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COMMUNITY AS CLASSROOM | Media Monitoring Guide – Election Edition

The Concept

Election media coverage plays an influential role in the outcome of elections, there are subtle ways a candidate is portrayed in a positive way, or a negative way.

This guide emphasizes and demonstrate some of the ways media coverage can be biased in the way various candidates and political parties are presented. It applied to mainstream media, including newspapers, TV, and radio. It can be applied to social media platforms.

The media portrayal goes beyond the number of stories and who gets asked to comment on issues to teach student and citizens how to spot media bias in political coverage.

The Background Story

The **Media Monitoring Guide** was first developed as part of a workshop for youth at an activist training retreat before social media was predominant. In recognition that most voters get their information about political parties, issues and candidates from the media and political campaign material the focus was on examining things to look for to assess media bias. Often, we get a sense that coverage is biased but cannot clearly identify how.

Third party materials are another option, and it would be interesting to know how many Canadians rely on third party groups, like environment groups, for their information, as it is not required to be neutral. However, this media monitoring election guide focuses on the mainstream media coverage of elections, which is supposed to be neutral.

Democracy relies on fair representation and unbiased coverage of all political options on all issues. The **Community as Classroom Media Monitoring Guide** is both to determine if fair representation and unbiased coverage is happening in the election and to encourage fair representation and coverage right here, right now.

Many voters are tuning elections out, partly because the way the media covers politics. Politics is often covered in a way that turns people off, leading to apathy and cynicism. Low voter turn-out and declining political engagement is a sign of a democratic deficit.

There are many solutions to address this crisis in politics, including electoral reform for proportional representation, fixed election dates, addressing the incumbent advantage, ending the influence of large donors in elections, making electoral districts smaller and therefore more affordable for more candidates. However, the media coverage of politics is a huge part of the political culture and therefore media coverage requires regulation and voter media literacy.

How to Use This Tool

First voters need to know the Broadcast Standards, Newspaper Code of Ethics and journalistic ethics set out to guide the media industry. An example of a good newspaper code of ethics is the *Western Producer*. <https://www.producer.com/editorial-code-of-ethics/>

After that we can measure the media coverage that we are being fed against these legal and ethical standards. The **Media Monitoring Guide** is to encourage media literacy and media activism or to help when people contact media outlets to address media bias.



Here's what to look for

- Certain **issues** get more coverage, certain parties get more coverage
- Certain **parties, interests, candidates**, or groups get preferential placement as the lead story, or front page
- There is an **assumption** of a certain political slant that is denied or unacknowledged

I) Bias Barometer

Party/Candidate	A	B	C
Number of favorable photos			
Number of photos unfavorable			
Number of favorable headlines			
Advantageous placement of headlines			
Advantageous placement of photos			
Number of stories that are positive			
Number of stories that are negative			
Number of stories with balance of various perspectives			

II) Attention & Agendas

Keeping track of topics

- How many columns or stories are about, tax cuts, reducing the deficit, reducing government spending, criticizing government is wasteful, or encouraging us to run government like a business or a family?
- How many of these are positive stories how many are negative stories that are critical of this policy agenda?
- How many stories are about the rights of citizens or workers to good benefits, safe and healthy working conditions, a strong public health care system, environmental protection, quality public education, and improving other social services, or creating a violence free society?
- How many of these are positive stories? How many of these are negative stories that are critical of this political agenda?

Backlash coverage

- Backlash uses a spokesperson from the “other side” to advocate its agenda. For example, the use of a woman as spokesperson for the Canadian Taxpayers Federation to advocate a right-wing agenda. A young, ethnic women, helps legitimize that agenda. She can get away with advocating the elimination of gun control and reducing government spending on childcare and be heard in a way that a white, male might not get away with.
- The notion that “any press is good press”, means even if elected representatives are criticized or given unfavorable coverage, it is better than no coverage or continuing to be invisible. When a party or candidate says outrageous things to get coverage, they are looking for a backlash to raise their profile and be able to explain themselves.
- Columnists, opinion editorials, like letters to the editor do not have to be measured or balanced, they can advocate a position. News stories cannot be biased. Know the difference.
- When parties and candidates are in power or in government, they have a huge advantage of incumbency. Media will always go to them to be part of the story or coverage, however they have a record to defend or explain so they may want less attention. Often, those in

power want only good news stories and to stay out of the media. Unless the tide is turning, and they are threatened with the potential of losing then they will go on the offensive, with spinning stories about their small victories.

- Parties in power that are upholding the status quo can have the attitude – “if it isn't not in the media, on TV or in the paper then it didn't happen”. Then the question of media power being used to ignore certain issues occurs through frivolous stories to deflect attention from the real challenging issues or frame the debate to maintain the status quo.
- Politics can be portrayed as a game, or the art of positioning and the media can promote this view. Does the media coverage talk about politics as a race, or battle, rather than a process of discussing ideas, exploring alternatives, solving problems, resolving differences, coming to agreement?

Politics As Showbiz

- Political media stories can cover the personalities over the policies, which plays into a cult of personalities and leader driven politics. This encourages the worst of party politics: centralized power and hitching the fate of the party to the performance/popularity of a leader rather than principles. It encourages politics to occur behind the scenes, in closed meetings, where politicians are bound by and protected by caucus and cabinet confidentiality. This approach means politicians who are not the party leader must fall in line, or be criticized as divisive, not a team player, a “lone ranger”.
- When politics is reduced to a popularity contest of leaders, their reputation, (founded or unfounded) their personality, and character become more the topic of political coverage than policy. This reduces politics and political coverage to “he said - she said”. It encourages a deterioration in political discourse to attacks on character, lies, reporting cheating and scandals, including such things as focusing on the salary of elected officials. All these examples also upholds the status quo agenda. It accomplishes the agenda of creating mistrust and distrust of politics, politicians, and government. This result is more voter cynicism and voter apathy.
- Some politicians who play into this type of media, may at the same time claimed to have no ideology. These politicians claim to be neither right nor left; to represent

everyone. This also maintains the status quo and makes politics about holding power over anything else. Think of this as ideology of power, or a phenomenon of politicians who stand for nothing other than maintaining their own position of power. These individuals will say whatever they think people want to hear /to remain popular, and offer simplistic remedies that dole out blame, rather than doing the political work of building support for new ideas to address complex challenges like poverty, climate change, and public engagement in governance.

- Political media coverage can play into the cult of personality as part of this phenomenon of “politics as showbiz”, where policies and ideas are secondary to the individual who is running. This makes politics about celebrity not leadership or public policy and who’s interests policy serves. The question of what interest does this person or party represents is avoided in “politics as showbiz”. Interests are blurred or clarified by media by showing who is driving the story. Ask who is driving the story of the media being consumed, cabinet ministers or government, the opposition, a corporation, a specific community group?

Trends in the portrayal of “Politics as Showbiz”:

- Use of high-profile personalities as candidates and spokespeople or supporters because they have name recognition not relevant experience.
- Politicians aligning themselves with the good work of others – posing for photos serving at a food bank.
- Distraction by a campaign or side issue. For example, when a child and the Ladybug Foundation were featured by the media while the Liberal Government was devolving social housing to the provinces. The media coverage of this small charity served to neutralize, even trivialize the issue of housing and homelessness as something that could be addressed by a child’s charity effort rather than an entire national government program to build social housing, which was being eliminated.
- Celebrity supporters and name dropping are key signs of politics as showbiz
- Negative politics are hallmarks of power-for-power or the ideology of power
- Focusing on trivial issues or ‘low hanging fruit’ and presenting important issues as a foregone conclusion - For example- saying there will always be poverty.

New Politics, Positive Politics, and the Politics of Unity

Can politics be an endeavor to build support for good ideas?
Consider these two lists from the National Skills Program.

Negative politics is:

- Saying yes when you mean no
- Making deals and seeking favors
- Withholding or carefully controlling information and plans
- Forming powerful cliques and excluding others
- Name dropping to gain support
- Presenting the benefits of a plan or idea without raising any drawbacks or doubts
- Deliberately overstating demands to prevent resource is being used elsewhere.
- Understating demands to secure resources to sell your ideas or plans.
- Using language that smooths over negative situations, for example, “we are working to improve our financial situation” instead of “we are almost broke.”
- Initiating or supporting destructive rumors about others with who you disagree
- Bullying goes with different points of view into silence or marginalization

At this point, applying these to electoral politics is almost laughable. Bullying and the abuse of power characterized the current political culture. Media coverage can support or discourage this by the type of coverage chosen.

Media coverage that treats politics like a spectator sport will encourage the gamesmanship as the norm. Citizens that expect a more inclusive and principled debate will look for a new approach to politics with more diplomatic, democratic, and consensual interactions. This new politics supports more democratic participation from as many citizens as possible.

“The politics we need hasn’t been invented yet”, Greta Thunberg, Climate and Environmental Activist 2018

What to look for in Positive Politics

- People say what they mean and mean what they say.
- Political support is developed by clearly articulating vision, and policy, while engaging participation.
- Information and plans are public and transparent, including how they were developed and by whom.
- Inclusion of different points of view in the debate is welcomed, clarifying differences and the common ground are encouraged, working to consensus or agreement is supported and encouraged as the norm.
- Support is earned through discussion, comparison and idea development not leveraged through pressure or bullying.
- Plans, policies and ideas are not spun as propaganda that is self-congratulatory while minimizing consequences, impacts on others, and costs.
- Plans and policies do not gloss over conflicts rather address differences in ways that lead to understanding various perspectives and points of view on history and interests.
- Conflicts are mediated and discussed by the interested parties or the whole group.

Analyze how the coverage of the election in your area matches to these considerations.

- What was edited out, what was not covered?
- No alternative point of view was presented.
- Relying on official sources without saying who the source is.
- Printing rumors and unsubstantiated information.
- Taking an individual anecdote, experience or example and representing it as the norm.
- Using the word, "we or *our" on behalf of corporations or government
- Media outlets or media personalities taking up a cause.
- Media vilifying certain individuals, groups, or causes
- Middle of the road bias. claiming to be neither right nor left and there for objective, correct, accurate, reasonable, and fair.
- Trivializing a point of view by focusing on side issues and irrelevant information.
- Media coverage that does not focus on policy differences or misrepresents them.
- Media outlets are more interested in scoops and being first than in reporting the news, so they are

creating the news, announcing things that are about to happen, or speculating they would happen.

- Announcing poll results at a time or in a fashion to influence public opinion, not disclosing who commissioned the pole, nor sharing what the actual questions were, and interpreting the results in biased ways.
- Predicting results, announcing polls in slanted coverage of historical elections, for example stating things as a foregone conclusion due to tracking so-called bellwether constituencies. These actions especially before the voting stations close in other time zones.

Summary

Media coverage has a huge role in engaging citizens in democracy, in holding political actors to account, analyzing, or making sense of complex issues, events and dynamics. Media literacy is essential to ensuring media actors are also accountable for ethical coverage.

III) Other Sneaky Tricks