

Canadian MSM political news coverage leaves too much to be desired: report

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A new study on the state of Canadian political journalism was released this morning. Its assessment: a resounding "meh."

While "mainstream media" news outlets are often lambasted as conveyers of shallow and divisive journalism that favor political score keeping over substantive analysis, Toronto-based think tank [Samara](#) offers a more qualified critique of Canadian political journalism. MSM news coverage might be bad, the group says -- just not as bad as most people seem to think.

Drawing upon over 7,500 Canadian news stories from 42 daily newspapers and six national TV programs in both English and French from the fall of 2011, the [report](#), titled "Occupiers and Legislators: A Snapshot of Political Media Coverage," found that political news nationwide did not uniformly privilege horse-race coverage over issues-centered stories and that, "contrary to popular belief," political news was not consistently negative or incendiary in tone.

But according to the report, news media across Canada does unequivocally fall short in one vital area: its effectiveness in actually informing the public.

"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," the report concludes.

In other words, for Canadians who want to stay politically informed, the country's leading news outlets don't make it easy for them to do so.

In gaging the informational value of political coverage, for example, the report deemed a scant 31 per cent of the coverage of last fall's Occupy protests to be "very informative," while 34 per cent was considered "not informative." The coverage of federal legislation in the fall of 2011 was found to be even scarcer in relevant fact and detail, with 24 per cent of all news stories on that subject labeled "very informative" and 39 per cent judged the opposite.

To measure such definitively qualitative, even subjective, aspects of news coverage, Samara relied on researchers from McGill University's Centre for the Study of Democratic Citizenship to come up with strict measures of tone, informational density, and focus.

In measuring tone, for example, the report relied upon a comprehensive list of buzzwords, flagged as positive or negative, which could then be tallied throughout an article or TV news transcript, allowing the researchers to determine its overall tenor of a story.

"Positive scores, indicating a positive story, contained words like hopeful or bold," the report explains. Meanwhile:

"Negative scores, indicating a negative story, were dominated by descriptors like blunder, harmful, anger or resistance."

Similarly, the amount of information in a political news story was determined based on the number of hard-facts identified in a story and the degree to which contextual information and a diversity of perspectives were presented.

While the report looked at Canadian news coverage on the whole, there were significant differences between the coverage provided by newspapers on the one hand, and television news on the other.

On the whole, newspaper political stories were found to be more issues-oriented in their coverage, while their televised counterparts were more likely to focus on the minutiae of the legislative process or on the upshot for one party or political figure over another.

There was also sharp divergence in tone between the two media in their coverage of the fall legislative agenda of the Harper government.

According to the report, after the estimated fiscal cost of the omnibus crime bill (Bill C-10) was released in early October of last year, television news outlets by and large adopted a appreciably more positive tone in their coverage of that issue, whereas, at the same time, newspaper coverage turned sharply negative.

This divergence carried through to the end of the year, the report says:

"Overall, 73% of television news stories about government legislation were positive in tone through the tracking period, compared to 28% of newspaper articles."

But differences in focus and tone notwithstanding, newspapers were not found to be significantly more informative than television coverage.

The Samara report released today is part of the organization's larger effort to measure the health and resiliency of Canadian democracy. Last December, as [reported](#) in The Tyee, Samara released a study on "political outsiders" in Canada – those demographic groups more likely to consider themselves underrepresented and politically marginalized.

Next year, Samara plans to publish its first annual Democracy Index, which today's report claims "will measure democratic performance in Canada between elections, with a focus on political leadership, public engagement with politics and public affairs journalism." That index will draw on data presented in both today's and last December's reports.