

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Occupiers & Legislators:

## A Snapshot of Political Media Coverage

Politicians, citizens, and media themselves often charge that the media too often portray politics in an argumentative, personality-driven way, focussing on the horse-race and political games at the expense of providing the public with information on the issues that matter them.

Far from engaging citizens on the issues of the day, some argue, media coverage alienates Canadians from important public debates, leading to low levels of trust and confidence in political leaders. In this era of declining voter turnout and decreasing participation in political parties, Samara, a charitable organization that works to improve political and civic engagement in Canada, prepared this study to assess the validity of common criticisms of the media and especially to answer these three questions:

1. Is the tone of political news coverage overtly or routinely negative?
2. Does the news media fail to provide the public with enough information about issues that affect their daily lives?
3. Do stories overly focus on political games or government processes at the expense of issues?

We analyzed coverage of two major political stories in the fall of 2011. The first story was the federal government's legislative agenda; specifically, three bills intro-

duced in the House of Commons in the fall of 2011: the omnibus crime bill (Bill C-10), the end of the long-gun registry (Bill C-19), and the termination of the Canadian Wheat Board's monopoly (Bill C-18). The second was the Occupy protest that began in the United States and spread to cities around the world, including Canada. Although stories about government legislation and the Occupy protests in Canada do not represent all political news in the fall 2011, they do provide helpful insight into political coverage during this snapshot in time.

The evidence challenges at least two of those assumptions. First, for these two stories it seems that Canadian news media are not uniformly negative. While newspapers were somewhat negative in tone, television, which still remains Canadians' largest source of news, was positive when it came to coverage of government legislation, and both media fluctuated in tone over time and in response to events. Secondly, the political media are not nearly as preoccupied with partisan wrangling as is commonly believed. In fact, nearly half of the newspaper stories about government legislation and a third of television coverage were focussed on issues, with the remaining coverage split between process and

political game stories. Overall, only about a quarter of the coverage focussed on the political game, which may be due to our tracking taking place in a non-election period when political game stories are not expected to dominate news coverage.

While our evidence challenges two of three common allegations against the news media, it supports the charge that the news media is not very informative. In fact, with less than a third of the stories considered very informative. Where Canadians are often judged for not knowing enough about politics, this study reveals that becoming informed about politics requires individuals to expend a great deal of time and energy to seek information. If the costs are too high to become informed about politics, people may simply disengage from the political system altogether.

While only a snapshot, this research nonetheless raises a number of questions:

- How can news organizations increase the level of information provided in their coverage in a consistent way for Canadians?
- Is the news media sacrificing quality information for quantity?
- What are the barriers for reporters when it comes to getting and relaying useful information?
- What research or training might help journalists and producers provide more informative news coverage?
- How can journalists make process and personality-driven stories more information-rich?
- What impact does negative or positive reporting have on public perceptions of politics?

- Even if media are not always negative or focussed on political games why do many Canadians feel that media are this way?

## THE SAMARA DEMOCRACY INDEX

In 2013, Samara is releasing a new research endeavour, the Samara Democracy Index, which will measure the performance of democracy in three areas: political leadership, public engagement with politics and public affairs journalism.

*Occupiers and Legislators* is the first step in developing the public affairs journalism portion of the Index, which will allow us to measure aspects of the news media every year. The Index will incorporate a number of components of political news gathering. Some examples of what we might consider analyzing include:

- Diversity of the journalists within the Parliamentary Press Gallery
- Concentration of media ownership
- Public perceptions of the media
- Responsiveness of the news media in covering what the public feels is important

We invite media professionals, politicians, and the Canadian public to provide feedback on these and other possible measures for the Index. Developed in partnership with leading academics and Canadians from across the country, it is our hope that the Index will provide Canadians with the tools they need to identify ways in which Canada's democracy can be strengthened.



Read the full report at [www.samaracanada.com](http://www.samaracanada.com)