

# TRADITIONAL 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, we need to know what is happening. This is why society relies on the media. It helps us learn about our community, stay informed of what governments are doing, and keep powerful institutions in check. Because the media provides such vital information, they can significantly influence our beliefs and decisions.

In order to provide accurate knowledge, the media must be able to pursue stories free of government interference. Because freedom of the press is an essential cornerstone of democracy, it is enshrined in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

Saskatchewan has several traditional media outlets that help inform us. Many communities are served by weekly newspapers. These papers predominantly are owned locally. There also are larger daily newspapers, and major radio and TV stations. They predominantly are owned by large corporations. In addition, some communities have not-for-profit community radio stations.

There is also the public broadcaster, CBC/Radio-Canada. It differs from other traditional media outlets because it is owned by the public. The CBC was created by the federal government in 1936, in the face of expanding broadcast technology. It is mandated to provide all of Canada with culture and information programs. Because CBC/Radio-Canada is a public service, it can act as a counterbalance to corporate and American media interests.

## HOLDING GOVERNMENT TO ACCOUNT

One particular strength of traditional media is its ability to cover news from the legislature. This is largely due to the press gallery. The press gallery is a group of reporters with special access to the legislature. Reporters or media organisations pay a fee to join, and are given access to offices in the legislature to report on the government. All major media outlets in Saskatchewan have membership.

The reporters of the press gallery play an important role in democracy. Their first-hand accounts of the legislature acts as society's window into government. They watch question period, legislative proceedings and committee work. They also take part in scums, an unstructured questioning of politicians that often takes place in the hallways of the legislature. Because they are based out of the legislature, they are also better-positioned to engage in investigative reporting that holds the government to account. Saskatchewan's political journalists work hard to provide a balanced perspective on the events of the day.

However, most members of the press gallery only cover the legislature part-time, popping in and out of the legislature as need be. Only a few reporters work out of the legislature's press gallery offices full time.

During elections, the nature of political coverage changes. The leaders of major political parties spend most of their time touring the province. Reporters are embedded with each leader's tour, reporting on their activities and announcements. Meanwhile, candidates spend their time campaigning in their constituencies. These activities are often covered by local media.

## MEDIA BIAS?

It is easy to find complaints about the "liberal media," a largely American idea that the media favours left-wing perspectives. It is true that decision-making is part of any news gathering and news reporting process. Certain issues and ideas will be brought to the forefront while other issues and ideas will be neglected. Because choices must be



made in what will be reported, there will always be some degree of bias in the media, no matter how responsible reporters are in trying to get the facts right. Some stories will get more attention. Some stories will get less attention. Some stories will get no attention whatsoever. And within all these stories, not every perspective can be discussed.

However, countless studies have found that the primary driver of news bias is the corporate interests of the media's ownership. Given that media's owners are ultimately responsible for creating publications and programs and choosing who works there, some bias towards the ownership is to be expected.

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 of 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 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?

Journalist independence is important to democracy. Journalists should be free to pursue their stories without interference from the government. Just as importantly, journalists should be free to pursue their stories without direct interference from owners of the media. This principle was tested in a dispute between Bell Media, the company that owns CTV, and the CRTC, Canada's broadcasting regulator.

In March 2015, the CRTC ruled that cable TV companies—including Bell Media—must make major changes to their offerings, including offering low-cost basic cable packages. This infuriated Richard Crull, Bell Media's president.

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 6:00 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, 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 apologised. However, Bell Media fired him less than three weeks later.

