

LEGACY MEDIA AND POLITICAL COVERAGE

Citizens cannot be present at every government meeting or hope to understand all the goings-on in their community. Yet, for citizens to make well-informed political choices, they need to know what is happening. This is why society relies on the media.

When we say media, we are including many things. There are social media platforms, such as TikTok, X, Reddit, and Facebook, where citizens actively participate. Then there are legacy media platforms, such as newspapers, radio, and television stations. Our focus for now will be legacy media.

Saskatchewan has several legacy media outlets. Many communities are served by weekly newspapers and a few have community radio stations. They are predominantly run by local owners. Then there are larger daily newspapers and major radio and TV stations, predominantly owned by large corporations. In addition, there is the public broadcaster, CBC/Radio-Canada. It differs from the other legacy media outlets because it is owned by the public and has a federally-legislated mandate to provide the country with cultural and informational programming.

HOLDING GOVERNMENT TO ACCOUNT

In order to provide the public with reliable information, the media must be free to pursue stories without government interference or control. This is essential to democracy. In Canada, the media's freedom is enshrined in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

One strength of legacy media is its ability to cover news from the provincial legislature. Many media outlets have reporters who are members of the press gallery. The press gallery is a group of reporters dedicated to covering what happens in the legislature. Members have access to offices in the legislature to report on the government.

The press gallery plays an important role in democracy. Unlike many “hot takes” on social media, these reporters offer a first-hand account of the business of the legislature. They watch question period, legislative proceedings, and committee work. They also take part in scrums, an unstructured questioning of politicians that often takes place in the hallways of the legislature. As well, they are well-positioned to engage in investigative reporting that holds the government to account.

Most press gallery members cover the legislature part-time, popping in and out as need be. This is a reality of cutbacks that legacy media have seen in recent years.

During elections, the nature of political coverage changes. The leaders of the major political parties spend most of their time touring the province. Reporters from major news organisations are often embedded with each leader's tour, travelling with them to report their activities and announcements. Other politicians spend their time campaigning in their constituencies. These activities are often covered by each community's local media outlets.

MEDIA BIAS?

Decision-making is an inevitable part of any news gathering and new reporting process. Certain issues and ideas will be brought to the forefront in some coverage, while other issues and ideas will be neglected. Because choices must be made in creating news, there will always be some degree of bias in the media.

This does not mean that reporters are inherently careless in their work. It is only to say that no news report can possibly envelop all perspectives on any issue.

Because no single news report or single news outlet can possibly envelop every perspective on every issue, it is important to seek out multiple sources. By reading multiple reports from a broad range of sources on the same news story, we will be better-equipped to form opinions on the news of the day.



Discuss

1. By law, Canadian media is almost entirely Canadian-owned. Do you think it is important to restrict foreign ownership of our media?
2. Choose a news story about a current Saskatchewan political issue. Find many different legacy media sources to compare the coverage.
 - a) What elements of the story have been reported by all media outlets?
 - b) What elements are in some stories but not others?
 - c) Are there issues related to this story that are completely absent from all coverage?
 - d) Do you see any evidence of a bias towards any particular perspective?
 - e) If there are differences in the news stories, can you think of reasons why this would be?

CORPORATE INTERFERENCE IN LEGACY MEDIA JOURNALISM

The independence of journalists is important to democracy. We know that journalists should be free to pursue their stories without interference from the government. Just as importantly, journalists should be able to pursue their stories without direct interference from owners of the media. This principle was put to the test in a recent dispute between the president of Bell Media (the company that owns CTV) and the chairman of the CRTC (Canada's broadcasting regulator).

In March 2015, the CRTC ruled that cable TV companies—including Bell Media—must offer subscribers pick-and-pay options, instead of simply bundling several channels together. As well, TV service providers must offer low-cost basic cable packages. This infuriated Richard Crull, president of Bell Media.

Crull called the head of CTV News. He decreed that CRTC chairman Jean-Pierre Blais was not to appear on any news coverage of the ruling. A 5:00pm interview with Blais on CTV News Channel was cancelled. As well, stories on 6 o'clock CTV newscasts across the country excluded Blais. However, senior CTV reporters felt that Blais's perspective must be part of a story about a CRTC ruling. They defied Crull's orders, and included Blais on CTV National News at 11:00 that night.

Learning of Crull's interference, Blais put out a stern press release. It said, in part:

One of the pillars of Canada's broadcasting system—and, in fact, of our country's democracy—is that journalists are able to report news stories independently and without undue editorial influence.... An informed citizenry cannot be sacrificed for a company's commercial interests.

Crull apologized for his actions, but less than three weeks after the incident he was fired from Bell Media.

