The Death of Democracy: How Newsprint Media Affects Voter Turnout
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"A democratic society depends upon an informed and educated citizenry." —Thomas Jefferson

Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent years voter turn-out in Canadian elections has been falling at an increasing rate. In British Columbia’s last six provincial elections voter turnout has decreased from a rate of 70.50% in 1983 (Elections BC, 2005), to a new low of 50.99% (Elections BC, 2009) in 2009’s recent provincial election. This creates a problem when attempting to define the terms of what a democracy encompasses and whether or not Canadians can claim to have a fully participatory democracy in future years. Low voter turnout undermines democracy by placing the decisions of the many back into the hands of the few. If current trends continue then the control of Canadian policy will be handed over to the elite who have the drive and resources to voice their opinions on election days. Thus by undermining democracy, decreased voter turnout can arguably be seen as a form of social domination by those people or organizations who maintain the resources or personal drive needed to cast their vote.

Recent literature has attributed this decline to a shift in average voting age (Statistics Canada, 2005) as registered voters get older and the population grows, but younger generations cease to register (Shabazz, 2008). Several different avenues have been explored in other recent North American elections to attempt to recruit youth into the political lifestyle, and while these plans did prove to boost voter turn-out in the 2008 United States Presidential election (McDonald, 2009), their long term effects and effect on Canadian voters have yet to be realized.

While substantial research exists into who isn’t voting, it is why the public isn’t voting that proves to be the issue of greater importance. Several theories have been put forth regarding class information gaps (Kim, 2008), television influence (Hayes, 2009) and negative political
campaigning (Elenbaas & Vreese, 2008) as influences on public inaction in the democratic process. While all of these theories come with their own interesting perspectives on voter behaviour, they all share a common factor in their concern of news media as being one of the parties responsible for a communications breakdown within the public sphere. This breakdown constitutes a realistic threat since as of 2003 89% of Canadians followed news media and current events either daily or several times a week (Keown, 2007). While 91% of Canadian news consumers receive their news from television, 70% also read newspapers and other print media to supplement their political knowledge (Keown, 2007). Thus if a link can be found between news media communication routines and decreasing voter turn-out, then print news media will have played a significant part in the current voter abstaining trend.

To address this trend we must first ask several questions with regards to media effects: What kinds of coverage routines do news conglomerates advocate and journalists use to sell newspapers, and do these tactics combine with news effects to negatively affect public opinion and action? Is ‘news infotainment’ a legitimate source of information or is it a symptom of a decaying media system? Finally, can a connection really be drawn between election coverage of the B.C. provincial elections and the low voter turn-out? It is these questions which I hope to explore and begin to understand through the research described by this report.

Chapter 2: Literature Review
Media Effects

A series of studies regarding the effects of mass media on public opinion and action regarding voting have been conducted within the last decade. Experiments had initially proved that negative media attention – including factors associated with negativity such as images and tone (Allen, Stevens, Marfleet, Sullivan, & Alger, 2009) – led to cynicism and reduced intention to vote (Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Valentino & Simon, 1994); (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995).
However, in response to these studies counter-experiments were conducted which showed that negative coverage can actually interest voters and create a stimulus effect in regards to turnout (Goldstein & Freedman, 2002). Through this debate it can be seen that there are in fact large gaps of knowledge regarding negative media effects and their impacts. Further, at this point there is also limited understanding of the effects of voting systems, including compulsory voting, on voter intention (Blais, 2006).

Regardless there has been a large increase in negative political advertising and coverage in the last decade, and while there is no overall reliable evidence that negative media coverage lowers voter turnout, there is strong evidence that it does “lower feelings of political efficacy, trust in government, and possibly overall public mood (pg 1176)” (Lau, Sigelman & Rovner, 2007); (Lau & Gerald, 2004). These factors linked to the public perception of “trust” and “political effectiveness” have proven to have a strong influence on democratic participation including a citizen’s decision to vote, by leaving them feeling disconnected with their governments and state (Livingstone & Markham, 2008); (Delli, Keeter & Kennamer, 1994).

In general it is now accepted that the narrative presented by the press does hold some sway over public opinion (Jamieson, 2001). Media have also been proven to have stronger effects based on the length and quantity of programs watched per day (Ridout, Shah, Goldstein & Franz, 2004) (Jamieson, 2000) – with advertisements and stories containing the proper news identifiers having more effect on audiences then other media (Jamieson & Campbell, 2001).

Other influencers of voter decision and turnout include interpersonal networks, which provide strong influence in areas with less media influence – though in recent years media influence and technology has started to segregate populations even as it claims to ‘connect the world’, thus interpersonal connections appear to be less important (Campus, Pasquino &
Vaccari, 2008). People are also more likely to vote if their vote counts more – such as if the political race is seen as being more competitive or 'closer' (CRIC, 2001) (Blais, 2001) this is because people are more inclined to vote if they believe that their vote counts more.

Since conflict creates interest, news media have been known to take an angle which highlights this conflict in order to retain reader attention. However, in doing so media has been known to inadvertently give false impressions about issues to viewers in their quest to find this contention (Boykoff, 2008) and create the hook that they perceive will make their story interesting. This type of framing gives false impressions and misleading assumptions to those who absorb them, as well as begins to cause desensitization to news coverage, which makes it even harder to encourage people to vote through media persuasion.

Market size can also affect voter turnout. Media with larger markets are more apt to cover larger scale events, taking away coverage from local races in which voters can participate. This effect has been used by some as evidence to explain the sharp decline of voting instances in North American urbanized areas (Althaus & Trautman, 2008). Larger markets have also become a catalyst for 'infotainment' news; newspaper advertisers want larger markets and news needs to be entertaining as well as informative in order to attract readers (Siegel, 1996). It is interesting to note that while population concentration and urbanization are seen to negatively affect voter turnout levels, one study suggests that population stability actually increases voter turnout since information is more apt to reach voters when they are settled within a defined area (Geys, 2006).

**Recent Coverage**

Recent political coverage focuses on the aesthetics of politics instead of intelligent information; voters are told more about the clothes a leader is wearing and whether they are perceived as strong or weak then their actual policies (Doyle, 2009). This type of coverage is
devoid of substance and focuses on style, which some have suggested creates an information
deficit within the public sphere (Cross, 2006), and distracts from real political issues and current
media (McKie, 2009).

While press is considered to be acting as a part of the governing body through the influence
it has on public opinion (Jamieson, 2001), current news media attributes only a small percentage
of their time and attention to political affairs – and a miniscule amount of to actual ‘watchdog
activities’ (Curran, 2002). Media need to work in tandem with government to channel
information to the public, not attack them based on superficial bases (Ansolabehere, Iyengar &
Simon, 1997). Though media was not created to act as a surrogate for the processes of society, it
has effectively failed in its real function as a broadcast for public concerns and a mobilizer of
public opinion (Curran, 2005).

Parts of this infotainment phenomenon have been attributed to instances of corporation
countermeasures to what they see as boredom in politics – news has to create interest to gain
viewers since none inherently exists within the content (Richards, 2007). The problem with this
view though is that it assumes that voters are actually interested in the superficial summaries of
politics and do not want the boring political body (Rawnsley, 2005).

Other studies on recent political coverage by McKelvy (2008) have shown there to be effects
from the lack of information present within media. While information bankruptcy itself will be
discussed in detail later on, it is important to note several findings about the effects of political
information, or the lack thereof. Exposure to political articles has been proven to increase voter
turnout under certain circumstances, but what the voter thinks and which knowledge affects
them the most can be influenced based on trends in the information they initially receive.
McKelvy found that when people were given issue-based information about a political subject
they tended to react by making logical decisions based on that information. If they remain
devoid of knowledge regarding political policies they are more likely to turn their ballot into a
popularity vote for the candidate they think displays the nicest physical characteristics or the
most charisma. They are also more likely to think that others around them have the same
information deficit that they do, which can exacerbate the effects of the third-party theory.

Third-party effect

Voting behavior is strongly influenced by the belief that the voter has in the power of the
media; when people place trust in news opinions, news media becomes crucial in situations
where people want to coordinate their vote with others (Capella, 1997). Although the first-
person effect indicates that people consider themselves more influenced then others when the
message being communicated is desirable or reinforces already dominant beliefs (Day, 2008),
negative media can create an opposite effect. Since people generally overestimate the effects of
negative media on others and underestimate the effects on themselves, this significantly affects
how they vote based on how they think others will vote. Overestimation causes 'counter-voting',
'popular voting' (Golan, Banning & Lundy, 2008) increased likelihood of voting for a large
party closer to their beliefs then a small favourite one (Cohen & Tsfati, 2009). This creates a
situation known as the third-party effect which can expand into other real life consequences such
as censorship based on the perceived influence of content on others (Xu & Gonzenbach, 2008).

Chapter 3: Methodology

A set of hypothesis were developed from which a meta-analysis related to news conduct
and voter turnout was created and tested against a sample of newspaper articles concerning the
2009 BC General Election using content analysis. These methods allowed for more generalizable
results based on a broad range of available data (Xu & Gonzenbach, 2008). A literature review
and analysis of Canadian and American literature was used to create a picture showing the
evidence of the effects of political media on different aspects of the public; research material was
mostly confined to North American publications since they are both plentiful enough to create a
reliable picture, and they are more applicable to the studied local situation. The use of Canadian
research literature was also considered important in cases where there were differences between
the media or voting systems in Canada and other countries, and where these differences would
have impacted the quality of the analysis. The research undertaken did not simply contain studies
of one aspect of media effect on the individual person or the public sphere, but focused on the
intersection of a series of media effects which had the potential to modify voting behaviour.
These included the effect of negative literature, knowledge gaps concerning technology and
disseminated information, and the third-person hypothesis. Since voting behaviour is considered
a complex function of the human mind, with many factors having possible sway, several
different paths needed to be explored within the band of media effect to establish as firm a set of
criteria as possible for media influence.

The review of studies assisted in developing framework for an analysis which aimed to
determine whether there was sufficient evidence that local media coverage of the recent BC
Election can be held partially responsible for the lack of voter turnout and participation. Further,
this might have suggested that the development of media trends can be correlated with the
depression of voting in recent years, and plans to counter these trends will need to be drafted
before we will see political participation in Canada’s democratic state on the rise.

The articles of analysis were those containing content about the 2009 BC General
Election and having run between the dates of February 14th and May 12th, 2009 in the newspaper
The Vancouver Sun. Articles concerning the 2009 BC Election were chosen both to ensure that
all coverage was relevant to the current media trends and voter turnout statistics, and because of
the scale of the election – being big enough to attract significant media attention but small
enough to contain a reasonable picture of the media coverage within local newspapers.

The coding sheet being used for the analysis was developed in such a way as to gather the
most relevant data in the most efficient way possible. Collecting the page number and article
length were essential for being able to compare the space and placement being given to political
coverage. Determining the article’s subject allows for a general picture to be made of which
issues received no coverage and which ones were considered a major topic in this election.
Subject also stands as a cross check for stories which are not about issues and tend to focus on
the ‘personal’ instead. Through this check we are able to see what the newspapers are focusing
on when they aren’t talking about campaign subjects which are useful to the public political
sphere. The category of scope was defined in a special way in that definitions needed to be made
for the idea of what constituted both positive/negative coverage and issue/personal based
coverage. The definitions of negativity, issue and trait were taken from Brooks’ and Geer’s
(2007) study on the effects of negativity and incivility on the electorate. In this study Brooks and
Geer used language as a marker for whether or not a phrase was considered negative or positive,
and whether it focuses on an issue or a trait. For example, the phrase “mean and focused” was
considered issue based and negative since it focused on the actions of an individual using harsher
language, “warm and fuzzy” was considered a positive trait-based phrase since it used uplifting
language to focus on a candidate’s qualities. When designing this study a few modifications were
needed in order to adjust these definitions to encompass a whole article and a set of issues rather
than a candidate. The idea of language was kept as the indicator for whether or not an article was
considered positive or negative, negative and positive words were counted and taken along with
the overall tone of the piece to decide whether the whole article was being framed positively or negatively. The idea of traits and issues when talking about people became personal and issues when talking about ideas. Issues were then defined to mean issues specifically about the nation state (e.g. the economy, poverty, human rights) and things which political parties could affect through their policies. Personal was deigned to mean any article which weren’t about issues, and thus didn’t contain relevant information on how candidates hoped to affect change within our province.

The story type was mostly for reference value, but also provided additional insight into whether any political articles were featured, and how many articles were being presented as news stories or opinion columns. Gender was provided for the candidate in order to add a frame of reference in case the source needed to be found at a later date. Party affiliation allowed for the ability to see which parties were being used as sources and given the most coverage in general. The function in the story allowed for the distinguishing of politicians and experts from other types of sources. This was to determine how many public opinions or organization spokespeople were actually being used for political coverage, and how many individuals were being used for their ‘expert’ status but were still giving coverage to a party through their mentioned affiliation. Information used was simply to determine how each source was being represented within the narrative. Information relevance was to determine the strength and position of a source’s information within a piece. The idea of positivity and negativity was taken from the definition used in scope, but the idea of important and unimportant (or ‘aside’) was created independently for this section. Important was defined to mean any source information that, if it were removed from the article, would not affect the story in such a way that it would require heavy modification or a new narrative. Obviously because of the way that articles are constructed this
meant that sources appearing near the end of a piece were more likely to be considered unimportant than sources appearing near the beginning.

Photos were used as an added test for positivity or negativity in the story. The size of a photo was done in inches squared so that the area was measured and used to determine how much space the photo actually took up. The idea of importance in a photo was based on whether the photo pictured a subject or person mentioned within the story. Positivity and negativity was determined based on the overall tone of the photo, including facial expressions and the photo subject. Finally, the alignment of the caption used the same criteria as scope alignment to determine whether it was considered positive, negative, or neutral.

Chapter 4: News Negativity

The first area of focus and analysis was negativity in the newspaper news coverage of the B.C. provincial election. The research found that 60% of articles within the Vancouver Sun could be considered as having a negative tone (Appendix A); that is, the articles used more negative language and imagery within their narrative than positive language and imagery. The research also found that a significant amount of photos depicted issues and candidates in a negative light (Appendix A). As previously stated there is a constant and continuous debate around whether or not negativity affects voter turnout and political involvement. Ansolabehere wrote in his 1994 research findings that negative messages can cause voters to become disillusioned with the electoral process and consequently less involved with political candidates and the decision on whether or not to vote. These findings became an area of contention over the next several years, with several different sources releasing findings that both proved and disproved the original research. Lau (2001) wrote that negativity in news actually stimulated voter turnout, as what is perceived as contention and fights between politicians can generate
voter interest which in turn causes them to vote for the ‘winner’. Other authors contend that while some negativity can generate voter turnout through interest, too much can cause voters to tune-out and become disassociated with election coverage (Golan, 2008), or that negative exposure can also make people think that others aren’t voting so they won’t vote either thinking their vote won’t matter (Golan, 2008).

Negative messages sometimes work to the advantage of political candidates, however. Negative coverage or campaigns can sometimes be designed in order to influence voters not to turnout; this is because candidates want to eliminate the votes being cast for their opponents by convincing supporters of other parties not to vote. The morality of these types of campaigns has yet to be explored, but in any election it certainly does not help participatory democracy when political messages are built to encourage a large percentage of voters not to turn out.

While the debate around whether negative language impacts voter turnout continues, we do know that negative tones have an impact on how a voter thinks about their local politics (Allen, Stevens, Marfleet, Sullivan, & Alger, 2007). Negative tones have shown to change how voters think about the party candidates, causing feelings of distrust and uneasiness towards both those parties whom the negative coverage is about and those who make the negative accusations. My research has shown that throughout the elections coverage the New Democratic Party was quoted more using negative tones and language (Appendix A), and the Liberal Party was quoted more using positive tones and language; overall, more negative quotes were used from sources then positive quotes (Appendix A). This means that by linking the results to previous research done by academics we can show that feelings of distrust would have been more prevalent towards the NDP than the Liberals. These feelings combined with the lack of coverage and
framing of other parties, which will be discussed in later chapters, could be responsible as for why the Liberal party was elected by voters to lead British Columbia.

The idea of why politicians make positive and negative statements has been explored by Brooks and Geer (2007) in their research on how incivility as well as negativity affects the electorate. There has always been a constant question of whether negativity undermines election messages, but Brooks and Geer break this question down and find that messages can be negative but also logical and civil. They then explore whether civil and rational messages have different effects then uncivil and irrational messages — whether their tone is considered negative or positive. Their findings show that “people shown the uncivil negative messages [...] were significantly less likely to agree that the candidate was raising important concerns” (Brooks & Geer, 2007). This means that people find civil negative messages more informative than uncivil messages, but positive or neutral civil messages remain the most informative. It also means that people are more likely to respond to logic in election messages rather than simple slander. They use these findings to extrapolate that politicians use uncivil negative messages when talking about their opponents to dehumanize them, and civil positive messages when defending or talking about themselves in order to stimulate voters to respond to positive logic. Brooks and Geer argue that this use of language is due to the fact that politicians naturally want to focus on their opponent’s failures and their own successes.

*The Vancouver Sun* then had chosen to focus mostly on these uncivil and negative messages for the NDP and on the positive civil messages for the Liberals, even though the campaign videos and speech transcripts show that there was an equal number of positivity and negativity between the two parties’ campaigns (BC Liberals, 2009) (BC NDP, 2009). However, by using candidate quotes in such a way some very real consequences were created. As discussed
previously (Allen, Stevens, Marfleet, Sullivan, & Alger, 2007) (Brooks & Geer, 2007) since negative and uncivil phrases are made by political candidates about their opponents these quotes can affect both the people making them and the people that they are about. Positive and civil quotes are made by a candidate about themselves and their party so they generally only affect the person making them. This means that while voters could have increasingly found the NDP to be more untrustworthy based on what the newspaper coverage quoted them as saying, voters would have responded well to the positive and logical comments made by the BC Liberals about themselves. The increasing levels of distrust for one party and neutrality or trust for the other could be seen as another reason why the BC Liberals were voted into office during the 2009 provincial election.

*Negativity in the STV*

Shifting away from candidate coverage presents us with another opportunity to see negativity at work in the newspaper coverage of the BC elections, this time with regards to a referendum to change the way ballots were counted within British Columbia – the single transferable vote. The single transferable vote is a ballot counting system in which citizens can vote for more than one candidate on their ballots, and then rank those they voted for in order of preference. A mathematical formula is used to determine how many votes a candidate needs in order to be elected within their riding; this formula is based on the number of valid votes cast and the number of seats allocated to the riding. In the event that a voter’s number one choice reaches the quota of votes and becomes elected all the surplus of votes for that person would be transferred to their second choice, if the second choice also reaches the quota then the surplus of votes transfers to a third choice, and so on until all the seats are filled. In the event that none of the
candidates reach the quota the candidate with the lowest number of votes would be eliminated and all the votes would be re-allocated to the voter’s second choice.

Despite the fact that the major concepts and premise behind the single transferable vote can be explained in less than 150 words the Vancouver Sun did not once explain the system. Instead they just noted that the STV was too complicated to explain. Every single article about the single transferable vote contained the word “complex”, and although the main purpose of my conducted research was to focus on the overall tone of the articles and not the way in which separate issues were covered, it would be a very interesting study to re-examine the election coverage and count how many times the STV was mentioned, in what capacity, and how many times it was brushed off as too complex for voters to understand. The only point when *The Vancouver Sun* attempted to explain concepts relating to the STV was through two ‘question and answer’ articles that were printed during the campaign coverage, though even these two articles explained only about the impacts of the STV and not about what the STV actually was. Treating the readers as not intelligent enough to understand voting systems and using negative language can certainly be seen as negative coverage on the STV, the questions remaining to be answered are why the press would hold such negative views of the subject, and what effect these views have on the people who read them.

The latter question as to what effects this type of coverage has on the voters and the issue itself can be speculated. The referendum on electoral reform failed to pass both times that it was added to the ballot during a BC provincial election, with the majority of people voting “No” or abstaining from voting at all. Research has shown that a significant number of people who voted “No” or abstained did so not because they didn’t feel that they had enough information on how the single transferable vote actually worked and how it would change the voting system
(McKelvy, 2008), but because people without information have been proven to be significantly more susceptible to the effects of negative exposure. Telling people that an issue is too complex to understand instead of explaining the issue limits the amount of information people receive on that issue, which leads them to rely on more personal analyses which discourage them from voting instead of logical arguments. This argument is further supported when we take into account the fact that the majority of ‘No STV’ campaign coverage focused on emotional or personal strategies, whereas the ‘Yes STV’ campaign used more logic and reason to persuade people than emotion. The idea of negativity replacing information leads us to a key idea about negative coverage: negativism can lead to information bankruptcy. For example, research has shown that negative coverage has candidates spending more time attacking each other and defending themselves than talking about policies (Lau, 2001), or spending more time talking about the controversies and contentions surrounding an issue than the actual issue itself. This means that people are deprived of key information on the situation within their nation-state and cannot participate effectively as a democratic citizen.

The reasons that newspapers replace issue information with negative language are complex. One reason is to save space in a medium which is being increasingly taken over by advertising. Another reason may be the principle of “balanced reporting”. Balanced reporting is the idea that every story must have views from both sides of an issue. The problem with this is it assumes that an issue will have two sides instead of only one perspective, multiple perspectives, or an ‘other’ which has been so disproved that it is no longer considered valid by the community of experts on the subject. Using the news coverage of global warming, Boykoff (2008) has done research on how balanced reporting skews the reality of situations. At the time of his research global warming had been accepted by the scientific community as a fact, a large amount of research had
been done on the warming of the earth’s surface due to greenhouse gases and the effects that this
temperature rise could have on the environment. Still, in news media coverage of global
warming time was still being spent with theorists who argued, based on insubstantial evidence,
that global warming wasn’t a proven phenomenon. Boykoff argues that by giving voice to a
perspective which is not actually considered valid by the reigning experts on the subject, people
who read that coverage are more likely to believe that global warming is still an issue of
contention and less likely to take initiative and work to problem solve the issue.

Similarly, single transferable vote was framed to be read in much the same way. Even
though there were vastly more vocal supporters in favour of STV initially than against it, equal
or more time was given to the detractors of STV in order to make the report be “balanced”. Since
negative sides have been shown earlier to be used for uncivil attack and positive sides for logical
defence, the culminating effect of this was that there was more space available for negative
imagery, less logical information about the issue available to the public, and no reason for the
public to believe that voting for the STV would help to improve the electoral system. This idea
of negativity taking the place of substance causing an information bankrupt news story is
something to be explored in more detail.

Chapter 5: The Third Party

As discussed in the previous chapter news negativity can sometimes have consequences
for a person based on how they feel other people are affected. When people believe that the news
will persuade others not to vote, or when they believe that everyone else will be voting only for
one side, there may not be any incentive to vote themselves since they may not believe that their
vote will have any difference (Golan, 2008). This tendency for people to base their own actions
on how much they think the news effects the actions and thought of others is called the “third-
party effect”, and is based on the assumption which voters make that media has more effect on others than on themselves. The thought processes behind this effect and its consequences on society and voting behaviour have been studied by several scholars (Golan, 2008) (Day, 2008) (Capella, 1997). These consequences include citizens voting for a particular candidate based on how they think others will vote, voting for an opponent to purposefully go against what they think others will do, and deciding to turn out to vote at all depending on if they think their vote will make a difference. These effects can differ based on how much power a person attributes to the media to sway the minds of the populace, and their view of themselves in relation to their independence from society.

*The Vancouver Sun* did several different things within their election coverage which would have caused a third-party effect in its readers, and thus swayed election results for those who saw others as susceptible to media effects. Uneven coverage for different issues encourages readers to perceive things which are not reflective of reality, or to make assumptions about the different candidates. For instance, there was significant uneven coverage on the political parties vying for a seat in the election. Although there were 4 major parties running in the provincial election and several independents, most of the campaign coverage was about the contention between the New Democratic Party and the BC Liberals. One of the other parties, the BC Conservatives, only had 1 article which featured them – and were only quoted 3% of the time (Appendix A) during the whole election coverage series. The Liberals and the NDP were quoted a total of 61% of the time (Appendix A), with several articles given to their campaigns and the ‘battle’ against each other. This uneven coverage has two effects which tie into each other, the first being that when a disproportionate amount of campaign tactics for one or two parties are mentioned, it gives people the impression of how others are voting which can affect how or if
they, themselves, vote. The other effect is that the lack of coverage for a party, such as in the case for the BC Conservatives, can lead people to believe that the party in question has not enough power, size, supporters or importance to be covered – thus they won’t vote for them thinking that they would never be elected anyway so it would be a waste of a vote. Granted, the BC Conservative party is a smaller party which could account for why there was less coverage, but even taking this into account it is still not reflective of the real political situation to only have one article about them throughout the election coverage. This effect is evidenced by the incredibly low number of votes that the conservative party received in BC.

The British Columbian Green party is another political party who not only ran with a full slate but also had strong policies and a political campaign. Despite their serious involvement in the political arena they were arguably marginalized in the election coverage about them. Although their leader, Jane Sterk, took part in the leader debates, her quotes were used as either commentary on the debate between the Liberals and the NDP, or as a type of third-party ‘other’ to add an alternative or edgy quality to the ‘boring’ subject of politics. In other interviews Green party candidates were not directly quoted on their policies, instead they are marginalized into a “child-party” - too young and lacking the experience to lead BC. They were also patronized as having to overcome such adversities as ‘having never won a seat in British Columbia history’, or ‘running a full campaign despite their low campaign budget’. It is almost as if the media equated the Green Party to the underdog in a children’s novel. This style of portrayal is comparable to the Conservatives in that it leads people to believe that voting for the Green Party would just be throwing your vote away.

Having discussed some examples of third-party effect on candidates we must now ask what this means in terms of voter turnout? There is, in fact, a proven significant link between
third-party effect perception and the likelihood of a person to vote (Golan, 2008). The impression of how other people decide to vote can influence a voter’s decision, including whether they choose to vote at all. Voters have also been known to change their voting behaviours (news consumption habits, candidate choice, voting turnout, etc.) based on the impression that they wish to give to other people (Freedman & Fico, 2004), which means they take into consideration how those people have been influenced by the media that they have been exposed to. As well, exposure to negativity in the media can make people think that others will not be voting, so they justify themselves not voting either based on the fact that their vote would not change anything (Golan, 2008). Griswold (1994) did a study which found that people who believe more strongly in the influence of media on others were less likely to vote. This means that as news becomes more negative people who believe in media’s power of influence are more likely to believe that others are dissuaded from voting for fear that their vote will have no effect.

Although the direct effects of negative news on voting behaviour have been hotly debated by academics during the last couple of decades, we do know that there are other effects on voters via a third party. Golan (2008) wrote that those who believed that attack advertisements were more persuasive on others voted more to balance the effects of these ad-driven people rather than for themselves, those who felt that ads held the same amount of influence on themselves as they did on others generally voted less since they were already fairly represented. Issue interest can also have an effect on whether people decide to vote. When a high amount of interest is generated and people believe that others are voting on ‘hot topics’, it can cause mobilization of voters who believe that their vote carries more weight since the vote could go either way (Goldstein, 2002). Similarly, when an election generates less interest it also
inspires lower turnout since people believe that the election is about nothing, nobody else will vote either, and things won’t change anyway.

Without doing additional research into the minds of voters it is impossible to discover what they actually thought about the 2009 British Columbia election coverage, but there are some conclusions that we can come to about how the campaigns were covered and speculate about their impact on the election results. As previously stated 60% of the news coverage was considered negative (Appendix A); as well, 50.6% of articles focused on aesthetics and personal issues to do with candidates rather than issues which had to do with policies or problems which the province faces. Along with these incredibly high numbers depicting low-interest-generating negative articles, we also know that a historically low number of voters turned out to cast a ballot. As well, through previous findings a link can be made between low interest or low negativity through third-party effects and intention not to vote. Thus while third-party effects cannot be blamed for all the instances in which a voter decided not to vote, it can be concluded that some of the instances could have been caused by exposure to news media and the third party effects created as a result. The effects that negativity and information deficit articles have are supported by Freedman (2004), who writes that voting behaviour generally depends on the overall tone of an election and the effects that framing have on the third-party effect.

This conclusion is even further evidenced by the events surrounding the electoral referendum on single transferable vote. As stated in a previous chapter language and tone used when describing the STV were decidedly negative because of the journalistic need for balanced reporting, but what of the third-party effects of this coverage on the minds of the voters? In the case of STV we can once again see where negativity and lack of interest (or information) has forced voters to veer away from something that could have the potential to improve their
electoral system simply because of the assumptions they make about others. While the negative tones used when describing the STV could have given voters the impression that the new voting system was a hotly contested issue and they should turn out to cast a decisive ballot on what direction we should take with it, it instead combined with the lack of information to create a void where a public sphere should be.

Information bankruptcy is the key in this instance, depriving people of the knowledge to make a sound decision on their own. Where the third-party effect comes in is that people have the resources and ability to go out and obtain any knowledge about the STV that they might need in order to make a sound decision on it, but they choose not to. Rather than conducting research and supplementing their knowledge on their own, people are more apt to rely on media effects to tell them how others are going to be influenced and simply assume that no one else has enough information to vote either (McKelvy, 2008) (Golan, 2008) (Xu & Gonzenbach, 2008). This encourages people to vote ‘No’ or abstain from voting. Thus people are once again provoked into not voting by the assumption that their vote will not matter in the long run.

This is supported by the culminative results of the 2009 provincial election where 49.01% of people did not vote at all (Elections BC, 2009) and therefore did not vote for single transferable vote, and of those who turned out 60.92% voted against the new ballot counting system (Election BC, 2009). This means that 80% of the province effectively voted against a proven and perfectly valid voting system. While additional research needs to be done in order to prove that uninformed citizenry holding the (possibly correct) idea that everyone else was uninformed constituted the main culprit behind these numbers, there is research which provides a connection between being uninformed and being more susceptible to outside effects. McKelvy (2008) published research which shows that people who had less information about an issue were
significantly more likely to make election decisions based on personal or emotional coverage that they had been exposed to, which also means personal coverage that they believed others had been exposed to. Since the ‘No on STV’ campaign used the most personal imagery, versus the ‘Yes STV’ campaign with used more logical arguments, people were more likely to be swayed or think that others would be swayed by the ‘No’ campaign. This combined with the belief that ‘No STV’ was more widely supported initially than it was because of the disproportionate coverage on it compared to ‘Yes STV’, and consequently people voted ‘No’ rather than allow their electoral system to evolve.

In the end voters appear to be most influenced by their own beliefs and the belief that they place in the power of media. Voters who believe that they can predict the effect of news media on others are more inclined to vote for either a popular candidate, or to vote against ‘society’ and advertising effects (Golan, 2008). These beliefs are amplified depending on how much exposure people have to media, thus more exposure to campaign articles causes greater instances of voting (Lau, 2007). Solutions for increasing voter turnout then might best be looked by exploring the lack of political articles, or information bankruptcy in election news coverage – a problem which will be explored in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 6a: Declaring Information Bankruptcy

A major theme in the election coverage discussed so far has been the lack of useful information contained within the news articles being published about the 2009 BC provincial election. Negativity replaces information to allow for balanced reporting or to generate the appearance of more contention between parties, and third party effects become pronounced when citizens lack the critical information required to make a decision on the running of their nation-
state – with that in mind it becomes important to look at in what ways articles have become devoid of information and what other effects this could have on society and the electoral process.

In the Vancouver Sun articles which were coded over 50% of the coverage did not focus on political policies or issues (Appendix A). As well there were a significant amount of photos which did not only abstain from focusing on political issues, but also had nothing to do with the story (Appendix A). Instead they focused on what this study defines as “personal” topics and information, which did nothing to aid voters in gaining an understanding about the problems that their province face and what each political party offered as a solution to those problems. A large portion of this personal coverage was spent attempting to build ‘fights’ between candidates instead of focusing on what each party presented as their political platform. For example, a series of articles were printed about one candidate who built his campaign on a slogan of being an honest “tax-paying citizen” which was taken to be slander against his opponent who was a status Native-American. Although there was much discussion around whether this was a deliberate attempt at slander and what the opponent’s views were on it, neither candidate received any other coverage on their campaign agenda or political views. The articles thus created the narrative of a “cage fight” between these two men, and then made it seem as though this was a commonplace thing on the “political battlefield”.

Another regular occurrence was to use polls and studies to report on political tactics. These reports tended to gloss over issues and agendas in favour of going through which audiences politicians were speaking to during their campaigns, and the location in which they were headed next. These articles focused on which parties were ahead in the polls, how many points separated them, and who they needed to convince to win more votes – in other words they contained nothing to do with what platform or policies the candidates actually advocated for.
Even in the remaining articles which did feature some talk of societal issues, a number of the issues were either mixed in with talk of personal topics, or were too shallowly discussed to yield enough key information for the public to make an informed decision about them.

Brooks and Geer (2007) write that this type of reporting tends to focus on traits rather than issues, and that the major “problem lies with the personal attacks”. As previously discussed negative coverage and personal attacks are often used to generate enough interest in a story to sell it. One of the problems with this is that articles are seldom long enough to contain a narrative and an in-depth analysis of a pertinent political issue. In recent decades people have been bombarded with a flux of advertising and media which seek to convey as much consumer information as possible into shorter and shorter durations. Thus it has been argued that as our minds become accustomed to shorter periods of time between subject changes our ability to give our attention to a single topic has decreased significantly (Postman, 1985). Combining this suggestion with the fact that advertising continues to take up greater amounts of space upon newspaper pages means that articles have become shorter over time, and have been criticized for being unable to contain useful amounts of information in recent years (Sherman, 2009). Thus negative imagery and narrative flourish push out relevant knowledge, and as previously mentioned when political coverage makes it seem as though there are no real issues of contention in an election people are less interested in the results, and therefore less likely to turn out to vote.

Another touched upon issue has been McKelvy’s (2008) notion that when people are presented with less information they are more apt to be persuaded by other influences, such as a third-party influence or personal characteristics. When people know less about politics in general elections turn into a popularity vote, which encourages coverage to maintain their focus on the personal rather than the political (Freedman, 2004) (McKelvy, 2008). In Freedman’s (2004)
study when subjects were asked to describe the things that they liked most about a candidate most choose physical characteristics or qualities related to experience and charisma; when asked about negative qualities subjects listed candidate policies and procedures. This implies that not only are personal attributes the focus of interest, but that personal attributes are relied upon to promote positive interest within party candidates. Since the coding of the Vancouver Sun articles was not designed to find a correlation between candidate focus and positive personal coverage further research would need to be done to apply this implication to the news media coverage about the BC provincial election.

The location of articles also worked against getting information about politics to the voter. Negative coverage, and especially negative personal coverage such as opinion pieces or scandal coverage, was more likely to be found near the front of the newspaper where people would have a better chance of seeing it if they had a limited amount of reading time or were skimming (Appendix A). Positive coverage, especially issue-oriented positive, on the other hand was more likely to be near the back of the newspaper where people would be less likely to read it. Since the majority of the articles tended to be in the small political section near the back, the location of these articles worked to minimalize the potential exposure of voters to political coverage creating the illusion of fewer stories on politics than there actually were. Location covers up political coverage and essentially makes it invisible.

Once again we can turn to the issue of the single transferable vote to illustrate in depth the lack of information within the Vancouver Sun election coverage, and the effects this lack has on the public. As previously discussed information in articles about the STV tended to suffer from the same symptoms as articles about other issues, the amount of negativity tended to push out the amount of actual information about the subject. This negativity was attributed to the need
for reporters to maintain a balanced perspective on the issue even though the campaign against the STV didn’t necessarily have an equal amount of reason behind it or nearly as strong a support base by political experts. As well, the negative coverage from those opposing STV allowed for a framework of contention between the ‘for’ and ‘against’ sides to take place, allowing for a more ostensibly more interesting narrative.

Since the ‘No STV’ campaign was given equal, or in some cases more coverage than the ‘Yes STV’ campaign, and tended to use a campaign which utilized a negative humanistic point of view which highlighted the complexity and unnecessity of STV, this negativity was allowed to take the place of valuable information. This information could have inspired voters to vote ‘Yes’ for STV or to vote at all, instead of voting ‘No’ or abstaining to vote for a topic they didn’t know much about. As shown by McKelvy (2008), people are also more likely to listen to the type of persuasive arguments that ‘No STV’ used to convince people, thus when you give disproportionate coverage to a negative campaign you override information, making people less informed about a topic, which makes them more susceptible to the negativity.

Chapter 6b: Elections without Visibility

The cause of article ‘invisibility’ within newspapers can be attributed to the results of two different patterns which appeared in the election coverage printed by the Vancouver Sun: the location of election articles with the tendency to put them near the back of the newspaper section, and the lack of election coverage in general. Throughout the election campaigns the average number of articles about the election per newspaper was 6 (Appendix A). This average wasn’t evenly distributed either, the newspapers having the most amount of articles were found at the beginning of the election before people had started thinking about the campaign, and the end of the election after people had already made a decision. Similarly, articles towards the
beginning and end of the election tended to be longer than articles in the middle (Appendix A),
excepting for a few outliers. Overall the average length of an article was 15 column inches.

As for location, the majority of articles tended to be on the back few pages of the
newspaper and were contained entirely on the election page, with the exception of opinion pieces
which were often featured in the first three pages of the newspaper and were almost always used
to put a heavily negative frame on a personal issue. Even the election page was prone to being
encroached upon by articles other than election coverage; advertisements, fashion tips, and
recipes often took up the space which could have allowed for greater quantity and quality in
election stories. Coverage of the election only ended up on the front page 6.9% of the time
(Appendix A) and was only considered a feature story 6.3% of the time; again, these feature
stories tended to be found on the front page mostly during the beginning and end of the overall
campaign.

Information invisibility also occurred for the people and issues within the story, not just
for the article itself. Throughout the election campaigning conservatives were barely mentioned
by any of the articles within the Vancouver Sun. Conservative party candidates were only quoted
3% of the time (Appendix A), and there was only one article in all of the coverage which was
actually about them – ironically this article was about their lack of representation during the
election. When members of the conservative party were mentioned they were marginalized to
either appear as though they were a distant political thought and no real threat, or as a political
‘other’ which gave them some expertise when they commented on the workings of the other 3
major parties.

More disturbing than the lack of information on the subjects was the lack of information
on the voting process itself. Only two small articles actually mentioned information such as
where to register, and what identification to bring on voting day. Locations for voting were not mentioned at all, except to say that it could be found on your voter registration card. Voters were expected to go somewhere else to look up any pertinent information that they needed in order to cast their ballot, with no real hints on where that ‘somewhere else’ was.

Single transferable vote was also given almost no coverage in Vancouver Sun articles during the election race, and as continuously mentioned information about them tended to be covered up by the fact that they were “too complex” for the average citizen to understand. Despite the fact that it was indicated that no one understood the premise of this new electoral system, only two ‘question and answer’ sessions containing real information about the effects of the STV existed amongst the all the election narratives. No explanation of what the STV system itself entailed was actually given. Any other articles on the STV were simply opinion pieces on how incomprehensible the single transferable system was, and why people should or shouldn’t vote for it.

Invisible election coverage has a number of impacts on the actions and thoughts of citizens when it comes to casting their ballot in elections. Since we know that the more exposure a person has to political literature the greater the likelihood that they will vote (Golan, 2008), and accordingly the less exposure they have the less likely they are to vote, it stands to reason that the lack of political stories present in news media during the 2009 British Columbian provincial election are at least partly to blame for the lack of voter turnout. Exposure to articles increases a citizen’s chances of voting (Freedman, 2004), therefore before we can expect voter turnout to increase we need to push for an increase in election coverage. Granted, it is unreasonable to think that just because the literature is available people will read it. It was explained previously that people in recent decades have busier lives and shorter attention spans, which means that they
could skip over the extra literature if there was some. As it was also mentioned earlier, people have become desensitized to elements of contention or drama in the news. Over-negativity can lead them to become desensitized to the interest generated by contention in articles, and over exposure to articles can leave them feeling put out by campaign coverage. In these cases even the act of or word ‘vote’ becomes devoid of meaning (Jarvis, 2007) and people begin to see it as just another chore in the day.

The lack of articles and short length create a problem in that people were not informed about the events taking place within their political sphere, but there are other ways to solve this then simply mass-producing election articles with which to bombard them. Information efficiency is what is needed in the articles printed by the Vancouver Sun, ways to reduce the amount of personal narrative and party attacks and more focus on the procedures and policies which each candidate advocates. Based on the findings in this report there is certainly room to eliminate negative personal coverage and promote more issue-based stories. Yes, there needs to be a narrative in order to make a hook which sells stories, but the coverage also needs to be politically aware and logical in order to teach society how to be that way too.

The issue of unbalanced coverage presents the final problem for this analysis. People are misdirected by unbalanced coverage, believing that issues and political parties are not important (or don’t even know they exist) because of their lack of coverage within the news. Newspapers are exnominating concepts and people and taking away their voice in the public sphere. By allowing this to happen we allow our choices regarding our societal governance to be taken away from us, and our democracy to be compromised. What we need is fair and truly balanced coverage which reflects the reality of the political situation, not just a “cage match” between two opponents with the other parties yelling out catcalls. In order to obtain this we need a news
media that are willing to entertain the idea that democracy is in a sore state, that modern news values and capitalist agendas are to blame, and that something should be done which allows us to break through these cultural barriers and restore the ability for us to exercise our voting right before our democracy is lost completely.

**Chapter 7: Conclusion**

The main point of the research contained within this report was to find out whether or not there is a link between low voter turnout in recent years and the effects of newsprint media on the public mind. To accomplish this, a framework for analysis was constructed using already published studies; this framework was compared against media samples to judge what kind of effect BC news media is having on the voter decision to abstain. To this end the study helped to draw several conclusions about the connection between newspaper media election coverage and the state of voter turnout within this province.

Through the analysis it was discovered that articles about the election proved to be extremely negative, and while no consensus has yet been reached in academics about what negativity itself does to the voter population there are other effects of negative coverage. Notably, information which could be used to enlighten the public on political policies and allow them to make an informed decision is being pushed out in favour of a more negative and contentious narrative. This means that citizens are uninformed about their political state and unable to participate in the electoral process as they are meant to.

Information bankruptcy compounds this by voiding election coverage of even more information through focus on personal attributes rather than political issues. The invisibility of articles through location in the newspaper and story length means that there was less opportunity for information to be presented to the public, and the invisibility of parties or issues gave people
false impressions about the importance of them assuming they even know that they exist. Information bankruptcy also allows for a more negative approach to politics since people become more susceptible to emotional arguments when they lack knowledge on a subject. The lack of information on the mechanics of voting is itself a disturbing prospect. People cannot be expected to understand where to go or how to vote without someone explaining the process to them. Society is not born democratic with inherent knowledge on the administrative procedures needed to cast a ballot, and this lack of knowledge can clearly affect the rate of voter turnout during an election.

Finally, third-party effects are combined with the negative attitudes and the lack of knowledge to create an electorate without inertia. People seeing the negative coverage and lacking knowledge assume that others are being affected by the media in the same way and that voting while uninformed would change nothing about the way the province is being run. This effect can certainly be found in our province based on the existence of negativity and information bankruptcy which overall means that there is a connection between news media coverage and the decreasing voter turnout within our province. What we need is news coverage which supports the political process and informs society about the issues we face in the future and what each candidate proposes to do about these issues. Only then will we be able to stimulate voter turnout in political elections, and enhance democracy within Canada.
References


Appendix A: *Tables/Graphs/Charts*

**Table 1**

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Appendix B: NEWSPAPER CODING SYSTEM SUMMARY

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2) **Subject:** See table.

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<td>1 Political power and decision-making</td>
<td>19 Non-violent crime, bribery, theft, drugs, corruption</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Budget, Government spending</td>
<td>20 Violent crime, murder, abduction, assault, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Peace, negotiations, treaties</td>
<td>21 Gender violence, feminicide, harassment, rape, trafficking, FGM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Municipal politics/relations, etc.</td>
<td>22 Child abuse, sexual violence against children, neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Provincial/Territory Relations</td>
<td>23 War, civil war, terrorism, state-based violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Foreign/international politics</td>
<td>24 Riots, demonstrations, public disorder</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 National defence, military spending, internal security, etc.</td>
<td>25 Other crime/violence (specify in ‘comments’)</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Other stories on politics (specify in ‘comments’)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Economy:</strong></th>
<th><strong>Social and legal:</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9 Economic policies, strategies, modules, etc.</td>
<td>26 Development issues, sustainability, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Economic indicators, stats, stock markets, etc.</td>
<td>27 Education, childcare, nursery, university, literacy</td>
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<td>11 Economic crisis (private), gov't bailouts of companies, company economic activities, etc.</td>
<td>28 Family relations, inter-generational conflict, parents</td>
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<td>12 Economic Crisis (public), job market</td>
<td>29 Human rights, women's rights, minority rights, etc.</td>
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<td>13 Poverty, housing, social welfare, aid, etc.</td>
<td>30 Migration, refugees, xenophobia, ethnic conflict...</td>
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<td>14 Other labour issues (strikes, trade unions, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 Rural economy, agriculture, farming, land rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>16 Consumer issues, consumer protection, fraud...</td>
<td>31 Legal system, judiciary, legislation apart from family</td>
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<td>17 Transport, traffic, roads...</td>
<td>32 Religion, culture, tradition, controversies...</td>
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<tr>
<td>18 Other stories on economy (specify in ‘comments’)</td>
<td>33 Other stories on social/legal (specify in ‘comments’)</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Party Politics</strong></th>
<th><strong>Other</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>33 Electoral Candidates</td>
<td>36 Ethics</td>
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<td>34 Scandal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>35 Human Interest</td>
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<tr>
<td>37 Misc (Only if nothing else fits – specify in comments)</td>
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</table>

3) **Subject 2:** See Section 2.

4) **Scope:** Issue Oriented Positive=1, Issue Oriented Negative=2, Issue Oriented Neutral=3, Personal Positive=4, Personal Negative=5, Personal Neutral=6, Unknown=7

5) **Size of Article:** In column centimeters

6) **Type of Story:** News story=1, Feature Story=2, Editorial=3, Guest Editorial=4, Statistical Analysis=5

7) **Gender:** Female=1, Male=2, Transgender/transsexual=3, Other=4, Unknown=5

8) **Party Affiliation:** Liberals=1, NDP=2, Conservative=3, Green=4, Independent=5, Other=6, Neutral=7, Unknown=8

9) **Function in the news story:** See table.

| 0 Do not know               | 5 Eye witness            |
| 1 Subject                  | 6 Popular opinion        |
| 2 Spokesperson              | 7 Cited Secondary Source |
| 3 Expert or commentator     | 8 Other                 |

10) **Information used:** Quoted=1, Cited=2, Author=3, Other=4

11) **Information Relevance:** Positive Story Important=1, Negative Story Important=2, Positive Story Aside=3, Negative Story Aside=4, Neutral Story Main=5, Neutral Story Aside=6, Other=7

Note: If the source were excluded would there still be a story? If not then it is considered ‘important’
12) **Gender**: See Section 7.
13) **Party Affiliation**: See Section 8.
14) **Function in Story**: See Section 9.
15) **Information Used**: See Section 10.
16) **Information Relevance**: See Section 11.
17) **Size of Photo**: In centimeters.
18) **Relevance of Photo**: Positive Story Important=1, Negative Story Important=2, Positive Story Aside=3, Negative Story Aside=4, Neutral Story Main=5, Neutral Story Aside=6, Other=7
   Note: Does the photo have strong ties to the story? If so then it is considered 'important'
19) **Alignment of Caption**: Positive=1, Negative=2, Neutral=3, Other=4
<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Subject 2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Scope</td>
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**NEWSPAPER CODING SHEET**