

Watching the Watchdog: Stats Don't Lie, Political News Falls Short

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Seems that when you spend an hour watching Canadian TV news stories about politics, you get only about 15 minutes of real information.

And fewer than one out of three political stories in a Canadian newspaper is truly informative.

These scary numbers come from the highly respected charitable [Samara Institute](#) today. And they're hardly from a casual online telephone poll.

Samara studied two big political stories late last year to come to its conclusions. They were the [Occupy movement](#) and the federal government's legislative agenda (the [omnibus crime bill](#), the end of the [long-gun registry](#) and the termination of the [Canadian Wheat Board's monopoly](#)).

The report examined 7,594 stories from 42 major daily newspapers and six national TV programs in both French and English. Online stories were included (among them, around 1-million tweets) which allowed analysis of coverage in print, on TV, and on the Internet.

That's about as widespread and authoritative as you can get.

One of the report's conclusions was that there were sometimes big differences between TV and newspaper coverage of Occupy and the government's legislative agenda. But I'll get to that in another column.

Because what concerns me now -- and it concerns me a lot -- is that, at least according to the report, our TV and newspapers give us so little useful political information.

There's a belief, long abroad in this land, that media coverage of politics is endlessly negative and concentrates mostly on political process and games.

(Which is not, of course, the same as the equally widespread belief that our politics themselves are endlessly negative and concentrate mostly on political process and games.)

Samara's report questions that belief with notably mild praise: "for these two stories (Occupy and the legislative process), it seems that Canadian news media are not uniformly negative."

And: "the political media are not nearly as preoccupied with partisan wrangling as is commonly believed."

But then the kicker:

"Our evidence suggests that citizens must sift through many news stories to find the information they seek."

Translated, this means that our political and TV reporters do a lousy job of telling us what's actually going on in the political world.

There's more:

"The challenge of obtaining information from the news is real. 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.

"If the costs are too high to become informed about politics, people may simply disengage from the political system altogether. Though new technology has made more information available than ever before, the public still relies on the news media to help sort through the information and explain how events in Ottawa and elsewhere affect them."

Toward the end, the report asks a number of questions. One is:

"What research or training might help journalists and producers provide more informative news coverage?"

As an old trainer (thousands of working journalists, hundreds of workshops in a dozen countries), I have two simple answers.

The first is -- tell stories. Forget that damned inverted pyramid which demands that you start with the latest information and work backwards. Human beings neither understand nor retain information packaged that way. Particularly when it comes to complex information like politics.

Replace the pyramid with traditional storytelling, almost always chronological. Context first, followed by dramatic development and climax.

Humans have used this method to pass on information, one to the other, ever since we first put two or three grunts together to share thoughts with others. It's by far the most efficient and effective way of communicating. Always has been. Always will be.

And when you've done all that, talk to the viewer like one human talking to another. And don't confuse speed and volume with authority and sagacity.

My second answer is -- newsroom bosses must demand that the story brings understanding to the reader or viewer. If it doesn't (unless it has some other overriding virtue) kill it.

Samara has spent months doing all the research, the number crunching, and the drawing of conclusions. The dirty work. Will the newsrooms listen?

Probably not.

Political reporters are much like the politicians they cover. Stubborn people, always calling for change. For everyone else.