

Canadian news gets mixed reviews

MIA RABSON, WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Published on: June 27, 2012

OTTAWA -- Canadian news media are not overly negative or preoccupied with political games, but could be a little bit more informative about issues.

Those are the conclusions drawn by a unique study by Samara Canada looking at how mainstream media covered Parliament and the Occupy movement in the fall of 2011.

Samara Canada is a charitable organization founded to improve civic engagement in Canada.

The study's authors analyzed 4,647 newspaper stories and 177 television stories on the Occupy movement between Sept. 17 and Nov. 30, 2011. A further 2,603 newspaper stories and 167 television stories about three bills debated in the House of Commons during that time were examined. The bills were an omnibus crime bill, legislation to eliminate the long-gun registry and legislation to eliminate the monopoly of the Canadian Wheat Board.

The study concluded newspapers and television often cover the same story differently. Newspapers were generally neutral on the Occupy movement but far more negative when it came to covering Parliament. Television stories were generally negative in covering the Occupy movement, but positive when covering legislation.

The tone of the stories was determined using a search for positive or negative words.

Samara also found the mainstream media are not as preoccupied with political process and games as is generally believed. Almost half of newspaper stories on the three pieces of legislation were about the issues, while the rest were split almost equally between stories about political games (26 per cent) and process (28 per cent).

A little more than one-third of television stories focused on the issues, while a similar amount focused on political games. About one-quarter of television news stories focused on process.

However, the media could do a better job informing the public about the issues they cover. Only one-quarter of stories about government legislation were considered "very informative" by Samara, meaning they contained a lot of facts, analysis or context about the issues. Only about one-third of stories about the Occupy movement were very informative.

Samara Canada plans to use the study and feedback to it from journalists and the public to design the media portion of the Samara Democracy Index. The index will be released in 2013 and will measure the democratic performance in Canada between elections.