

Questioning the press gallery

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Samara's latest [report](#) looks at political news coverage and how it compares to some frequent complaints.

Firstly, for these two stories, it seems that Canadian news media are not uniformly negative ... Secondly, the political media are not nearly as preoccupied with partisan wrangling as is commonly believed ... 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.

(Note: Stories from Maclean's were not included in this survey and so I am now free to sneer and shake my head at the failings of others.)

The survey covered a three-month period last fall—a majority government situation during which neither the New Democrats nor the Liberals had permanent leaders—and, in terms of Parliament Hill, looked specifically at coverage of three pieces of legislation. Given those terms, the second count—is the media too preoccupied with partisan brinksmanship?—likely requires further investigation. What sort of results, for example, would have come from a comprehensive investigation of the minority government years? Or perhaps the year before the next election?

The first count is a bit difficult to figure. I know and understand what Samara was trying to measure and I think I understand the general complaint, but I'm not sure I can say what the significance is of what they've found.

The third count, I think, is most relevant. I think it gets at a legitimate complaint and something the political press had to think seriously about. To what degree is political coverage difficult to understand or simply impenetrable to the casual observer? How many readers or viewers struggle to either keep up or, if coming to a story late, get up to speed? Anecdotal evidence is dangerous, but I'll note here that the most popular thing I've written so far this year (at least in terms of pageviews) was [this](#) rough guide to C-38. That was published more than a month after the bill was tabled and owes a great deal to my editor's judgment that it needed to be written at that point. I, having published dozens of blog posts and a magazine piece already on C-38, likely wouldn't have otherwise paused to explain what was going on. But it seems to have met a need that existed.

This is ultimately, I believe, an argument for political coverage to be more comprehensive and thorough. (And online coverage more easily enables something like a rough guide to the budget implementation act: in a daily newspaper or nightly newscast that kind of piece might

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be lost or discarded by the next day, but online that rough guide can linger for more and more people to read and come back to.) And there is probably useful information in this Samara report for and industry that is presently struggling to figure out how to

make itself valuable to customers.