

SAMARA DEMOCRACY REPORTS

Occupiers and Legislators: A Snapshot of Political Media Coverage

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Introduction

“We aren’t just missing an opportunity to help the public make sense of things at a critical time. We’re making things worse. We’re actually getting in the way.”

Andrew Coyne on political reporting
Maclean's, September 17, 2008

It is a small proportion of Canadians who sit daily in Question Period or travel across the country to spend time on Parliament Hill. Instead, much of the information and context Canadians receive about politics comes from what they see on the evening news or read in newspapers, in print or online.

The news media help to shape citizens’ perceptions of their political leaders and the political system. However, the performance of the news media is often criticized, with politicians, citizens, and media themselves charging that the media too often portrays politics in an argumentative, personality-driven way, focussing on the political horse-race and political games at the expense of providing the Canadian public with information on the issues that matter to them. As one former

Member of Parliament said, “I find the media are very selective and very critical of politicians and that has only led to a lot of apathy in the public.”

Rather than engaging citizens in the issues of the day, some argue, poor media coverage may serve to alienate Canadians from important public debates, leading to declining levels of trust and confidence in government and other political leaders. In an era of declining voter turnout and decreasing participation in political parties, it is

worth investigating whether these charges are accurate.

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?

Social media is increasingly part of how people source their news, so we also conducted an initial look at political conversations on Twitter. The goal was to see what was discussed online, and how newspaper and television news stories were incorporated into online political conversations.

WHAT WE DID

To explore these questions, 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 introduced 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. In contrast to government legislation, this story originated from outside government. These two different stories allowed us to compare media coverage of institutional politics with coverage of grassroots politics in Canada.

Using data collected by the Centre for the Study of Democratic Citizenship at McGill University, we examined 7,594 stories from 42 major daily newspapers and six national television programs in both French and English. Many of these stories also appeared online, which allowed us to analyze a significant amount of coverage to which Canadians are exposed, whether in print, on television, or through the Internet. Using this sizeable database of news content, we address the three questions outlined above as follows:

We first looked at the *tone* of political news coverage, which can influence how audiences feel about a political event. For each article or broadcast transcript, we assigned a score indicating the tone of a news story. This score was calculated using an automated computer algorithm, comparing the share of positive language contained in an article or newscast to the share of negative language. Positive scores, indicating a positive story, contained words like "hopeful" or "bold," "support" or "agreement." Negative scores, indicating a negative story, were dominated by descriptors like "blunder," "harmful," "anger" or "resistance." Neutral stories contained an equal share of positive and negative language.

From these scores, it is possible to get a sense of whether the overall tone of political news coverage was routinely or overwhelmingly negative. What we found is that there were notable differences in how newspapers and television journalists reported on the same story.

Secondly, we examined *how much information* about politics the Canadian political news actually provides. To do this, human coders at McGill University read and categorized a representative sub-sample of 587 newspaper articles and 139 television stories about the government bills, and 399 newspaper articles and 127 television stories on Occupy.

For each news story, we analyzed the amount of information by the presence and amount of facts, context, and analyses that advances a reader's understanding of the issues. From this analysis, we can tell how much news Canadians must sift through before finding the information they require.

Thirdly, we tested to see if the *focus* of the news coverage of Parliament actually did emphasize political games and the horse-race. To do so, we looked at the sub-sample of government legislation coverage and classified the primary focus of the government-focussed stories into one of three categories: political games; government process, including technical discussions about Parliamentary process; or issues, including discussion of policy implications, background or options.

We also examined the coverage of these two political issues on the Twitter social media platform. We examined nearly one million tweets tagged with the dominant Canadian politics hashtag (#cdnpoli) or hashtags related to Occupy (#occupy and related tags) to see where these tweets were linking. It is thought that social media gives non-traditional news sources influence and exposure. We wanted to test that assumption for these two news stories.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

This project is one of a few that systematically analyzes the media coverage of Canadian politics

outside of election periods using such a large database of content. Although we examine only two political issues, the wealth of evidence our database provides can supply new information that journalists, politicians, and the Canadian public can use to better understand the complexities of political news coverage.

Through this study Samara hopes to provoke discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of political reporting in Canada today, and encourage a larger conversation on how to measure the state of public affairs journalism into the future. Specifically: What information, routinely collected, would assist journalists and the public in understanding the media's coverage of political affairs? How helpful is the information in this report? What else would contribute to a healthy discussion of the political media in Canada? What matters to Canadians when it comes to gathering information on politics?

Feedback from journalists, news producers, media outlets, and the public, together with the findings of this research, will be used to design the media portion of the Samara Democracy Index, an annual measurement of the health of Canada's democracy. Slated for first publication in 2013, and released annually, this index will measure democratic performance in Canada between elections, with a focus on political leadership, public engagement with politics and public affairs journalism. ^

Findings

TONE: IS ALL NEWS BAD NEWS?

In 2011, Samara spoke with politically disengaged citizens across the country in a number of focus groups, summarized in a report called *The Real Outsiders*. Many of the citizens we spoke to described feeling frustrated with the news media: “It’s all negative,” remarked one individual. “That’s why I try to go straight to the sports pages.” This is a concern also shared by many media scholars and observers, who argue that too much negative political news could lead to public cynicism towards politics.

But how negative is political news coverage and how often is it negative? To explore this, we

mapped the overall tone of newspaper and television coverage during the lifetime of two big political stories—the Occupy protests and the fall 2011 federal government legislative agenda—across the two media, as seen in Figures 1 and 2. From this analysis emerges striking differences between how television and newspapers reported on these stories as they evolved.

OCCUPY PROTESTS

On September 17, 2011, more than a thousand people gathered in Zuccotti Park in New York City, beginning a series of protests that would last

more than two months and spread to cities around the globe. By October 15, this included cities in Canada, such as Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, and Montreal. One month later, however, most protest camps were dismantled, and by the end of November the most visible element of this citizen-led action was over.

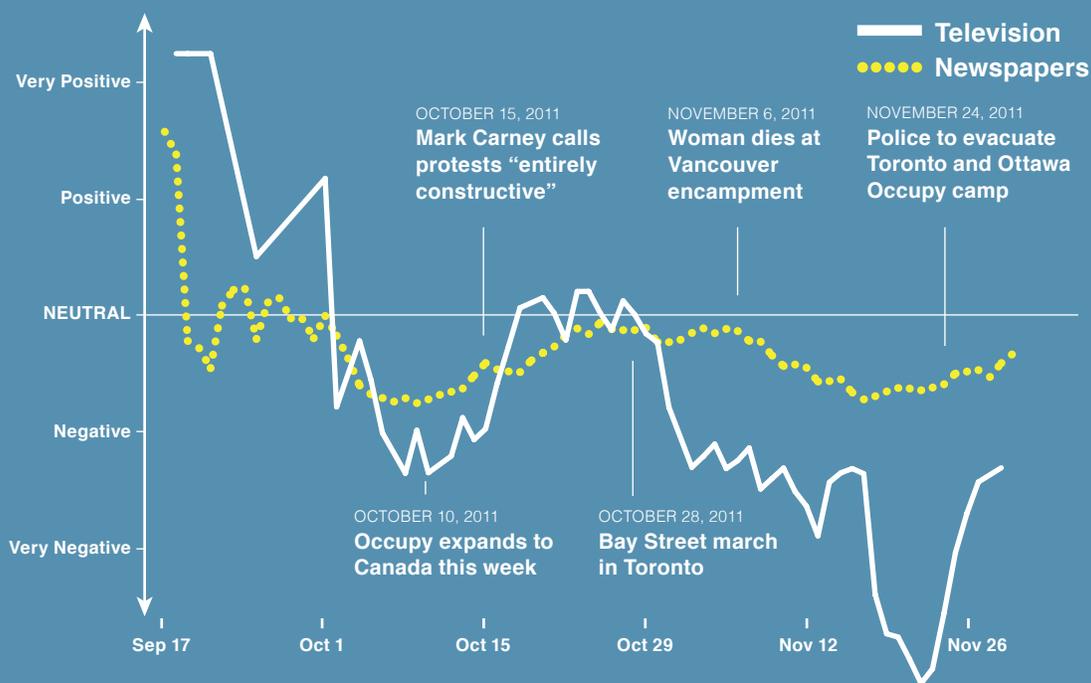
We analyzed 4,647 newspaper articles and 177 television stories covering Occupy between September 17 and November 30, 2011. Overall, television appeared to be somewhat more negative in their Occupy coverage than newspapers during this period. Examples of negative coverage include stories about developments such as how “police [are] cracking down on

Occupy protesters” (*Montreal Gazette*), or how “Occupy protesters [are being] evicted” (*CTV National News*). Positive stories, in contrast, focussed on how “members of Occupy Toronto say their resolve is strong” (*Toronto Star*) or about how “It is thrilling to see people talking so openly about the many issues the Occupy movement has come to represent” (*Times-Colonist*).

Overall, 51% of television stories and 45% of newspaper stories were negative in tone. But this contrast was more pronounced when we analyzed the news coverage over time.

Over the course of the tracking period, the average daily tone of newspaper coverage was largely consistent, hovering just below the

**FIGURE 1:
AVERAGE DAILY TONE OF OCCUPY COVERAGE**



neutral point (see Figure 1). The tone of newspaper coverage did become slightly more negative around October 10 when attention shifted from the American Occupy protests and Canadian reporters began to report on the protests spreading to this country. Coverage then reverted back to a neutral tone when marches began and camps were erected in Canadian cities around October 15. This shift also coincided with widely reported comments made by Mark Carney, Governor of the Bank of Canada, on October 14, when he referred to the protests as “constructive.” Jim Flaherty, Minister of Finance, also said he could understand the “legitimate frustration” of Wall Street Occupiers on October 13. Despite these minor shifts in tone, however, newspaper coverage overall was consistently neutral until the end of November.

In contrast, by November, television news coverage was noticeably and increasingly negative, particularly when compared to newspaper coverage. Through September and October, the tone of news coverage was varied with many news stories focussing on protesters’ motivations. But starting in November, the coverage shifted to stories about court-issued eviction orders, sanitation, and safety issues, and arrests. At this time, the amount of negative language used in television news stories started to grow.

Towards the end of our tracking period, as many protests were shut down, television news offered a distinctly negative picture of the Occupy protests. As events on the ground grew more confrontational and police moved in to evict protesters, television news became increasingly negative in tone. Newspaper coverage, though covering the same events, maintained its neutral tone. There were 55% more negative television news stories in November than there were in October. By comparison, there were only 15%

more negative newspaper stories in November than there were in October.

This study may also understate the difference in tone between television and newspaper coverage. Because we only examined television transcripts and not the actual visuals—including provocative images of protests, tent cities, and later, of police evicting Occupy participants—television news may have actually been even more negative than estimated.

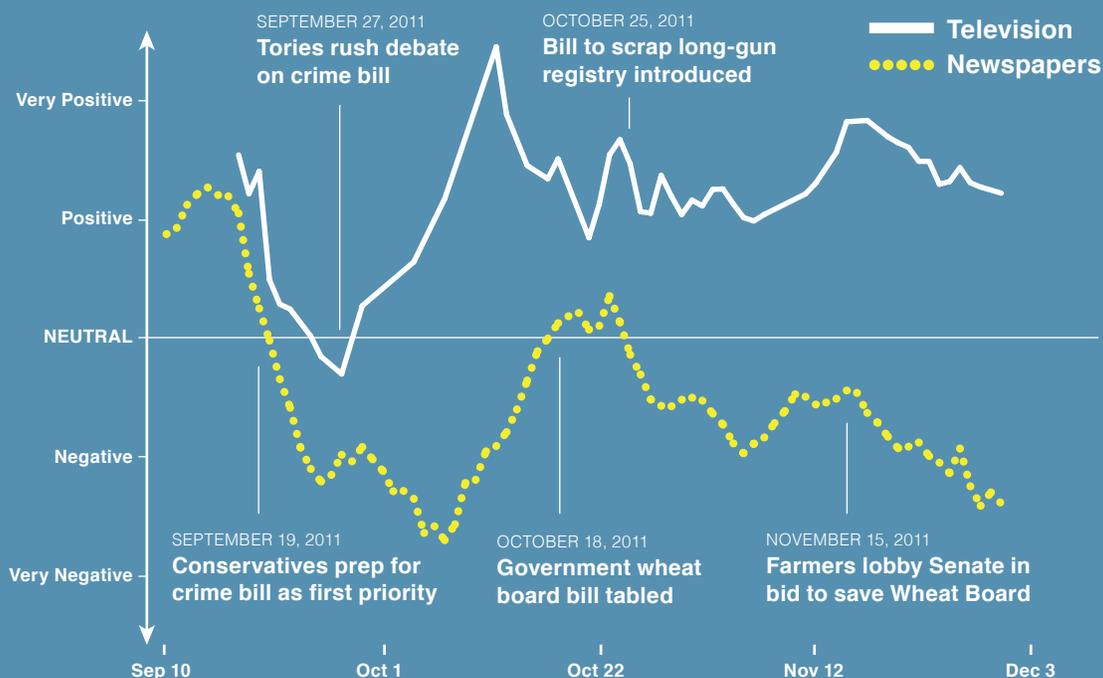
FEDERAL GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION

We analyzed 2,603 newspaper articles and 167 television stories dedicated to three bills put before the House of Commons in the fall 2011. Stories were collected between September 10 and November 30, 2011. As with the Occupy coverage, television coverage differed from newspapers, but this time for its distinctly positive tone.

Parliament reconvened on September 19, 2011, marking the start of the first extended opportunity for Stephen Harper’s Conservative government to pursue its legislative agenda with a Parliamentary majority. The tone of newspaper and television coverage began positively, focussing on forecasts of the upcoming legislative session and the omnibus crime bill, which was introduced on the second day of Parliament. At this point, both television and newspapers grew briefly negative through the rest of September as the House of Commons debates continued.

In early October, however, the tone of television and newspaper noticeably diverged (see Figure 2). Coinciding with the release of the estimated costs of the crime bill, television coverage became significantly more positive. Newspaper coverage, by contrast, grew more negative. This divide was long lasting and significant: The television coverage of government legislation remained predominantly positive through to the end of

**FIGURE 2:
AVERAGE DAILY TONE OF GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION COVERAGE**



November, while newspaper coverage remained mostly negative. Importantly, this divide occurred despite television and newspapers covering the same issues. Overall, 73% of television news stories about government legislation were positive in tone through the tracking period, compared to only 28% of newspaper articles.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER QUESTIONS

This study, contrasting two fall 2011 political stories, shows that contrary to popular belief,

political news coverage is not overtly or routinely negative. The news media does tell positive stories. However, the systematic differences between how television and newspapers report on political issues raise important questions, including: Why was the television news so negative when describing the grassroots politics of Occupy and so positive when describing government legislation, and why was this coverage so different when compared to how newspapers covered these same events?

INFORMATION: I STILL HAVEN'T FOUND WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR

Many Canadians look to the media for information that can help them make judgements about important political issues facing their lives and communities. In turn, political leaders, government actors, and citizen activists depend on the media to communicate their messages to the broader public.

Unfortunately, the news coverage we tracked was not very informative. Only one quarter (23%) of the government legislation stories we examined were classified as “very informative,” meaning they contained substantive amounts of facts, analysis and context about the issues (see

Figure 3). Stories about Occupy were only somewhat better, with 31% of the stories classified as very informative.

When it comes to helping Canadians understand the issues, the remainder of the stories—a majority—were either somewhat informative or not informative. Instead of talking about and analyzing key points about a political issue, these less informative stories tended to describe political photo-ops without analysis, or they printed quotes verbatim, without putting issues into context. The least informative stories discussed political issues only in passing, providing very

EXAMPLES OF VERY INFORMATIVE, SOMEWHAT INFORMATIVE, AND NOT INFORMATIVE ARTICLES

VERY INFORMATIVE

“Records of the shotguns and rifles owned by Canadians would be destroyed under legislation introduced Tuesday to scrap the long-gun registry—preventing provincial or future federal governments from making use of the information. The majority Conservative government unfurled a long-promised bill Tuesday to scrap the registration of long guns and permanently delete more than seven million files on gun ownership. Police, health, and victims’ groups immediately voiced their opposition, while anglers and hunters welcomed plans for the registry’s demise.”

Ontario-based newspaper

SOMEWHAT INFORMATIVE

“The federal Conservatives are making good on a promise to scrap the controversial long-gun registry once and for all. Public Safety Minister Vic Toews tabled a bill Tuesday in the Commons that would effectively abolish the registry and destroy all information currently contained within it. Accompanied by a pair of female hunters and an Ottawa grandmother who lost her grandson to gang violence, Toews and colleagues Candice Hoepfner and Pierre Poilievre then headed out to a farm west of Ottawa to drive home their point.”

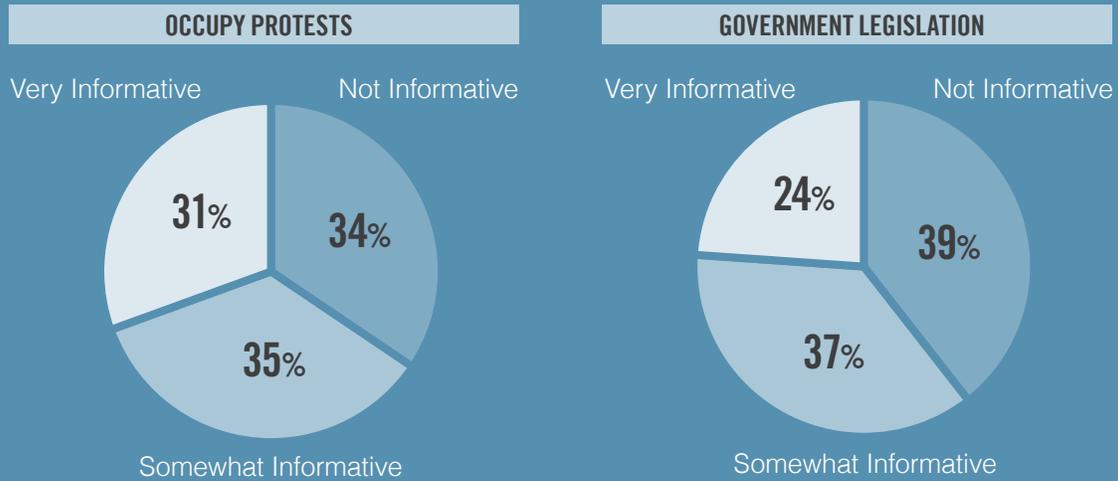
BC-based newspaper

NOT INFORMATIVE

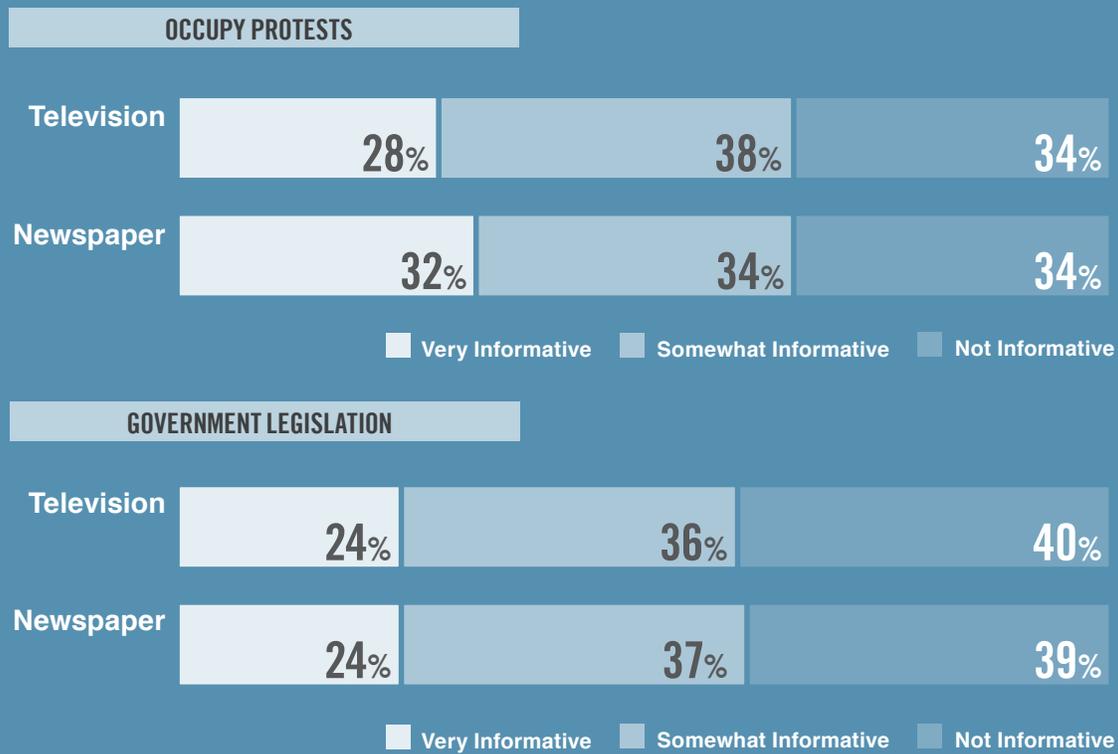
“So you drove a stake through its heart? About time, is what folks in Moose Jaw, Sask., and Grey County, Ont., will say, when the long-gun registry finally meets its ignominious end—the stroke of a bureaucrat’s delete key, followed by a blank screen. From the cities will come wailing, rending of garments and more impassioned palaver before the last bit of registry data is unmade. The “Stop Harper!” posts on Facebook may multiply again, for a time. But there will be no further stay of execution. Bill C-19, which might have been called a Bill to Show More Respect to Rural Canadians, will be law.”

Quebec-based newspaper

**FIGURE 3:
HOW INFORMATIVE WAS NEWS COVERAGE OVERALL?**



**FIGURE 4:
HOW INFORMATIVE WAS NEWS COVERAGE BY MEDIUM?**



little substantive information for news audiences.

Notably, there was also little difference between newspapers and television when it came to how informative—or not—their coverage was. Newspapers are often considered by many media observers to be significantly more informative than television. However, this assumption was not supported by our findings in either the government legislation or Occupy coverage (see Figure 4). Television—where most Canadians get their news, according to recent research by the Canadian Media Research Consortium—and newspapers were equally uninformative, with any differences well within the margin of error.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER QUESTIONS

This study of news media shows that concerns about the lack of information in news are justified. Canadian news consumers must sift through many stories to find the information they seek. At such a rate, Canadians can only expect around 15 minutes of very informative news in an hour-long newscast. Those who read about politics in newspapers also have a challenge when less than a third of the political news articles contained within are very informative. How can newsrooms improve the quality of their political news coverage? What are the barriers to creating informative news stories and how can these barriers be overcome?

FOCUS: ALL HORSE-RACE AND GAMES ALL THE TIME?

With a 24-hour news cycle and countless media stories available from across the world, Canadian news media increasingly have a role to play as a filter for what is most important and relevant to citizens. However, when covering Canadian politics, journalists are often accused of focussing more on political personalities and partisan strategies than on stories that tell people what government legislation will mean for citizens. This is a common charge particularly during the height of election campaign periods. But this charge may be equally valid during the months and years between elections.

Indeed, the politically disengaged Canadians that Samara spoke to were frustrated by news stories that seem to only focus on “where [politi-

cians] went on trips, where they stayed in hotels... how much money they’re spending, [and] what town they were in shaking hands...” Such coverage was not relevant to their lives, they said. A similar complaint was raised by former Members of Parliament throughout Samara’s series of exit interviews. Many thought the media’s focus on political games obscured the “real work” they were doing in Parliament.

Despite common beliefs about the preoccupations of the news media, the news stories we collected suggest that political games stories are not as prevalent as many believe—at least in the case of government legislation in fall 2011¹. When it came to news coverage of government legislation, almost half (44%) of the news stories in the

Note: Focus of news was not tracked for Occupy coverage.

sample were about political issues (see Figure 5). The rest of the coverage was split evenly between stories about process and political games.

Newspapers were somewhat more issue-focussed than television news coverage. Almost half of the newspaper coverage on government legislation was about the issues (46%), compared to a third of television coverage (36%). However, this does not mean that television coverage was overwhelmingly focussed on partisan wrangling. Only a third of television coverage (37%) focussed on political games. The remainder were process stories.

The focus of a news story can also dictate the amount of information contained in a story. Based on our sample of government legislation coverage, there is a direct relationship between stories being issue-focussed and being very informative (see Figure 6). Almost four in ten issue stories were found to be very informative. By contrast, few political game or process stories communicated as much information.

In fact, the focus of a story has more to do with

how informative it is than the tone that a journalist uses (see Figure 6). Some media observers assert that the use of negative tone in news is necessary, arguing that negativity allows journalists to marshal more evidence and information in their role as a watchdog. Our results show, however, that there is little difference between negative and positive stories when it comes to how much information they convey. After accounting for tone, the focus of a news story remains a strong indicator of how much information can be found in a story.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER QUESTIONS

Outside of election seasons, at least, the political media is not overwhelmingly focussed on partisan wrangling as conventional wisdom holds. Overall, almost half of the newspaper coverage of government legislation and a third of television coverage was, in fact, focussed on the issues. Importantly, the focus of a news story also matters greatly as to how much information is communicated. With this in mind, it is important to ask: How can the media's focus on issues be strengthened? 

EXAMPLE OF ISSUE, PROCESS, AND POLITICAL GAME STORIES

ISSUE

“People in Canada were killing each other with the least regularity last year since the mid-1960s, but it’s not enough to make the federal government reconsider its pending tough-on-crime legislation. Statistics Canada said Wednesday the homicide rate fell to 1.62 for every 100,000 people last year, the lowest it’s been since 1966.”

Alberta-based Newspaper

PROCESS

“Justice Minister Rob Nicholson and Public Safety Minister Vic Toews touted their government’s omnibus crime bill Thursday saying it targets the right people while protecting victims and urging its speedy passage. The ministers were appearing before the House of Commons justice committee where the Safe Streets and Communities Act is being studied following its introduction on September 20.”

National TV program

POLITICAL GAME

“People who have plumbed the depths of Stephen Harper more deeply than I have say he will never rest until he achieves his ultimate goal. The goal is not simply to win two or three more elections—although he surely intends to do that—but to transform his Conservatives from a party supported by 35–40% of the electorate into nothing less than the natural governing party of Canada.”

Ontario-based newspaper

FIGURE 5:
WHERE DOES GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION COVERAGE FOCUS?

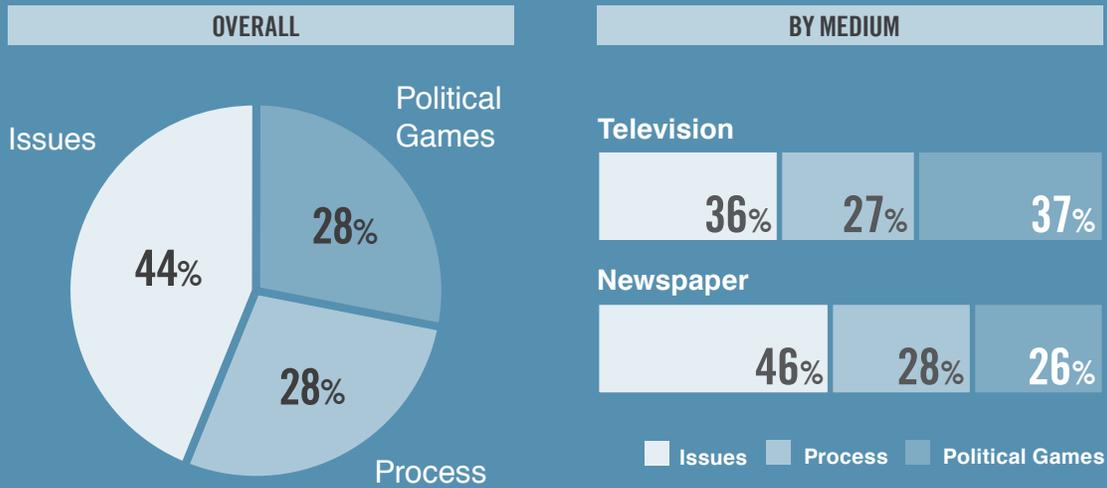
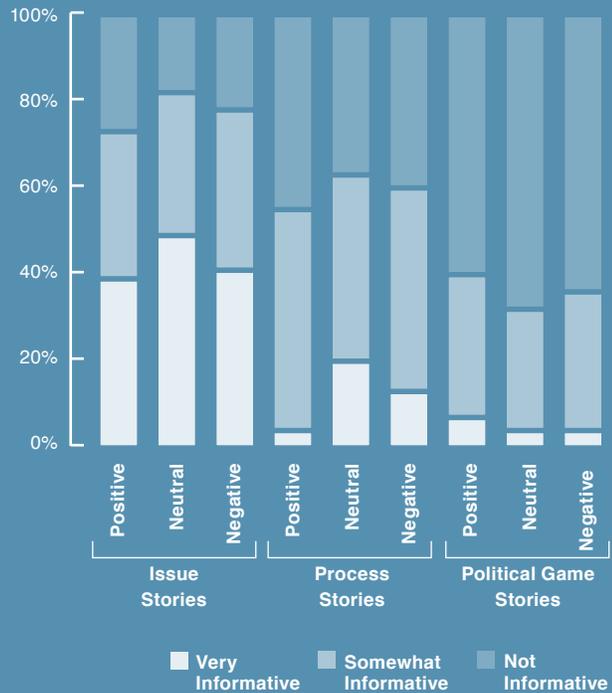


FIGURE 6:
WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO INFORMATIVE COVERAGE?

39%
of issue stories are very informative

12%
of process stories are very informative

6%
of political game stories are very informative



THE #CDNPOLI ECHO CHAMBER

Social media is now an integral part of twenty-first-century news media. Platforms such as Twitter are deeply embedded in mainstream newsrooms, and journalists are often key influencers in social networks. However, Twitter is also in the hands of individual Canadians and politicians who try to speak directly to the public. Is this more participatory, two-way flow of communication changing how political affairs are being talked about?

We collected 950,954 tweets posted about national Canadian politics (#cdnpoli) and the Occupy protests (#occupy and related hashtags) between October 6 and November 30, 2011.

Over half of the tweets contained links to other online content. While not a perfect measure, such links can provide a good indication of what people on Twitter are talking about. Links to blogs, other social media sites, or alternative news sites (e.g.

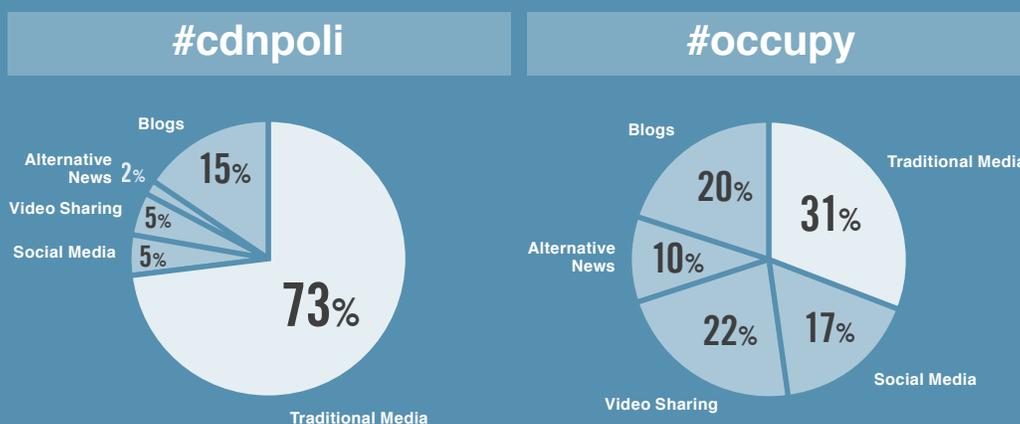
The Huffington Post or Rabble) suggest a diverse and expanded online conversation that includes a broad set of voices. Links to mainstream print or television suggest a conversation that amplifies what is already being discussed in traditional media.

In the #cdnpoli discussion, the vast majority of links—73%—went to traditional media sources. The fact that over one quarter of the links were to non-traditional sources is notable and points to the possibility of a more diverse social media conversation in the future. But, for now, these results highlight the continuing centrality of traditional media in Canadian political discussions.

In contrast, only 31% of tweets about #occupy linked to mainstream media, and the vast majority linked to non-traditional information sources.

WHERE IS TWITTER LINKING?

Composition of links in #cdnpoli and #occupy tweets



Conclusions and Discussion

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. In some key respects, our evidence calls for a reconsideration of common assumptions about the media.

TWO CRITICISMS UNFOUNDED

Firstly, 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. Our evidence suggests that citizens must sift through many news stories to find the information they seek. We also found a direct relationship between the focus of a news story

and the amount of information about politics that it provides. It should be noted that it is not impossible to find informative process or political game stories, as we actually did find some. But the important point is that information on the issues in political game or process stories is rare.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

The challenge of obtaining information from the news is real. Where many 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. Canadians lead busy lives and any difficulty in getting useful information creates barriers to an engaged public. If the costs are too high to become informed about politics, people may simply disengage from the political system altogether. Though new technology has made more information available than ever before, the public still relies on the news media to help sort through the information and explain how events in Ottawa and elsewhere affect them.

This research raises a number of questions of considerable concern:

- How can news organizations increase the level of information provided in their coverage in a consistent way for Canadians?
- Why do television and newspaper outlets cover the same political events in different ways when it comes to tone? What impact does negative or positive reporting have on public perceptions of politics?
- Why was television coverage of government legislation so positive in tone, but negative towards the citizen-led Occupy protests? Does this suggest that groups without savvy public relations spokespeople are at a disadvantage on television? To what

degree is tone shaped by the visuals available?

- 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?
- 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

Like many Canadians, we at Samara are concerned about declining interest and involvement in politics. It seems, at times, that Canadians have given up on their political system, but the media can play a role in reversing this trend. Samara believes that rigorous public affairs journalism contributes to a healthy democracy and an engaged public.

In 2013, Samara is releasing our new research endeavour, the Samara Democracy Index, which will measure democracy in three areas: political leadership, public engagement with politics and public affairs journalism. The Index will be a yearly measure of our democracy, based on the belief that the health of democracy should be evaluated on more than just electoral turnout every four years.

Occupiers and Legislators is the first step in developing the public affairs journalism portion of the Index, which will allow us to measure the performance of 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 performance of the media
- The 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. Our website (www.samaracanada.com) provides ways for individuals to contribute ideas on what elements of the media—and democracy—matter most. In partnership with leading academics and Canadians from across the country, it is our hope that our work will provide the Canadian public with the tools they need to identify ways in which Canada's democracy can be strengthened. ~

VERY INTERESTING... NOW WHAT?

If you thought this report was useful, we ask that you please share it with your friends, family, colleagues, or students and discuss what it means for the health of Canadian democracy. We also have more reports on our website including reports on our exit interviews with former MPs and our focus group findings. We are always seeking individual volunteers and partner organizations for our other initiatives. For example, Democracy Talks is a national public outreach program to bring forward the voices of those who are less engaged in politics, which starts in the summer of 2012. We also are working to get Samara into the classroom by developing more teacher support materials based on our own research and the work of other organizations, which will help teach young people how they can engage meaningfully with democracy.

Check out www.samaracanada.com/get_involved for more information on how you can help build a strong and healthy democracy.

Acknowledgements

This report is part of a broader, large-scale project: The Samara Index. In development for over a year, this project is driven by a desire to better understand three components of our democracy: *Political leadership, public engagement with politics, and public affairs journalism*—the last being the focus of this particular study. This is a technically complicated project, and as such, there are many people we would like to acknowledge.

We are very grateful for the leadership and support of Michael MacMillan, Co-founder and Chair of Samara, and Alison Loat, Co-founder and Executive Director, whose driving vision for a better, more inclusive democracy guides this project every day.

We would also like to thank the academic advisory team, and in particular those from the media team who helped develop the methodology of our study: Stuart Soroka (McGill University), Colette Brin (Université Laval), Fred Fletcher (York University), Mary Francoli (Carleton University), Thierry Giasson (Université Laval), Alfred Hermida (University of British Columbia), and Quinn Albaugh (McGill University).

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Our appreciation also extends to all those who assisted with data collection and human coding at the Institute for the Study of Canada at McGill University. Their support

was invaluable, though the analysis and conclusions shared in this report are Samara's alone.

Thank you to the team at Samara who tirelessly supported the production of this report, including Kendall Anderson who drafted and edited this report.

Design services were provided by the team at Trioro, and we'd like to particularly acknowledge Ryan Bloxsidge and Scott Snowden.

Samara's Advisory Board also contributed valuable guidance. Thank you to Sujit Choudhry, Heather Conway, Scott Gilmore, Kevin Lynch, Robert Prichard, Charles Sirois, and Perry Spitznagel.

Finally, we would like to thank and recognize Bennett Jones and the many individual donors who have provided important financial contributions to Samara. Their support is vital in ensuring that we continue to produce relevant research and programs in support of Canadian democracy.

Thank you to everyone for your support of this project.

Appendix

TONE ANALYSIS

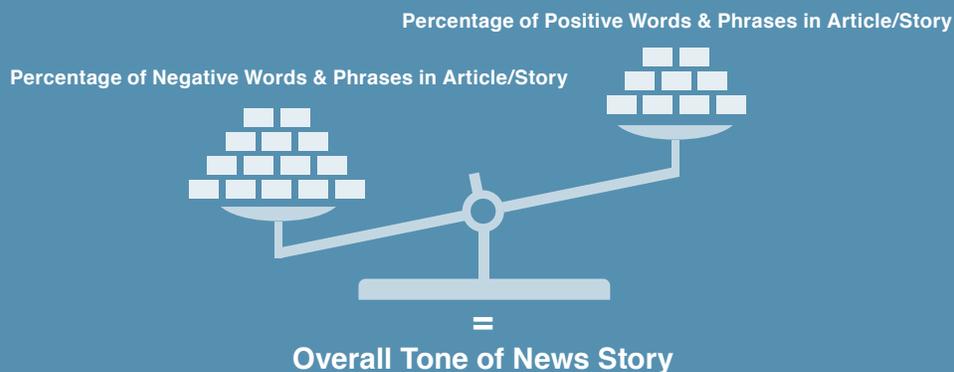
In total we analyzed 7,594 news stories, 7,250 from newspapers and 344 from television, produced between September and November 2011, for tone. With such a large sample, we relied on automated content analysis to determine how negative, neutral, or positive each story was.

The tone of an article was calculated using automated content analysis—an established computer-aided research method. This method counts the number of positive and negative words/phrases in an article based on a pre-determined list of words. The list, or “dictionary,” used

in Samara’s study included approximately 6,000 words and was assembled by McGill University researchers, reflecting language that expresses a generally positive or negative feeling when used. Once the frequency of words is tallied, each story is assigned a “tone” score by calculating the difference between negative language and positive language, divided by the total word count of an article. Scores are then adjusted by adding 0.44 to the total score to account for a slight systematic negative bias in this metric.¹ Positive scores reflect a positive tone, while negative scores reflect a

TONE OF NEWS

How we measure negativity/positivity in news



¹ See Lori Young and Stuart Soroka (2012) “Affective News: The Automated Coding of Sentiment in Political Texts,” *Political Communications* 29: 205-231.

negative tone. Scores between -0.5 and $+0.5$ are classified as “neutral.” The prevailing assumption in this type of analysis is the words used in an article or broadcast are chosen to convey a certain meaning.

Images that accompanied news articles or broadcast were beyond the scope of this type of content analysis. Had images been included, there is no reason to suggest that they would have changed the general direction of an article’s tone. In fact, images likely would have amplified its direction, making the news more negative or more positive.

AMOUNT OF INFORMATION

To measure how informative news stories were, we selected a random, representative sample of 587 newspaper articles and 139 television stories about government legislation, and 399 newspaper articles and 127 television stories about Occupy from the larger pool of articles collected. For each news story, trained coders from McGill University evaluated how much information was communicated to the reader about issues, using the criteria as seen in the box below.

It is important to note that the veracity, or truthfulness, of the information contained within articles or transcripts was not part of the evaluation criteria.

FOCUS OF STORY

Concerns about the media’s preoccupation with partisan political games stories focus particularly on stories about government. Because of this, we narrowed our analysis to media coverage of government legislation, excluding Occupy coverage.

Using the same representative sample of government legislation as above, coders assigned each story a primary focus:

Political games stories primarily describe the legislative agenda in terms of partisan and political competition and tend to feature discussions about personalities and/or electoral prospects. However, there are other ways to tell the story of what is happening in Ottawa besides a political game perspective. We defined two other categories. Process stories focus on the rules and the mechanics of Parliament and the Canadian political system. Issues-centered stories include

AMOUNT OF INFORMATION

Measures how much information is communicated in a news story

Very Informative

- Substantial amount of facts
- Insight beyond stakeholder positions
- Advanced use of context demonstrating research

Somewhat Informative

- Significant quantity of facts
- Detailed description of stakeholder positions
- Some use of data to provide context

Not Informative

- Few or no facts present
- Vague analysis of stakeholder positions
- Anecdotal evidence, factoids, talking points

FOCUS OF NEWS

Political news stories are categorized into one of three types

1

Political Games

Main focus of article/story:

- Partisan strategy/success
- Who wins or loses
- Electoral prospects

2

Process

Main focus of article/story:

- Legislative process
- Parliamentary rules
- Mechanics of government

3

Issues

Main focus of article/story:

- Content of policies
- Context of issues
- Analysis of consequences

discussion of policy implications: Who will benefit and how? Who will pay? What are the alternatives? It is possible that stories contain elements of more than one focus. However, coders were directed to determine the dominant focus and assign a single category to each story.

DATA COLLECTION

Newspaper articles and television transcripts were obtained from media archival services. The databases used were NewsScan, Factiva, CPI.Q, and ProQuest. Both English and French news

coverage was collected. Duplicated stories, such as when the same news article appears in multiple papers, were retained in the newspaper sample in order to better reflect the real distribution of media across the Canadian public. Articles and transcripts that were less than 70 words in length were excluded from the analysis.

Coverage was restricted to a predefined list of daily publications and filtered using appropriate keyword searches to ensure that only relevant content was collected. The box on the next page lists the outlets from which data was pulled.

NEWSPAPERS

ENGLISH

NATIONAL

The Globe and Mail
National Post

ATLANTIC

The Chronicle Herald
The Telegram (St. John's)
The Daily Gleaner (Fredericton)
Cape Breton Post
Telegraph Journal (New Brunswick)
The Guardian (Charlottetown)
Times & Transcript (Moncton)

QUÉBEC

The Gazette (Montreal)

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Times-Colonist (Victoria)
The Vancouver Sun
The Province

ONTARIO

Toronto Star
Toronto Sun
Ottawa Citizen
Ottawa Sun
The St. Catharines Standard
The Kingston Whig-Standard
The Windsor Star
Waterloo Region Record
The Hamilton Spectator
The Chronicle-Journal (Thunder Bay)
The London Free Press

PRAIRIES

The StarPhoenix (Saskatoon)
Edmonton Journal
Winnipeg Free Press
Winnipeg Sun
Calgary Sun
Edmonton Sun
Leader-Post (Regina)
Calgary Herald

FRENCH

QUÉBEC

La Presse (Montréal)
Le Devoir
Le Nouvelliste (Trois-Rivières)
Le Quotidien (Saguenay/Lac-St.-Jean)
Le Soleil (Québec)
Le Droit (Gatineau/Ottawa)
Le Journal de Montréal
Le Journal de Québec
La Tribune (Sherbrooke)

NEW BRUNSWICK

L'Acadie Nouvelle

TELEVISION

ENGLISH

CTV National News
CTV Question Period
CTV Power Play

CTV Canada AM
CBC News: The National

FRENCH

Le Téléjournal

* NOTE: Television news outlets that were not included in the analysis were excluded because transcripts from these sources were not available in the archival services used. Daily newspapers were selected to ensure national representation.