

Politics and the media

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Occupy Movement: A protestor wears a mask on the back of his head at the Occupy Portland camp, Friday, Oct. 7, 2011, in Portland, Ore. News organizations are forever balancing what we think people should know and what we think they want to know.

Don Ryan / The Associated Press

Canadians often hammer the news media for political reporting.

But, do journalists deserve the criticism?

Do we too often portray politics negatively?

Do we focus too much on the

win-lose aspects of the game?

Do we ignore issues in favour of personalities?

Is lousy media coverage responsible for Canadians becoming disengaged from the political process and debate?

The questions are complex, and I would accept some of the appraisals, but a new study indicates we're not as bad as many of you might think.

Commonly held criticisms of the media may be overly harsh, according to a study that looked at coverage of two stories from the fall of 2011: the federal government's legislative agenda and the Occupy movement.

The study was done by Samara, a charitable organization aimed at improving political and civic engagement in Canada. It found during the short period of the study that political coverage was "not uniformly negative or focused on political games, as the accusation often goes."

According to Samara, "between one-third (for television) and one-half (for newspapers) of all news stories are focused on the issues, with the remainder focusing on political games and process."

(Samara also measured tone: "In these two stories, television tended to be more positive when covering government legislation and negative when covering the Occupy movement; whereas newspapers tended to be more neutral when covering Occupy and more negative when covering government legislation.")

There is still room for considerable improvement, of course, as Samara points out. (Much of the coverage “lacked context

and facts.”)

I’m not surprised. It would be nice to think we could focus only on what matters, but that’s probably not realistic.

News organizations are forever balancing what we think people should know and what we think they want to know.

Issues are the vegetables of most news packages; horse races and personality differences are the cake and ice cream.

History is littered with important political stories that were never told in their entirety (or at all) simply because either the journalists — or the public — found them too dull or too complicated. But there is also a long tradition of important changes and citizen engagement emerging from the wreckage of less weighty coverage also.

I think if we can entice people with a sugar-coated tidbit, we might just get them to chew off a bigger bite of the main course. Hence the mixture of ingredients in any news package.

That may seem like we have admitted defeat, but as long as journalists keep trying to engage citizens in public affairs, we are doing our jobs.

It’s when we give up entirely and simply defer to the lowest common denominator that we — all of us — will truly have lost.

From my standpoint, we’re not even approaching that yet.