearly evident, without “hard proof” to determine a correct course of action, it seemed little could be done to buck the current trend of rising unaffordability.
Chapter 3. The Role of Data

3.1 An example of the influence of data

Quantifiable data linking Asian investment, immigration and housing prices has been available for decades. In a panel interview with the Asia Pacific Foundation, Ley notes a direct correlation over a 25-year period between Metro Vancouver housing affordability and numbers of foreign newcomers to the area (Asia Pacific Foundation, 2015). However, as the degree of impact had not been quantified and earlier prompts for the collection of data on foreign investment had been frustrated by the government’s stance on non-intervention, the course for government action remained unclear.

It was this political climate that received the findings in Andy Yan’s study for BTAworks, “Ownership Patterns of Single Family Home Sales on Selected West Side Neighbourhoods in the City of Vancouver: A Case Study.” The contents of the study are summarized by a headline published by the National Post: “In a six-month period, 70% of detached homes sold in Vancouver’s west side went to Mainland China buyers” (Cooper, 2015a). The study’s influence was widespread, cited in more than 50 mainstream media articles between November 2015 and August 2016. The study is notable not only for its mapping approach but also for the use of the term, “non-Anglicized Chinese family names” as a proxy for buyers from mainland China. The widespread circulation of the study can be attributed to the timeliness of the research topic. The study appeared to answer questions regarding not only the causes of inflated real estate prices but also the group largely responsible.

But while appearing to answer questions about the extent of foreign ownership, there remained questions about the extent of speculative investment. The difference is significant as noted by journalist Frances Bula: “We don’t know if the 70% of buyers were foreign investors, temporary residents, permanent resident, non-resident dads parking their wives and children here, or families who
moved here wanting desperately to get out of China with its smog and suffocating education system — families who are fully planning to create a new life rooted in Vancouver” (Bula, 2015).

Another question left unanswered by the BTAworks study is one regarding financing: if 70% of the buyers with non-Anglicized Chinese names are presumed to be foreign speculators, how is it that 82% of the residential property owners were holding mortgages? As the author himself notes, “With 82 percent of residential properties in the study holding a mortgage, the image of pure ‘cash sales’ seems highly problematic” (Yan, 2015).

Finally, the methodology used to identify the ethnicity of foreign owners drew criticism. Yan’s study draws upon mortgage and sales transaction data to profile owners according to occupation (self-declared) and ethnic identity (by full name analysis). However, as Ian Young notes, having a non-Anglicized Chinese name does not prove that a buyer is a recent Chinese immigrant or a naturalised Chinese Canadian. For Young, the question is almost rhetorical, as the issue of middle-income housing affordability cannot be addressed by researching the ownership of luxury homes (Young, 2015).

3.2 A data purposed by narratives?

Aside from controversies over its methodologies, Yan’s study generated feedback on its influence and use. In July, the ubiquity of the study was discussed in a two-part feature by Travis Lupick for the Georgia Straight. Tagged as a StraightTalk feature, the first article was provocatively subtitled with the question, “How did the region become so convinced that foreign money is the dominating force driving the Vancouver real-estate market?” Lupick suggests that the reach of the BTAworks study had more to do with confirmation bias rather than a comprehensive analysis of market factors. Among other causal factors, Lupick notes alternative theories such as geography, low interest rates, buyer panic, media focus on the foreign buyer narrative, zoning restrictions, as well as
the inter-generational transfer of wealth from baby boomers to millennials (Lupick, 2016f). In a public debate where there has been such a loud call for empirical evidence, Lupick suggests that the focus on studies that support the foreign buyer narrative reflects a bias bordering on prejudice, a suggestion made explicit by the footer link which references the first of this two-part series: “History shows racism has always been a part of Vancouver real estate.”

Lupick’s observations parallel the theories of soft systems researcher Peter Checkland that unless data is purposed by a human agenda, it remains “raw” data. It is only when data is selected for analysis that it becomes information. Regarding the BTAnworks example, Lupick suggests that the foreign buyer narrative purposed the data as information that was useful to support a theory about speculative investment from overseas.

3.3 No dearth of data

At issue is the question of selected data. How does data inform our understanding of the real estate market? How do biases influence our selection of data? The hashtag #giveusdata suggests that information has been deliberately withheld. However, this does not mean that information has not been gathered. According to the Land Title and Survey Authority and the BC Chamber of Commerce, citizenship declarations were once included with every property transfer registered at the BC Land Title Office. The paper-based system was in place for 20 years until 1998. As no financial resources were ever allocated to its organization and analysis, the data was left unpurposed and eventually destroyed.

Beyond the issue of ownership, our understanding of the home real estate market comes from assessments of its availability (number of listings), market value (pricing, tax assessments, sales volume) and affordability (pricing to median gross income ratio). Historically, the two primary sources have been multiple listing service (MLS) data and BC Assessment records. Other sources
include information published in reports on related financial transactions (mortgage approvals), property development (permit applications) and construction activities (costing averages for housing starts). In 2012, a City of Vancouver task force researched foreign ownership by analyzing the out-of-country mailing addresses registered with BC Assessment. For Millionaire Migrants, Ley drew upon twenty-five years of census, immigration, airport and property ownership data. In 1990, media analyst Donald Gutstein outlined the linkages between Asian investment, immigration and housing prices through an in-depth survey of newspaper articles.

As for market pundits, articles in Real Estate Issues dating from 2011 clearly reflect industry concerns regarding affordability. Analyst William McCarthy researched the issue and included data from the Real Estate Board of Greater Vancouver (REBGV). McCarthy reflects on the exponential rise in housing prices while citing a statistics Canada map detailing recent immigration throughout the Vancouver region and data from the National Association of Realtors (NAR) affordability index (McCarthy, 2011). While McCarthy’s article is concerned with gauging the depth of an eventual price correction, its breadth of research acknowledges immigration (both domestic and foreign) as causal factors for housing price inflation beyond a level that can be afforded by local buyers.

Full name and other ownership information is available through the Land Title and Survey Authority of British Columbia (LTSA). Due to the Torrens land title system used in BC, the information by law must be recorded and made accessible to the general public (through a paid service). As the LTSA website states: “Legal title to land can only be changed by the act of registration on a public register, and the issuance of a certificate of indefeasible title.”

Regarding efforts to track foreign capital in-flows, Josh Gordon has pointed out the usefulness of CRA databases (Gordon, 2017). Journalist Ian Young has noted precursors to the Yan study, including two Landcor studies that identified the ethnicity of purchasers by full name analysis (Young, 2015).
Among the studies Lupick notes as being largely ignored, is a 2015 report by the China Institute of the University of Alberta that calls for more data of the kind needed to evaluate policy proposals (Sun, 2015). The report’s observations on the paucity of ownership/occupancy data are significant because they acknowledge a conceptual difference in the utilization of housing stock. Underpinning the legal definition of real property in Canada, is a distinction between the conceptual frameworks of “home” and “investment.”

**Summary**

It is less about the dearth of data than about data that helps us to define corrective action. As public policy researcher Josh Gordon observes, “When a government doesn’t want to address a thorny issue, a typical move is to delay action with a call for more information. Further study is justified in the name of good policy” (Gordon, 2017). However, what information we select for analysis may depend on the framework of a policy narrative. Therefore, delays can be further aggravated by a conflict in narratives. In the case of real estate in Vancouver, a neoliberal economic agenda that invites human and financial capital from across the Pacific and turned Vancouver into a “hedge” city where land can be purchased as an attractive global asset (Hutchinson, 2014), has existed since the ‘80s. Such a narrative conflicts with a nativist policy that seeks to protect the domestic population’s access to local resources. The former approach can be seen as beneficial to the real estate industry and for preserving homeowner equity, but the latter is necessary to redress class inequity. Then too, against the background of a history of racism against the Chinese, discussing the two approaches requires perspicacity. The questions generated by the Yan study indicated that further research was required and that it was time for the government to take a role in the collection of data but to do so in a manner that remained sensitive to the history of racism against Chinese people.
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Chapter 4. Data and the Process of Legibility

4.1 An objective lens to a complicated situation

Andy Yan’s work for Bing Thom Architects is significant because of his attempt to use metrics to explore the issues. Its findings encouraged questions about race and real estate but did not necessarily clarify next steps for Christy Clark’s government in 2015. In 2016, the PTT data was expected to answer some of these questions by tracking the citizenship of home buyers.

According to Mike de Jong, the goal of the PTT data was never in question: “The objective here is to get beyond the theory, get beyond the conjecture and the speculation and actually have hard data that allows us to say definitively” (Palmer, 2016). The results were supposed to prove that foreign ownership was driving up the price of housing to a point necessitating political action. This chapter explores one way in which the PTT data fulfilled this objective: by helping to simplify the issues, the data appeared to chart a clear course of action.

Making complex situations legible

In his 1998 book, “Seeing Like a State,” political science researcher James C. Scott presents a theory about the ways in which pre-modern states established control over its resources through the process of “legibility.” Legibility is the process by which a state comes to acquire an understanding about its terrain and peoples through procedures of governance such as census-taking and land surveyance as well as specific projects such as the creation of permanent surnames and the standardization of language, weights and measures: “The more I examined these efforts at sedentarization, the more I came to see them as a state’s attempt to make a society legible, to arrange the population in ways
that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion” (Scott, 1998, Introduction).

Scott develops this argument into a negative critique of data-based social-engineering projects founded on high modernist principles. Drawing on Cold War-era examples from the Soviet Union, Tanzania and 20th-century ecological disasters such as forest diebacks in Germany, Scott concludes these government efforts to exert control over local communities, resources and practices failed because of a gross oversimplification of causal factors and solutions. “[The] necessarily thin, schematic model of social organization and production animating the planning was inadequate as a set of instructions for creating a successful social order. By themselves, the simplified rules can never generate a functioning community, city, or economy” (Scott, Introduction).

The final chapter concludes that these efforts failed and will continue to fail because schemas that are drawn from an incomplete knowledge of situated problematics and processes can never be successful; and yet it is these same schemas that make society and its problems legible to the state.

But why is simplification necessary for legibility? Why are models for social planning and remedial action “necessarily thin”? One answer may lay in two additional requirements for Scott’s model of disastrous social planning:

“In sum, the legibility of a society provides the capacity for large scale social engineering, high modernist ideology provides the desire, the authoritarian state provides the determination to act on that desire, and an incapacitated civil society provides the leveled social terrain on which to build.” (Scott, Chapter 9).

Here, the two requirements of interest to us are “an authoritarian state” and an "incapacitated civil society." In an authoritarian state, a schema is useful for efficient communication within a bureaucracy that is less concerned with
informing its “incapacitated” citizens than with the development and execution of a plan. In this type of society, schemas serve the purpose of informing citizens only what they need to know in order to perform the task that is required of them.

However, even in a non-authoritarian state, schemas serve the function of efficiently communicating information essential for decision-making in what Peter Checkland refers to as a “consensual domain ... that is to say, a cognitive domain in which knowledge can be shared” (Checkland, 2006). Not only does a democratic state need to make society legible in order to propose informed policies; it also needs to communicate its plans back to society to achieve consensus. In this case, schemas are useful as containers of information that can be easily disseminated for the purpose of building consensus around proposals for political action.

But how are schemas created and rationalized? While it is possible for schemas to be based entirely on theory, Western societies have tended to organize their knowledge of the world according to scientific principles, relying on empirical evidence acquired through the collection and analysis of data, (De Sousa Santos, Nunes, Meneses, 2007). Embedded in this approach is the assumption that data has an objective nature, that the information presented as data is “given,” “factual,” and a true representation of the natural world as it actually exists. However, this ethos of data as “given” is one that deserves closer examination, particularly considering the role of data in discourse simplification.

4.2 Data in discussions on race and real estate in Vancouver

To investigate the way in which data may have simplified the real estate debate in Vancouver, 204 mainstream media articles were analyzed for keywords or signifiers in order to identify focal points in public discourse that were possibly influenced by the release of data. A change in frequency over time was tracked for subjects, objects and main issues.
4.2.1 Subjects under discussion

Graph 1.

Subjects under discussion in mainstream media headlines between November 2015 and August 2016

The graph shows the frequency of signified concepts for subject: immigrant, homeowner, foreign buyer, or Chinese (buyer). These concepts were selected based on a) relevance to topic, and; b) a text search query for words that could be identified as subjects in a subject-verb-object (SVO) sentence structure. The significance of conceptual terms was inferred based on frequency.

Also selected for query were terms that represent a difference in conceptual approach. For example, an immigrant is part of the national narrative of multiculturalism but a buyer has non-nationalist qualities.

A correlation to data source was investigated through article content analysis. Where possible, the data source informing the news article was identified and tracked. Appendix A has more information about criteria and choice of time frame.
Observations

Home owner and immigrant minimally met the criteria. Signifiers for the concept of Chinese (and Chinese buyer) occurred 31 times while references to the concept of foreign buyer occurred 69 times in headlines. Comparing November and July, there was less use of signifiers for Chinese in July. July also saw an increased use of the term foreign buyer without an indicator for the subject’s country of origin.

Correlations to the release of data

Significant spikes in frequency for Chinese coincided with the publication of four sets of data: data from the BTAworks study on November 2nd, the release of BC Assessment data, the annual release of the Demographia affordability study, and the release of a National Bank estimate in March reporting that Chinese investors were buying one-third of Vancouver homes.

The spikes for foreign buyer coincide with the announcement of the citizenship tracking system in February 2016, the release of a study by SFU’s School of Public Policy and the release of the PTT data in July.

4.2.2 Objects under discussion

Graphs 2 and 3 indicate the occurrence of signified concepts: home, housing, investment and real-estate. Concepts were selected based on a) relevance to topic, and; b) a preliminary text search query for words that could be identified as objects in an SVO sentence structure.
Graph 2. Objects under discussion

Graph 3. Objects under discussion - “Home” vs. “Housing”
In graph 2, *home* is distinguished from *investment* because of conceptual differences between the terms. A *home* suggests a property that is intended for occupancy whereas *investment* denotes a commodity. *Real estate* can signify the market or the context of the market or the values of a property whether it is intended for use as a home or as an investment.

In graph 3, *home* is distinguished from *housing* because conceptually, *housing* is more generally used to reference a resource or stock and can also include structures other than single detached homes. For the most part, however, the culture of home ownership in Canada refers to ownership of single detached houses.

**Observations**
The concept of *investment* was referenced in 15 headlines. The concept of *home* and *housing* was referenced in 50 and 61 headlines respectively. *Real estate* featured in 53 headlines. Seven of the months saw higher occurrences of the term *housing* over *home* except in March and July.

**Correlations to data**
There were more references to *real estate* than *home* in November and January, coinciding with the release of the BTAworks study and the BC Assessment data. In March, there were three times as many references to *home* than to *real estate*, coinciding with the National Bank estimate.

For both *home* and *real estate*, the highest number of occurrences were in July, the same month as the PTT data

**4.2.3 Main issues under discussion**
Main issues were identified by the signifiers: *ownership, immigration, market, race* and *affordability*. Concepts were selected based on a) relevance to
investigation topic, and; b) frequency of occurrence. Using content analysis, articles were coded according to the degree in which a main topic was featured.

**Observations**

Below is the breakdown for the articles according to main issue.

1. Ownership 84
2. Market (health or state of the market as expressed in values) 56
3. Affordability 58
4. Race 20
5. Immigration 8

**Comparative results from November 2015 and July 2016**

The months of November 2015 and July 2016 were compared (graph 4). In November, the issues of *race*, *market*, and *ownership* were featured in a similar number of articles, coinciding with the release of the BTAworks study. In July, *ownership* and *affordability* were the primary issues, coinciding with the report of preliminary PTT data.
Graph 4. Main issues - Comparative results from November 2015 and July 2016

Additional findings on the influence of data

Below is a list of the six most cited data sources informing the articles.

1. BTAworks
2. PTT data
3. BC Assessment
4. RBC Housing Report
5. CMHC
6. National Bank (NAR)

Out of the 204 articles, 50 referenced the BTAworks study and 38 referenced the PTT data. Out of the 50 references to the BTAworks study, 46% of the headlines contained a reference to race, racism or the terms Chinese and Asian.

Summary

This chapter included an analysis of media headlines in order to correlate focal points in public discussions on real estate with the release of data. Based on the
frequency of citations and the occurrence of keyword signifiers, both the BTAWorks study and the PTT report were found to have influenced the debate on foreign ownership, at least in terms of how the mainstream media framed the issues in headlines. Most relevant to our discussion is the finding that out of the 50 references to the BTAWorks study, 46% of the headlines contained a reference to race, racism or the terms Chinese and Asian. In July, headlines citing the PTT data were more likely to feature the word buyer without an indicator of the subject’s nationality. In this sense, the PTT data report may have helped to move the issue of foreign ownership outside of the context of race. Whether or not this was done purposefully is of course, much more difficult to ascertain. The end result, however, was that the release of the PTT data was followed three weeks later by the proposal to implement a 15% foreign buyer tax.

According to Scott, simplification is necessary for the process of legibility. Data can help with this simplification process by enabling the communication of model problems with model solutions. In the case of the PTT report, the data not only appeared to settle the debate but also indicated a seemingly elegant (non-racist) solution to the problem: a surtax on foreign buyers. History tells us that there would be ramifications from the hasty passage of Bill 28 but at the time of the proposal, was there anything in the report that could have forewarned of some of the coming issues? Perhaps, regarding foreign ownership, the issue was less about data collection than a problem of data interpretation.
Chapter 5. Data as Concept

5.1 Dare and capta

Regarding the data gap mentioned by Siddall in his 2016 GVBT address, we might ask several questions: How is it that in an extensively networked society, where information regarding a state’s capital is collected to a degree never before seen, we still hear the clarion call for yet more data. Why does “data” in the digital age appear to make complex situations less “legible” in some cases while “oversimplifying” nuances in others?

Regarding “data” as a concept of information, soft systems researcher Peter Checkland cites Martin and Powell to explain the relationship between data, information and “purposeful action” within organizations: “Information comes from data that has been processed to make it useful in management decision-making” (Checkland, 2006). Key to this definition is the notion that data needs to be processed (extracted and analysed) in order to be used as information.

Checkland presents a model to further break down the interpretive nature of data by clarifying the distinctions between “data,” “information,” and “knowledge.” Referencing the word origin of “data” from the Latin dare which is “to give,” Checkland suggests that available raw data should be distinguished from extracted data through the use of the term, “capta,” from the Latin word capere which is “to take.” The purpose of distinguishing raw from selected data is to highlight the interpretive nature of acquired facts. All values that are acquired through a scientific process can be categorized as data but data that is selected for analysis is capta; and capta by nature of being data that is (pre)selected by
the design of the research is never wholly objective. In other words, what we choose to analyze depends on the research question and research design.

Capta is therefore data that has been "enriched" by assumptions regarding the sort of information that is considered useful (Checkland, 1998). Capta is then reframed in a larger story that causes it to gain in significance. Capta that is analyzed, contextualized and reframed is information; when it is related to larger, “longer-living” structures of meaning, it may be referred to as knowledge (Checkland, 1998).

The above may seem a rather overzealous breakdown of the different dimensions of data but it serves the purpose of highlighting areas where problems of interpretation are likely to occur: “The most important feature of this analysis of data, capta, information and knowledge is that the act of creating information is a human act... [it] is the human being who can attribute meaning to the selected data which have been highlighted for attention, this being done in a context which may well be shared by many people but may also be unique to an individual” (Checkland, 1998). In short, the information yielded by data can mean different things to different people depending on context. Whereas science and technology produces the data that constitutes research; human activity attributes meaning to selected data (capta) that gives the research its significance. In policy development, a large part of this meaning attribution takes place through the lens of a policy’s narrative framework.

The data/capta model reminds us to distinguish between the methods by which data is captured and the human activities of extracting and analysing information from selected data to produce information and knowledge. It acknowledges that these human activities are often driven by the questions and assumptions that produced the research in the first place. When the research has been commissioned by the state for the purpose of effecting political change, there are further problematics. What if the state drafts a policy proposal and
includes in its white paper a call for data to support justification of the proposal? How should we view the validity and relevance of data that is already purposed by its strategic use in a policy narrative? Is data sought after-the-fact necessarily compromised? To answer these questions, it is helpful to examine the ways in which data supports the positivist, empirical approach to problem-solving; and how its interpretation affects deliberation and consensus-building around policies.

5.2 A question of authority

For their 2013 conference in Grenoble, the International Public Policy Association (IPPA) called for proposals on “policy narratives” which they defined as “strategic justifications of policies.” (IPPA, 2013) The term was developed by behavioural economist Emery Roe during the early ‘90s and gained wide circulation in the political and social sciences. Roe’s work focused on the strategic simplifications that facilitate communication and understanding of complex situations: “[Policy] narratives are stories (scenarios and arguments) which underwrite and stabilize the assumptions for policy-making in situations that persist with many unknowns, a high degree of interdependence, and little, if any, agreement” (Roe, 1994).

As schemas, narratives can be fairly representative models of the situations they address. They can help to structure our understanding of situations whose complexity might otherwise instill “policy paralysis.” In our example of the real estate bubble in Vancouver, individual interpretations of causal factors (particularly within the context of racial tensions) can be seen as a roadblock to the achievement of consensus around policy changes. But a government working within a narrative framework that sees foreign investment as a likely factor can still build consensus for political action based on this narrative even without understanding or commenting on all causal factors.

For Roe, these narratives are strategic simplifications that can be based on theory (for instance, the theory that foreign investment drives up housing
prices) but they differ from a scientific theory in that science is validated through its findings (published and peer-reviewed) and the conditions of scientific inquiry involving predictions that are testable and falsifiable such as when we ask the question, “Are the majority of homes in BC being purchased by foreign investors?” This difference can be perceived in the “consensual domain” as a difference of reception and interpretation, of which economist Jeremy Swift has observed: “Scientific facts are falsifiable … [narratives] are not. They escape the checks and balances of science.”15 And by “escaping” the constraints of science, narratives are seen to be a reasonable focal point around which to build consensus.

This is not to say that narratives do not have a use for scientific research. Policy narratives require the support of scientific authority in order to a) establish the credibility of its approach and b) to rationalize its solutions. Here we see the rhetorical potential of data, as data not only gives a policy narrative credibility (providing initial evidence to support a claim); it also informs an understanding of the problem in a way that makes the solution appear logical (through deductive reasoning). It serves an argumentative purpose. Used judiciously, it can facilitate discussions around policy by “embedding scientific expertise into [the] meaningful social context” surrounding a proposal. (Fischer, 2012) Used without circumspection, it simply serves the purpose of confirming biases. What is important to take note of here is the relationship between narrative and data. Not only does the framework underwrite a study’s representation, the framework sets the goals for research, thus possibly compromising the validity of its data. This is especially true when the framework defines the measurable component of a research design (through the process of operationalization) in a manner that may or may not be helpful to our understanding of the problem but almost certainly

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suggests its solution. Thus, measuring the number of foreign homeowners in Vancouver in the context of studying causal factors for real estate inflation suggests that the solution is to move forward with proposals discouraging foreign homeownership.

What is being questioned here is not the use of data in providing insight on a complex situation nor is it the purpose of this essay to critique the general use of policy narratives to frame a hypothesis. However, there are problematics involved with the assumption that all data acquired through a scientific inquiry is objective. There are also problematics when the proposals underwritten by a policy narrative do not include a call for comprehensive studies or when the operationalization of a fact-finding study is left unquestioned. At issue is the presentation of data in its analyzed form, wherein the results are infused with both the authority of a scientific process and the authority of an official commission.

Regarding authority; it might be useful to remember Scott’s recipe for failure in social-engineering projects. Scott suggests that one essential component is “an authoritarian state that is willing and able to use the full weight of its coercive power” (Scott, 1998). In the case of a non-authoritarian state, governments will ideally seek information that will help them to make decisions around policy with the support of public opinion. If the government chooses to embrace a policy narrative without pursuing a comprehensive analysis of factors then it is likely to propose policies based on incomplete knowledge; thus the possibility of poor social planning is still present with or without state coercion.

This brings us back to a discussion of the data collected through PTT Form (Version 26) and the notion that calls for solutions involved a call for the “right” sort of data, i.e., selected data that was useful to support the foreign buyer narrative.
5.3 The PTT Form revisited

The announcement
The change to PTT Form (Version 26) (figure 1) was announced February 16, 2016, as part of Mike de Jong’s Balanced Budget 2016 report. The change was described under a category of actions intended to develop better data on cost drivers. In summary, the changes granted the government the authority to collect new information from owners during property registration. The backgrounder mentions that this data was once required with land transfers until 1998. The purpose of the data was clearly stated: “BC Housing will conduct a study on the key factors affecting housing affordability in British Columbia, which may then contribute to policy-making across all levels of Government” (BC Ministry of Finance, 2016).

The form
PTT Form (Version 26) is an editable PDF that can be downloaded through the Land Title and Survey Authority (LTSA) website. While an individual purchaser may fill out the form themselves, the website strongly advises consultation with a legal professional and the link to the form is grouped under the heading, “Forms for Legal Professionals.” By law, LTSA staff cannot provide legal advice or assistance in completing the form. LTSA does provide training to legal professionals on how to update the form. This information is provided through news updates posted on their website.

The form collects information through the addition of yes/no checkboxes and subsequent fields for the identification of citizenship (figure 2), as well as a field to collect information regarding any two years of tax returns filed within six years of registration. It collects information on purchases made by both individuals and corporations. Though Bill 28’s foreign buyer tax exempts corporations, the form also collects data on the citizenship of a foreign
corporation’s board of directors. Below is a breakdown of unique data points captured by the form:

1. Whether the purchaser is a Canadian citizen or permanent resident.
2. The purchaser’s country of citizenship
3. Whether or not the purchaser continuously resided in BC for at least one year prior to registration.
4. A listing of any two years for which the purchaser filed income tax during the six years prior to registration.
5. If applicable, citizenship of a foreign corporation’s board of directors.

The report
The report of the preliminary data from the PTT amendment was based on data collected between June 10 and July 14, 2016. It is a preliminary study comprised of 4 pages of mainly aggregated data and highlighted summations expressed as percentages and averages. The full title of the document is “Property Transfer Tax Report: June 10 to July 14, 2016.” Under notes, respondents are identified as “foreign nationals.”

Presentation of the report
The PTT data was presented on July 7, 2016 alongside of a powerpoint presentation, titled “Housing Market Information.” Highlights from the PTT data report were extracted and used for visualizations.

Comparing the form to the extracted data (capta)
The most significant difference between the dare (collected information represented by the design of the form) and the capta (the dataset pulled for analysis in the PTT report) is the lack of reference to the tax-related info that was presumably collected in Section A.
Analysis
On the PTT form, the field for information on tax return years is significant because it acknowledges a category of respondents who may not hold citizenship/permanent residency as defined under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act but are still tax-paying, “contributing” members of society. If this information was collected, then we might expect to see this information also highlighted in PTT report, at least in an appendix or supplementary table. In fact, there is no reference to the data that would have been collected from this field, nor is there an explanation for its absence in the notes. Indeed, anyone who has not examined the form itself would not be aware of the missing data.

The matter is concerning because it suggests the reason for a rather large oversight in the tax proposal: this lack of reference may have caused a category of respondents to be overlooked in the proposal’s draft. Had the preliminary report selected this data for analysis, it would have been apparent that the proposal needed an amendment to acknowledge the circumstances of long-term residents on work visas, those in the transitional stages of residency applications, or those living in mixed citizenship households.

Aftermath
In fact, all of these circumstances would be later addressed in changes to the tax announced in March 2017, seven month after its effective date. The tax now exempts residents with work permits or residents who achieve citizenship/permanent residency status within one year of registration. Residents who paid the tax and meet the new requirements for exemption may now apply for rebates under this amendment. In spite of these revisions, there are still
consequences needing further resolution: as of April 2017, the foreign buyer tax currently faces a court challenge on the basis that it is unconstitutional.16

Summary

In Western democratic societies, consensus decision-making depends on shared knowledge that is seen to be both reliable and invested with authority. A call for data arises in situations where people do not feel that they have access to the information they need to make informed decisions. Throughout 2016, controversy over real estate inflation in Vancouver was framed in part by the apparent lack of empirical evidence in the form of available data concerning ownership and speculation. However, our previous analysis of media content from this period shows numerous references to data sources. This suggests that these calls for data included a call for the “right” sort of data.

Chapter 3 discussed Lupick’s critique of local and national coverage of real estate issues. What Lupick is drawing our attention to is the selective use of data (capta) in a narrative that links foreign investment with inflated real estate prices, a link that is problematic because of the assumption that much of the “foreign money” buying up Vancouver real estate originates from mainland China, a country that has also provided BC with a large immigrant population and a large in-flow of financial capital.

As noted in Chapter 3, the correlation between immigration and Vancouver housing prices has been documented for at least twenty-five years across industry, government and academic sources. The link between immigration and population growth (resulting in increased demand for housing) was reaffirmed in Siddal’s November 30th presentation to the GVBT:

16 As of April 2017, Jing Li, the main plaintiff in the class action lawsuit has not withdrawn her case.
“At the national level, and in our largest cities in particular, immigration far outweighs the impact of natural (domestic) increase as the source of population growth. Net international immigration currently accounts for roughly two-thirds of Canada’s population growth, up from around 40 per cent in the early 1990s.” (Siddall, 2016).

But immigration is a very different practice from investment; and in Canada, its issues are carefully discussed within the framework of a multicultural narrative that celebrates “inclusive citizenship.” A history of discriminatory policies against the Chinese had made discussion of foreign ownership into a sensitive topic. Policies to limit individual foreign investment must therefore distinguish between the practices of purchasing a home (a desirable goal for immigrants) as opposed to investing in a property (an activity of overseas speculators). The amendment to PTT (Version 26) can be seen as an attempt to identify the scope of the practice of home ownership among non-citizens but its research design does not capture the information related to the practice of property speculation or the economic activity of contributing taxes. Including the data on tax returns may have helped to clarify the scope of any of these activities.
Chapter 6. Conclusion

The above case study has served to highlight issues with the use of data to support policy narratives on housing and real estate in Vancouver. When we use data to confirm our biases or to move forward with policies that have already been underwritten by a narrative framework, we run the risk of overlooking significant variables; when we accept its findings as conclusive, we risk blind spots in our understanding of a complex situation. Additionally, the relationship between data and narrative is susceptible to flux, with empirical evidence sometimes investing far too much authority in a “thin schema.” At other times, a narrative can shape the boundaries of inquiry in a manner that actually handicaps understanding, leading not only to honest errors of inference but oversights that are marginalizing. In the case of the PTT report, the use of data did help to steer public discussion away from a “racism outbreak” (Tieleman, 2017). However, it could also be said that there were oversights in the analysis of the data that marginalized non-citizens without permanent residency, those who have contributed to the local economy through their labor and tax contributions, and who may have every intention of rooting their lives in Vancouver.

Recent policy changes indicate that there were mis-steps in the application of knowledge acquired through the PTT report. While the report may have indicated “conclusive” links between foreign investment and real estate inflation, both the study and subsequent tax policy changes have faced criticism for failing to address the real issue on hand: making housing affordable. While the amount of foreign investment has decreased, housing prices have not, with March 2017 home sales hitting a record high and the average price of a detached house reaching 1.77 million in June. With Christy Clark’s announcement of reversals to the foreign buyer tax, it would appear that the narrative of foreign investment as a primary causal factor has lost favor. Consequently, it would seem that the data used to support the initiatives in the
first place has decreased in value: the BC government has not updated the PTT report since October 2016 and the cost of the research to date has not been disclosed. Regarding the change in narrative, Siddal concludes with this observation:

“To some, the scapegoat is obvious: blame foreigners. It's the recurring theme, the clear cause according to the twitterverse and many commentators. In fact, according to a 2015 Angus Reid poll, nearly two-thirds of Vancouverites believe that foreign investing is the ‘main cause of high housing prices’ here… while it would be convenient to hang all of the blame for high prices on others — offshore buyers — it’s just not that simple … while foreign investment clearly is a factor, it is not the only one.” (Siddall, 2016).

Siddall has since been criticized for assertions that the PTT data was tainted. However, the point he makes is a good one: a simplistic overview can lead to simplistic solutions. This is the same point made by David Ley in his assessment of the proposal to collect data in 2015: “There is a danger, too, in thinking that data on foreign buyers is all we need. Far more important is a strategy to build affordable housing” (Asia Pacific Foundation, 2015).
Appendix A

Source selection criteria for media analysis
Articles were sourced from news websites with a print circulation of 150,000 and/or an online circulation of 2 million visitors a month. Google keyword ranking was taken into account as the Google algorithm ranks sites according to keyword usage, unique visits, duration of visits, the number and quality of inbound and outbound links. It must be mentioned that the algorithm also factors in a user's location, past search history and search settings; however, out of the three, location is the primary factor. These supplementary factors are given lower priority than page rankings and rankings according to usefulness and context.

Time frame
The time frame selected for investigation was from November 2015 until the end of August 2016. The start of the time frame coincides with the publication of the BTAWorks study on November 2. The end of August was chosen in order to include discussions of the PTT data and the foreign buyer tax proposal.

Additional criteria for keyword terms
Included in this query for subjects were terms referring to a person or group of people. Excluded were proper names or subjects with occurrences less than five.
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