



Samara's Occupiers and Legislators debunks some criticisms of the media

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Published on: June 27, 2012

An analysis of the coverage of two major political stories in Canada is challenging some frequent criticisms of the media.

[A new report from Samara](#), a Canadian charitable organization that works to improve political and civic engagement, says that based on its analysis of two news stories from the fall of 2011, news media is not overly or overtly negative and political media pays more attention to the issues than critics give it credit for — its coverage was about more than just horse races, personalities and partisan games.

The conclusions that Samara's *[Occupiers and Legislators: A Snapshot of Political Media Coverage](#)* comes to are based off of an analysis of 7,594 stories from 42 daily newspapers and six national television programs about two news stories: The Occupy movement that arrived in Canada on October 15, and the federal government's fall legislative agenda — specifically, 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).

"We were really looking for one that was a traditional political story that you'd imagine with the Prime Minister and parliamentarians. And then we were looking for one that was a political story that was not generated in Ottawa," Alison Loat, executive director of Samara, told J-Source.

"That was why we chose those two; because there was an interesting juxtaposition of big-P and small-p politics."

In these stories, their research assessed "the validity of common criticisms of the media," based on feedback they'd received in previous research (including [MP exit interviews](#) and [speaking with the politically disengaged](#)), and looked to answer 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?

Coverage of Occupy and the legislative agenda was quite different, even between mediums, but researchers found similar conclusions: The answer to questions one and three was no. The answer to question two was yes. At least in the cases of Occupy and the legislative agenda.



“This is just a period of time; this is just a snapshot,” Loat said, pointing out that the findings should not be seen as representative of all political news. “To understand what all political news and all issues looks like would require a much larger piece of research.”

Samara is working on a much larger piece of research that these findings – and the subsequent feedback they hope to receive on it – will be used in: [The Samara Index](#), which will be launched in 2013. But more on that later.

Here’s how the findings broke down in these two stories.

1. Is the tone of political news coverage overtly or routinely negative?

On the issue of tone, researchers found that while political coverage isn’t overtly or routinely negative based on the algorithmic analysis of words from the newspaper articles and television scripts, there were “systematic differences between how television and newspapers report on political issues.”

2. Does the news media fail to provide the public with enough information about issues that affect their daily lives?

Researchers found that “concerns about the lack of information in news are justified,” and that Canadians can only expect 15 minutes of informative news coverage in an hour-long newscast.

They considered very informative stories to contain “substantive amounts of facts, analysis and context about the issues,” while those less informative “tended to describe political photo-ops without analysis, or they printed quotes verbatim, without putting issues into context.”

Though, it should be noted that when it came to newspaper articles, the researchers did not distinguish between columns or news stories.

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“The reason we didn’t was based on advice we received that the reader doesn’t necessarily distinguish between a column and a news article,” Loat explained. “We sort of thought let’s be really straightforward about this and not make a judgment as to what’s a column and what’s not – and just say ‘anything that a citizen will read or view.’”

However, Loat did say that making that distinction is something they may consider doing in the future.

3. Do stories overly focus on political games or government processes at the expense of issues?

No, they did not, in the case of the legislative agenda of the fall of 2011.

Researchers also looked at how informative each of issue, process and political games stories were based on the framework of question 2 and found that issue stories were the most informative and political games stories the least.



What about new media?

On top of the newspaper and television stories, researchers analyzed nearly a million tweets to see what types of news stories were being linked to. They found that tweets that bore the #Occupy hashtag linked to alternative media sources more often than the #cdnpoli tweets, which more often than not, linked to mainstream news sources.

Of course, Loat noted, they only captured a snippet of the conversation, as many tweets are sent without hashtags. For example, many journalists who tweet from Parliament Hill often do not include the #cdnpoli hashtag in their tweets.

The Samara Index

Occupiers and Legislators is part of a larger project that Samara is working on. The Samara Index, starting in 2013, will be an annual measure of political leadership, public engagement with politics and political affairs journalism. Since *Occupiers and Legislators* raises more questions than answers (“most good research does,” Loat says), these findings will help shape further study in the latter category.

Samara is seeking feedback from journalists, editors and producers at media organizations on the findings of the *Occupiers and Legislators* report. “We’ve reached out broadly to different media organizations to invite them to have us come in and present the results and generate a discussion with them,” Loat says, adding that they will have done 10 of these presentations by July.

“We thought this was an interesting way to at least begin the conversation on what are the right things to be looking at if we are trying to assess the health and strength and role of political media in our democracy,” Loat said. Once they figure out what aspects of public affairs journalism they should be looking at, they will be things that Samara looks at year after year in order to see how trends are changing or not.

As for the overall goal of *Occupiers and Legislators*? Loat hopes it will “encourage journalists to engage with us, give us feedback, and talk about what’s important.”