The Enhancement of Democratic Citizenship
Evaluating Media Performance in Quebec and British Columbia

By
Maïalène Boutin-Wilkins

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Media Observatory, McGill Institute for the Study of Canada

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Modern representative democracy requires informative, independent, and judicious mass media. That this is true has been recognized in a wide body of literature, from theoretical work on democracy (Dahl 1971), to reviews of the role of mass media in the democratization of South Asian and African regimes (Kasoma 1995), to recent considerations of the role of the Internet in politics (Norris 2001). Scholars and journalists alike have emphasized the need for mass media to keep citizens informed, to provide a platform for public discussion and to scrutinize government activities.

Mass media is considered as enhancing democratic citizenship by providing sufficient public affairs coverage to keep citizens informed about politics (Entman 1989). Informed citizens are better able to make enlightened choices come election time (Buchanan 2001). The news media should also foster public deliberation by allowing for debate on policy issues to take place in its pages (Just et al. 1996; Page 1996). The confrontation of different viewpoints will enlighten citizens’ policy preferences and eventually allow for the emergence of the best policies (Graber 2003; Curran 2005; Siebert et al. 1971). Finally, the media should perform its watchdog role by examining government activities, informing citizens of any wrong-doing and therefore allowing them to keep the government accountable (Entman 2005; Gans 2003; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001; Bennett and Serrin 2005).

There is a considerable body of work spanning decades suggesting that this role is fundamental. However, a number of communication scholars have questioned whether mass media can actually accomplish these public interest functions. Even in comparatively open, democratic regimes, economic and organizational constraints may impede the capacity of mass media to provide the volume and quality of information that
democratic theory suggests is necessary (Cook 1998; Patterson 1997). In contrast, other scholars have suggested that the news media should not be entirely at fault for failing to provide adequate information in order to foster deliberation and to act as a check on government since citizens’ demand for public affairs information is actually quite low. More recent studies have indeed indicated that citizens are both unable and unwilling to process large amounts of political information. Mass media should therefore not be judged too severely but should still aim to engage these citizens and get them to pay attention to the political process.

There has nevertheless been relatively little empirical work directly assessing the extent to which media provide the kind of information representative democracy requires. This is the goal of the current paper, which aims to test mass media’s propensity to provide information, and/or to act as a civic forum where different viewpoints are debated and monitor government activities. Two case studies will allow us to consider if the mass media in Canada is performing as advocated by democratic theory, specifically, (1) in Quebec, for the first three years of the Charest Government and (2) in British Columbia, for the duration of the Citizens’ Assembly’s mandate and the referendum on the proposed electoral system change. The first case study will allow us to consider if major Quebec newspapers are providing sufficient information on government activities and acting as an effective, government-monitoring media. The second case study will go into more depth and look at newspapers’ content in order to clearly assess if major British Columbia and national newspapers are adequately informing citizens on the process of electoral system change, and are presenting a diversity of viewpoints and therefore acting as a civic forum. The second case study is particularly interesting because it will allow us
to understand how the news media provides information on an important policy change. It therefore provides us with a natural experiment in the sense that the study will track and assess the media coverage of a brand new policy domain. Together, these studies will thus assess if Canadian news media are able to perform these three democratic functions. It will therefore constitute a diagnostic check on the current state of media in Canada and in this sense tell us about the state of Canadian democracy.

The tests begin with a consideration of what an effective, deliberation-enhancing, government-monitoring media might look like, empirically speaking. I then review the promises made by the governing Quebec Liberal Party during the 2003 electoral campaign, and examine coverage of those issues over the following 37 months in four major Quebec dailies. Resulting analyses provide some information about the extent to which the Quebec news media provides critical information about the ongoing conduct of the Quebec Government. Results are relatively positive: to the extent that we can capture the behaviour of the news media over the past three years, it would appear as though a considerable degree of attention has been dedicated to the major policy promises of the Charest Government.

The second analysis will consider the mandate and attributes of the Citizens’ Assembly and the proposed electoral system–single transferable vote, and its characteristics–and assess if those elements were covered by five major British Columbia dailies and by the two Canadian national papers. Again, results prove to be relatively positive: the newspapers provided considerable and detailed coverage of the Citizens’ Assembly and the electoral system it recommended from the beginnings of the Assembly’s work in
January 2004 to the May 2005 referendum. However, the media’s role according to democratic theory needs to be considered before I present these cases.

Mass Media’s Democratic Functions

The mass media’s democratic functions have deep roots. While the information and monitoring functions can be traced back to the writings of Bentham, Burke and Jefferson, the public deliberation function has its roots in the libertarian principles advanced by Milton and Mill (Splichal 2003; Siebert et al. 1971; Saint-Jean 2002). Jeremy Bentham provides the intellectual foundation for the ‘Fourth Estate’ concept even if Burke is the first to present this term to talk about the press’s increasingly important monitorial role (Splichal 2003; Hunt 1850). Bentham regarded government officials as being constantly exposed to temptations; they consequently require constant surveillance by what Bentham referred to in his later work as a “Public Opinion Tribunal” (Bentham 1791, 1820, 1822; Cutler 1999; Splichal 2002). For Bentham, newspapers are “not only the appropriate organ of the Public Opinion Tribunal, but the only constantly acting visible one” (Bentham 1822, 45). Furthermore, Bentham considered the liberty of the press as fundamental since the press operates as a check on governmental power (Bentham 1820). As Mill indicated, Bentham was really concerned with the question “by what means are the abuses of authority to be checked” and considered the press as one important instrument for the surveillance of governments (Mill 1838). It is to be noted that the press

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1 There are three estates in Parliament, but in the reporters’ gallery yonder sits a fourth estate more important than they all. It is not a figure of speech or witty saying; it is a literal fact, very momentuous to us in these times (Burke quoted in Carlyle 1841).
was not seen as merely reporting abuses of power, but as providing information on everything that was going on in the political assembly, and therefore, performing the information-providing function. Indeed Bentham’s main concern was that all transactions in the political assembly would be under the surveillance of the public (Splichal 2002).

Similar ideas about the importance of mass media are expressed in the Federalist Papers. Thomas Jefferson had a comparable understanding of the press and its simultaneous function to inform the public, and monitor governmental matters as “they are the only censors of their governors” (Jefferson 1787). Jefferson believed– much like Paine would later argue– that citizens needed to be educated and informed about public affairs, a task best performed by the press (Paine 1791; Siebert et al. 1971; Saint-Jean 2002). Moreover, by providing information about government misconduct, citizens are better able to keep the government in check, as argued by Bentham. Jefferson even states that “… were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter” (Jefferson 1787). Jefferson therefore considers the press as an instrument of education and surveillance for the public: it will help protect them against the potential encroachments of government.

The mass media’s public deliberation function can be first traced back to the writings of John Milton. Although Milton does not mention the press in his work Aeropagitica

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1 Even if, as some scholars have suggested, the founders had a different understanding of the First Amendment and free press than we do today, it remains true that this document eventually came to define the news media’s democratic function (Schudson 1998; Zaller 2003; Saint-Jean 2002; Graber 2003; Powe 1991; Sparrow 1999; Siebert et al. 1971).
published in 1644, he presents us with the concept of the “free market place of idea” which constitutes the foundation of this function. His assumption is that men should have unlimited access to a diversity of ideas in order to exercise their reason, to learn to distinguish right from wrong and to ensure that the truth will be discovered (Siebert et al. 1971). Mill took on this concept in his work *On Liberty* to make an argument for the liberty of discussion and to add strength to the liberty of the press concept. He states that the liberty of the press has been successfully defended on the grounds that it acts as “securities against corrupt or tyrannical government” but that the importance of public discussion allowed by this free press should be more clearly presented (Mill 1859, 20). Mill believes that free discussion – the “collision of adverse opinions” - is necessary because opinions need to be contested in order for the truth to emerge (Mill 1859, 59).

According to this libertarian theory of the press, the mass media’s purpose is therefore to help citizens arrive at enlightened opinions by providing a diversity of viewpoints and ideas (Siebert et al. 1971; Page 1996; Norris 2000). It posits citizens’ capacities to sift through the different opinions available— to recognize sound arguments and reject falsehoods— so that a multiplicity of viewpoints will be exposed in the media (Page 1996; Siebert et al. 1971; Norris 2000).

In the Progressive Era (around the turn of the 19th century) journalistic practice emerged along these lines with the rise of the penny press and the demise of the partisan press. The new commercial press was no longer concerned with pleasing partisans (thereby providing biased information) and so it eventually put forward professional guidelines (Schudson 1978; Tuchman 1978; Key 1964). Objective reporting, gathering
supplementary evidence, presenting conflicting viewpoints became standards of journalistic practice and consolidated the new ideal of the press as a neutral observer of politics (Tuchman 1972, 1978; Siebert et al. 1971). This evolution of the press occurred alongside a modified conceptualization of ideal citizenship which was taking hold. The informed citizen—the “cool independent”—no longer in need of partisan cues, was able to become informed, study the issues, evaluate candidates and decide who to vote for in the next election (Schudson 1998; Zaller 2003, 114). In turn, this increased the demands on the press who assumed the duty—required of them by the new model of politics—to perform a public service role (Johnstone et al. 1976). A novel news standard emerged, one in which newspapers aspired to a “sober, detailed, and comprehensive coverage of public affairs” as demanded by the new ideal of the informed citizen (Zaller 2003, 114).

In their typology of press systems published in 1956, Siebert, Peterson and Schramm clearly identify the functions of the press that constitute this full news standard, or, as they name it, the “social responsibility of the press”. In this respect, the press should; (1) service “the political system by providing information, discussion and debate on public affairs”; (2) enlighten “the public so as to make it capable of self-government”; and (3) safeguard “the rights of the individual by serving as a watchdog against government” (Siebert et al. 1971, 74). This notion of the role of the press is therefore close to what Jefferson, Bentham, Mill and Burke had envisioned for society, and it still holds today, as reflected in professional codes of journalism (Siebert et al. 1971; Merrill and Lowenstein 1971; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001). Different codes of journalism indicate that the notion of journalists accomplishing a public service is still prevalent within the profession: alongside the professional values of objectivity, balance and fairness that
define their work, journalists also recognize the importance of the public service role they are asked to play. The Canadian Association of Journalists clearly mentions that journalists “serve democracy and the public interest”. (Canadian Association of Journalists, 2002). Moreover, Kovach and Rosenstiel’s survey of American journalists reveals, that journalists consider their first purpose is to provide citizens with the information they need to participate in politics, and that the journalist needs to monitor public affairs, provide a platform for discussion and criticism, and act as a watchdog of all forms of power (Gans 2003; Protess et al. 1991; Underwood 2001; Ericson et al. 1987; Deuze 2005; Graber 1989).

Recent work in political science and communications takes a similar view of the functions of mass media in representative democracy. Schumpeter’s definition of liberal democracy in terms of structural characteristics states that democracy involves three functions: participation among citizens in the selection of parties and representatives through elections, pluralistic competition among parties, and civil and political liberties to speak, publish, assemble, and organize, as conditions necessary to ensure effective competition and participation (Schumpeter 1952). As Norris has suggested, three political functions can be identified from these concepts. Mass media should thus; (1) foster participation by providing political information; (2) allow for pluralistic competition by acting as a civic forum; and (3) be a watchdog for civil and political liberties.

Mass media are therefore widely viewed as the principal source of information on politicians’ activities, and consequently a fundamental safeguard against abuses of power, and a critical space available to citizens’ to hold governments responsible; to reward or punish them accordingly come the next election (see, e.g., Ericson et al. 1987; Sparrow
However, while the mass media’s capacity to perform its civic forum role is questioned, it is still widely regarded as one of the principal platforms for public discussion on issues of importance (Graber 2003; Page 1996; Just et al. 1996; Norris 2000).

Organizational and Economic Obstacles

Whether mass media actually act as an effective Fourth Estate is another matter. The capacity of news media to perform this role is certainly widely questioned (see, e.g., Merrill and Lowenstein 1971; Patterson 1997, 1998; Sparrow 1999; Francke 1995; Deuze 2005; Saint-Jean 2002; Altschull 1984; Ericson et al. 1987; Curran 2005; Graber 1989, 2003; Baker 1998). First, a number of scholars argue that, while different professional codes clearly state news media’ public interest role, this role remains weakly institutionalized (Bennett 2003; Bennett and Serrin 2005; Graber 2003; Gans 2003; Blumer and Gurevitch 2005). Different news organizations do not necessarily have the inclination or interest to perform this function, and are not in any way forced to act in accordance with the public interest role (Graber 2003; Blumer and Gurevitch 2005). Some news media may therefore adhere to certain democratic responsibilities, and not to others, or they may choose particular occasions when they will act as their public interest role demands.
There is also the issue of journalists’ lack of expertise in the fields in which they are required to report (Cook 1998; Graber 2003; Lippmann 1922), and the time constraints which make it difficult for even the most knowledgeable reporters to gather the necessary information (Ericson et al. 1987). Patterson (1997; see also Sparrow 1999; Lippmann 1922). This suggests that these democratic functions simply ask too much of newspeople: journalists are expected to have an extensive and almost impossible level of understanding of politics. In fact, Patterson suggests that those who blindly support this democratic role, fail to consider the fact that journalists are mainly driven by news opportunities, and that the news media focuses on events, and not on issues. Therefore journalists cannot be expected to present detailed coverage of all government activities and debates as Bentham had envisioned (Patterson 1997, 2003). As Lippmann states, the press is “like the beam of searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision”, intermittently covering public affairs issues, and so it cannot be expected to provide a detailed account of current political events (Lippmann 1922, 364).

Some scholars also argue that objectivity, a professional standard adopted during the Progressive Era, in fact impedes news media’s performance of its democratic role (Tuchman 1972; Entman 1989; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001; Bennett 2003; Saint-Jean 2002; Bennett and Serrin 2005; Cook 1998). Journalists are quick to rely on the presentation of a variety of arguments pertaining to an issue in a point/counterpoint manner—of using what Tuchman named “strategic ritual”—in order to eschew all appearances of bias (Tuchman 1972). Consequently, the media are unable to clearly assess the validity of the arguments, and to reveal their potential fallacy—which would
constitute valuable information—assisting citizens to perform their role in self-government (Bennett and Serrin 2005; Graber 2003).

News media are usually profit-making enterprises: their priority is therefore to generate plenty of profits through advertising and circulation revenue. As a consequence, mass media will tend to provide information that (cost-effectively) attracts an audience (such as crime stories for instance), but this does not necessarily encourage the kind of time-consuming, often tedious activity needed to gather information, and fulfill the democratic functions of the press (see, e.g., Cook 1998; Francke 1995; Carey and Maynard 2005; Patterson 1997; Baker 1998; Entman 1989; Curran 2005; Bennett 2003; Hamilton 2005; Entman 2005; Picard 2005). Market pressures therefore undermine news media’s capacity to provide public affairs information, which in turn limits the development of a public deliberation platform and the surveillance of governmental affairs by the press (Page 1996; Bennett and Serrin 2005). Moreover, even if news media is able to partly fulfill its role, news stories may simplify and de-contextualize public affairs information, and undermine the functions the press tries to perform (Curran 2005; Iyengar 1991). The consensus that emerged in the literature is that the ideal proposing news media as a “marketplace of ideas” cannot be attained; economic pressures render mass media incapable of fulfilling their democratic potential (Page 1996; Entman 1989; Saint-Jean 2002; Curran 2005; Baker 1998).
Citizens’ Capacities and Interests

While mass media are widely regarded as playing a critical role in representative democracy, it is still not clear if they reliably do so. While mass media may provide all the information that a public needs, it still seems unlikely that democratic functions will be fulfilled, due to both journalists’ capacities and citizens’ interests. Indeed, a number of scholars propose that news media do not provide more public affairs coverage mainly because the demand for it is so low (Patterson and Seib 2005; Neuman 1986; Zaller 1999; Gans 2003; Graber 2003; Entman 1989). This “vicious circle of interdependence” as Entman calls it explains why mass media is incapable of living up to the demands of the full news standard (Entman 1989). In other words, in order to produce high quality public-affairs information, news media require a captive audience of sophisticated citizens. News media should therefore not be unfairly blamed for the situation, but the complexity of the problem should be recognized (Entman 1989; Patterson and Seib 2005; Graber 1988).

Many scholars trace the roots of this problem to the Progressive Era and the informed citizen ideal it put forward while attributing to the mass media the information-provision role that had been previously performed by political parties (Patterson and Seib 2005; Graber 2001, 2003; Lippmann 1922, 1925; Zaller 1999, 2003; Schudson 1978, 1998; Neuman 1986). According to this ideal, citizens are able to be informed about all matters pertaining to public affairs (Zaller 1999; Schudson 1998). They should be able to identify the main issues facing society and have some knowledge of their history, their possible alternatives, and potential consequences; in short, they are expected to become experts (Graber 1988, 2001; Lazarsfeld et al. 1954). However, this ideal cannot be attained, as
Lippmann first argued more than eight decades ago, and the press should not bear the burden of performing this impossible task (Lippmann 1922). He posited that citizens are asked to be “theoretically omnicompetent”, to be very knowledgeable about public affairs even if they do not have this “unlimited quantity of public spirit, interest, curiosity and effort” (Lippmann 1922, 362; Lippmann 1925, 24). Scholars tend to agree with Lippmann’s diagnostic and to conclude that citizens are unable to acquire the vast amount of information necessary to attain this ideal and be effective citizens (Schumpeter 1952; Schudson 1998; Zaller 2003; Graber 2003; Graber 1988). This paradox of mass politics, as Neuman defined it, has been demonstrated through the years in a number of studies that clearly show citizens’ lack of political knowledge (Lazarsfeld et al. 1954; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991; Gidengil et al. 2004; Fournier 2002; Neuman 1986; Graber 1988; Smith 1989). Citizens do not act as prescribed by normative theory.

The paucity of political knowledge can be attributed to people’s limited interest, time and capacity to acquire and process information and, as some scholars suggest, a new citizenship model is therefore necessary (Graber 1988, 2001; Zaller 2003; Neuman 1986; Schudson 1998; Lodge et al. 1995). Schudson was the first to advocate for a rethinking of the informed citizen ideal on the grounds of the unreasonable demands it made on citizens (Schudson 1998). Recognizing that most citizens are not interested in political matters, he put forward the idea of the “monitorial citizen” that scans his environment in order to be sufficiently informed and does not bother with acquiring detailed and complex information on every political issue facing society (Schudson 1998; Gidengil; et al. 2004; Fournier 2004).
A number of scholars agreed with the assessment underlying the new ideal: citizens lead busy lives, have a number of obligations which makes it difficult for them to attend to and process the flood of information published and broadcasted daily (Graber 1988, 2001; Zaller 1999, 2003; Patterson and Seib 2005; Schumpeter 1952; Gans 2003; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). They therefore select the information that they will absorb by carefully weighing the costs of processing it on the basis of time and effort that this will necessitate, as evidenced in Graber’s panel study, and will be driven by their interest to acquire information that they deem to be useful in their daily lives (Graber 1988; Gans 2003; Zaller 1999). Citizens will scan their environment in order to get a very general idea of the issues that are not salient in their lives and will monitor for exceptional events that warrant their full attention (Graber 1988, 2001; Gans 2003; Zaller 2003; Schudson 1998). Individuals resort to the online model of information processing: the essence of the information is extracted and integrated into a “running tally” while most of the details are discarded (Lodge et al. 1995; Graber 2001). The tally is then updated when citizens are exposed to new information. They are said to monitor the news or as Herbert Simon argued, to “satisfice” rather than “optimize” when they are processing information (Graber 1988; Schudson 1988; Zaller 2003; Simon 1967). This behavior is thus close to what Downs deemed to be rational: citizens are busy and know that, as individual voters, they are unlikely to have an impact on electoral outcomes. Consequently, they decide to minimize their involvement and to acquire only as little information as necessary in order to make their choices (Downs 1957; Zaller 1999; Graber 1988).

Measured against the ideal of the informed citizenry put forward during the Progressive Era, mass media is widely perceived as performing its democratic functions rather poorly
(Graber 2003). However, this new perspective on citizenship should lower the expectations of media performance. Like Schumpeter before him, Dahl clearly states that it is no longer required to be perfectly well informed about every major political issue, but to be “attentive” (Dahl 1989). Consequently, the demands made on the press should be less stringent. It is not asked to provide detailed information on public affairs, but to cover the most important issues adequately\(^1\). It seems possible for mass media to provide at least a basic amount of information on government activities, to present different viewpoints on contentious issues, and to approach the most important government policies with critical consideration. Whether this exists in Quebec and in British Columbia is the subject of the section that follows.

Two Expository Analyses:

1. Quebec Media Coverage of the Charest Government

The first case study will assess if the Quebec media performed its information and watchdog functions during the first three years of the Quebec Liberal Government. Our narrow question here is: To what extent did Quebec media monitor the actions of the Liberal Government? However, we have to begin with a question that is somewhat broader: If mass media are acting as a Fourth Estate, critically monitoring governments,

\(^1\) Zaller (2003) has responded to joint concerns of media and citizen limitations by proposing a new “Burglar Alarm” standard, where mass media at aim to grab the attention of monitorial citizens by covering the most important issues “by means of coverage that is intensely focused, dramatic, and entertaining” (122). This new perspective on media coverage is, however, not evaluated in this study.
what should the resulting content look like? That is, what is the empirical test for the existence of a media acting as a Fourth Estate?

Broadly speaking, the work discussed above suggests that (A) mass media should devote a considerable amount of attention to government activities, and that (B) reportage should be thorough, accurate, and critical. The first of these propositions is relatively easily examined. Admittedly, we have no set goal for what exactly is ‘enough’ coverage – we do not know whether there should be one, two, or eighteen articles per day on public affairs. But we can nevertheless look at the overall volume of coverage and assess whether there seems to be quite a little, quite a lot, or somewhere in between\(^1\).

The second proposition is considerably more difficult to assess. A thorough content analysis could provide some information on how critical coverage is, perhaps, though as we shall see such an analysis is not possible here. Even so, an objective assessment of whether content is sufficiently informative, accurate and critical seems a rather tall order: there are again no clear benchmarks against which to measure press coverage. I try to measure the extent to which articles are informative in the second case study; here, data restrictions mean we have to concentrate on attentiveness (volume of coverage) rather than content (amount of contextual information, tone and quality of coverage).

Expectations A and B reflect the news media’s information function as intended in democratic theory. Work on media as a Fourth Estate suggests a further expectation: (C) mass media should devote particular attention to monitoring those policies that were critical in getting the party elected to Government. This presumably is what is required

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\(^1\) This theoretical section, and part of the Quebec analysis, draws from previous work by Boutin-Wilkins and Soroka (forthcoming).
in order to enhance citizens’ capacity to hold governments accountable. It is relatively easily tested: media coverage during a Government’s term in office should pay ongoing attention to those issues that were central in the party program and the preceding election campaign.

For the first case study, I use a content analysis of Quebec newspapers to assess the extent to which Quebec media (1) provide a sufficient volume of news about the provincial government, and (2) devote ongoing attention to those issues critical in getting the Charest Government elected. The latter requires that I first consider the Liberal Party’s promises during the 2003 campaign. I do so in the section that follows.

**Promises**

I identify five major policy initiatives proposed by the Liberal Party during the election campaign. The Liberal Party platform, *Un gouvernement aux services des Québécois*, identified two main issues: healthcare and education. Here, the Liberal Party promised to reinvest in healthcare and education systems, providing both better care to patients, and better guidance to students. Both promises included a wide array of specific policy proposals, each of which we track in media content below.

The party also promised that Quebeckers would pay in average 27% less tax five years after the election. This promise figured prominently in the party platform, and was repeated by candidates throughout the campaign. Two other policy issues, not in the party platform, nevertheless became central in the campaign: the Province’s fiscal
imbalance, and municipal de-mergers. Charest’s party indicated that it intended to solve the fiscal imbalance issue with the federal government – that is, sort out the problem of provincial deficits that were regarded principally as the product of miserly federal government transfers. The Party also proposed allowing ‘de-merging’ of the newly formed (that is, merged, and much-reviled) municipalities. (The Liberal party made clear that it supported the new municipalities, but also promised to present a bill providing the framework for the de-merging process in the National Assembly.)

There were many other less prominent promises–as there are in most election campaigns–and we include these in forthcoming analyses, but the five principal issues outlined here take up the bulk of the discussion that follows. They also inform our expectations regarding what media should in principle be covering in the post-campaign period. If Quebec media act in a way that enhances citizens’ capacity to hold the Charest government accountable, we should see regular coverage of these five issues over the last 37 months.

**Coverage**

For the first case study, we rely here on a content analysis of coverage of the Charest Government in four major Quebec newspapers, *La Presse, Le Soleil, Le Devoir* and *The Montreal Gazette*. Content is derived from two full-text search indices: *Virtual News Library* for the francophone newspapers, and *Canadian Newsstand* for *The Gazette*. The French-language index is very limited, and does not allow us to capture full-text for any volume of articles. We are accordingly quite limited in our content analysis, and rely on
a battery of keyword searches, capturing the volume – but not the tone – of coverage of the Charest Government, coupled with the campaign issues listed above, monthly, during and since the 2003 election campaign. The various keywords used in each search are listed in the Appendix.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 presents monthly coverage of the Liberal Party’s five principle issues: healthcare, education, cutting taxes, the de-merger of municipal governments, and efforts to solve the Province’s fiscal imbalance. The top panel shows that coverage of all these issues is to a certain extent seasonal: during the summer months, and winter holidays, there is less coverage of the Quebec Government. This is of course commonsensical: when the Government is not in session, there is less to report on.

More substantively, the top panel shows the relative salience of campaign promises shifting over time, roughly in line with what we know about the past two years of Quebec politics. Coverage of healthcare increases in December 2003, when healthcare bills are voted on at the National Assembly, peaks in September 2004 at the time of the First Minister’s conference on health care and increases again in February 2006, when Jean Charest and his health minister, Philippe Couillard, presented the government’s response to the Chaoulli ruling. Coverage of education peaks in March 2005, motivated mainly by student strikes. Coverage of taxes peaks at the same time, when the Charest Government includes limited tax cuts in its budget. This is not the only time that we see coverage of taxes, however – evidence, perhaps, that media covered the topic both when the Government was and was not fulfilling its promise. Certainly, the government was saying
relatively little about tax cuts through 2003 and 2004, but media nevertheless showed some interest in the topic. Coverage of fiscal imbalance peaks in January 2006, motivated by the election of a Conservative government that had made clear its willingness to provide solutions to the province’s fiscal imbalance during the electoral campaign.

The prominence of de-mergers over all other issues in the first part of the mandate is apparent in the top panel of Figure 1, but is perhaps even clearer in the second panel, which shows the cumulative coverage of the five issues over the past three years. Coverage of de-mergers peaks early after the election, when the bill on de-mergers is presented in June 2003. It increases again when debates on the bill are held at the National Assembly in the fall of 2003. And the topic continues to overwhelm all others until July 2004, a month after the referenda on de-mergers are held.

[Tables 1, 2 and 3 about here]

The significance of de-mergers is also apparent in Tables 1, 2 and 3, providing raw figures for coverage of all issues tracked in our study. Table 1 includes all newspapers, separated into campaign and term (post-campaign) coverage. Table 2 shows precampaign coverage, by newspaper, for all major issues while Table 3 looks at postcampaign coverage. De-mergers clearly top the list for campaign-period coverage in all newspapers while they get less attention in all newspapers except the Gazette during the term since the issue gets resolved with the de-mergers of some municipalities. It is both notable and predicable that de-mergers are particularly prominent in the English-language Gazette, whose readership will to a larger extent reside in anti-merger municipalities.
That is the recent history of the Quebec Government, as captured in media content. What of our expectations of an informative and critical media? Over the 1144 days captured in our analysis, 5567 articles were published dealing with the Charest Government’s five major policy proposals. That amounts to an average of 1392 articles in each newspaper – that is, about 1.2 articles per day, in each newspaper, on these five policy domains. If we expand our sample to include all articles captured on any campaign promise (see Table 1), then there has been 9999 articles – 2.19 policy-relevant articles per day in each newspaper.¹ This seems like quite a reasonable volume of coverage, actually, well above our initial expectations. Of course, we have no sense here for the quality of coverage, and even a brief mention of a policy will mean the article is captured in our analysis. Nevertheless, the overall volume of coverage here suggests that Quebec newspapers may do quite a reasonable job of providing citizens with information about their provincial government.

Does this coverage track those issues most important in the Liberal Government’s election campaign? Generally speaking, yes. Figure 1 shows a reasonable volume of coverage of the five issues we identify. Table 1 compares coverage in the campaign with that after the campaign, and suggests considerable correspondence as well. There are notable differences across newspapers, however. The overall differences between the Gazette and the Francophone newspapers are striking, especially during the campaign period: the Gazette focuses more narrowly on de-mergers (43.5%) and health care (21.3%) while the Francophone newspapers allocate attention more evenly across five or six top issues and are thus better informing citizens. These differences in coverage are

¹ This is a conservative estimate, as it is based on seven-day weeks, and Le Devoir has no Sunday edition.
less important during the term, presumably because the de-merging process has allowed the *Gazette* to focus more extensively on other issues and to expand its agenda. Although the Francophone newspapers provide coverage of the five issues that were critical in getting the Liberal Party elected, some differences in attentiveness can be identified. *Le Devoir* focuses a little more on *réingénierie*, a general topic covering a variety of administrative changes that emerged in Liberal Party parlance after the campaign, and gives less attention to de-mergers and tax cuts than other newspapers. *La Presse*, the largest newspaper in our sample, with the widest and most diverse Quebec circulation, provides coverage that seems to best reflect the allocation of attentiveness that we would have expected – the papers devotes a considerable amount of coverage to each of the five major campaign promises. Probably influenced by its geographical position in Quebec’s capital, *Le Soleil* tends to focus on public administration issues (*réingénierie, conseil de la fédération, déséquilibre fiscal*).

### 2. British Columbia and National Media Coverage of the Citizens’ Assembly and STV

The second case study will closely consider if national and British Columbia newspapers are providing sufficient information on the Citizens’ Assembly and its proposed electoral system, and acting as a public deliberation platform. Our narrow question here is: To what extent did B.C. and national media coverage provide information on the process of electoral reform set up by the provincial government? Additionally: To what extent did they provide a platform for public deliberation? Again, it is first necessary to consider how media content should look if it is to act as demanded by democratic theory.
The first two propositions are taken from the first case study: it is suggested that (A) *mass media should devote a considerable amount of attention to government activities*, and that (B) *reportage should be thorough, accurate, and critical*. The second proposition, however, can be assessed in this case study. I will evaluate the amount of detailed information about the electoral reform process provided in the articles, in addition to the tone and quality of coverage.

Moreover, two other propositions are made to test mass media’s public deliberation function. According to democratic theory, news media should provide multiple, contrasting perspectives and viewpoints on issues facing society, and thus provide a forum for public deliberation (Just et al. 1996; Baker 1998; Curran 2005). Moreover, it has been suggested that this diversity should also be present in opinion pieces and letters to the editor: the news media’s editorial stand should not limit the presentation of differing arguments or ideas (Page 1996). The final expectations are that: (D) *mass media should present a variety of viewpoints on important issues of the day* and (E) *should foster the competition of ideas in its opinion pages and letters to the editor*.

The second case study will allow us to consider if national and British Columbia media (1) provide enough information about the Citizens’ Assembly and the single transferable vote system, (2) present information in a manner that will lead to greater comprehension, (3) provide a variety of viewpoints, and (4) foster the competition of ideas in its opinion pages. This case study calls for a brief overview of the Citizens’ Assembly and the electoral system it recommended: the single transferable vote system.
Citizens’ Assembly and STV

British Columbia’s Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform began its work in January 2004 with an educational phase meant to help members learn about the various electoral systems and make an informed decision about the electoral system that would be better suited to British Columbians’ needs (British Columbia Citizen’s Assembly on Electoral Reform 2004). This constituted, in very general terms, the Assembly’s mandate. Over the course of the year, Assembly members learned more about different voting systems, heard and read citizens’ presentations and submissions on the topic and deliberated amongst themselves to first decide if an electoral change was necessary, and then to come up with a better electoral system for British Columbia, namely single transferable vote system\(^1\). The proposed change of electoral system was in turn put on a referendum ballot, to require an approval by 60% of the voting population, and receive a minimum of 50% of cast ballots in at least 48 of the 79 constituencies in order to become effective. When it narrowly missed the first requirement in the May 17\(^{th}\) 2005 referendum, the premier Gordon Campbell decided to put the question on the ballot again in the next provincial general election on May 12\(^{th}\) 2009\(^2\).

The Assembly had different characteristics and attributes, four of which are here deemed important in order to understand this peculiar democratic process. First, the Citizens’ Assembly was representative of the B.C. population. The rigorous selection process applied this principle by picking from the voters’ list two citizens –one male, one female-

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\(^1\) The Citizens’ Assembly customized their own version of single transferable vote system - named BC-STV- in order to take into account British Columbia’s specificity. However, the term STV will be used throughout this paper.

\(^2\) STV had 57.7% of the total vote and received a majority in 77 out of the 79 electoral districts.
from each provincial riding, in addition to two aboriginal citizens. Second, even if it was created by the government and that it had to eventually report to the executive (it had to submit a final report) the Assembly’s work was to be completely free of any governmental interference. Third, the Assembly was seen as competent and therefore able to fulfill its mandate. Finally, it was considered as inherently democratic: it offered normal citizens the chance to deliberate and make a decision on an important policy issue. These four characteristics constitute our expectations of what the B.C. and the national press should focus on during the Assembly’s mandate in order to inform citizens. They should also focus on the different electoral systems reviewed by the Citizens’ Assembly. The current system, single-member plurality or first-past-the post (FPTP), “pure” proportional system, the mixed member plurality system (MMP), and majority systems should therefore be mentioned in the press.

Inevitably mass media should also be covering the single transferable vote system (STV), explain in some detail how it works as well as present some of its characteristics and potential outcomes. The first expectation is that the press will inform citizens on the workings of this particular electoral system: the fact that they will have to rank candidates, and that their vote can be transferred if their “favourite” is not elected or has enough votes to be elected. Characteristics were mostly presented as being either positive or negative. Achieving greater proportionality was the Assembly’s first concern in choosing an electoral system better suited the B.C.’s needs and one of the main reasons why they decide to recommend STV. The fact that this electoral system would ensure that every votes count and would therefore be more representative constitutes the first characteristic that should be mentioned by the press. STV is also said to allow for greater
choice; citizens can choose between candidates and parties. Furthermore, it is said to ensure for better local representation since ridings are bigger and more than one MLA represents it. This in turn can lead to less party politics, in the sense that candidates have an incentive to better represent their constituencies and not simply be their party’s spokesperson in the riding. One possible outcome of this electoral system, the election of a coalition government, is also presented by some as a positive characteristic. The electoral system is also perceived as making it easier for smaller parties and independents to get elected and could also foster the greater representation of minorities and women in the Legislature. The media should normally inform citizens on these seven different STV traits in order to allow them to make an informed choice in the referendum.

Five negative traits should also inform our expectation of what media coverage should look like in British Columbia and to a certain extent, nationally. First, the single-transferable vote system’s inherent complexity should get some media attention. Due to the large ridings represented by more than one MLA, it could become difficult to hold politicians accountable for their actions. Certain characteristics can be deemed as negative as well as positive. Some critics see the potential formation of coalition or minority governments in a negative light because it could lead to greater political instability. The election of smaller parties to the Legislature is also said to foster this instability. Finally, this candidate-centered electoral system can weaken political parties and diminish their representative function. The media should cover these negative characteristics and outcomes as well as the more positive ones in order to present citizens with contextual information on this electoral system and present a variety of viewpoints that will help them make an informed decision. If British Columbia and national press
acts as demanded by democratic theory, it should be possible to see (1) regular coverage of the Citizens’ Assembly different attributes; and (2) STV’s various characteristics in respectively the ten months it took the Assembly to come to a final conclusion, in the seven months between that time and the referendum.

**Coverage**

For the second case study, we rely on a content analysis of coverage of British Columbia’s Citizens’ Assembly and of the electoral system they proposed, single transferable vote, in three major British Columbia newspapers, the *Vancouver Sun*, *Vancouver Province* and the *Victoria Times-Colonist*, in two smaller, regional papers, the *Kamloops Daily News* and the *Prince George Citizen*, and in Canada’s two national newspapers, the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*\(^1\). Two different full-text search indices were used for this case study: *Canadian Newsstand* captured articles from British Columbia newspapers, while *Factiva* was used to access national newspapers’ content.

A thorough content analysis allows us to clearly assess the quality of the coverage of the Citizens’ Assembly and STV. A team of four coders content-analyzed articles covering the beginnings of the Assembly’s work in January 2004 to the end of May 2005, right after the referendum on electoral change was held. All articles were coded for the amount of contextual information they provided, their tone and quality of information about both the Citizens’ Assembly and STV. Articles were first coded for mentions of the Assembly

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\(^1\) According to circulation data from the Canadian Newspapers Association dated March 2005, the *Vancouver Sun* has the widest circulation in British Columbia. The *Vancouver Province* and the *Victoria Times-Colonist* come in second and third, while the *Prince George Citizen* and the *Kamloops Daily News* are sixth and seventh in terms of provincial newspapers’ circulation.
and of its mandate - studying electoral systems and proposing or not an electoral change. Coders then considered if the articles mentioned the Assembly’s attributes, assessed the articles’ tone on the Assembly and made a judgment on the quality of information they provided. The same coding process went on for STV: articles were coded for mention of STV, for providing basic information on how it works, for discussing the system’s positive and negative traits, and for tone and quality of information. Finally, mentions of other electoral systems and of the different stakeholders involved in the process of electoral change were also coded.

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 presents the monthly coverage of the Citizens’ Assembly and the single-transferable vote in seven newspapers. The top panel indicates that national and British Columbia newspapers paid at first little attention to the workings of the Assembly. The learning and public hearings phases which took place between January and June 2004 did not foster the press’ interest: only about 17 articles were published on the topic monthly. Unsurprisingly, coverage decreases during the summer months as the Assembly suspends its activities. However, media attention is shown to intensify in September 2004, when the Assembly enters its deliberation phase and members decide to recommend an electoral change and consider what electoral system would better suit British Columbians’ needs. Coverage first peaks in October and November, motivated by the Assembly reaching its final decision and recommending the switch from first-past-the-post to single-transferable vote system. Media attention appears to have been sparked by the fast approaching referendum on electoral change: the topic –more specifically STV-
gains more prominence in the news media in the months leading up to the May 17th referendum, with 41 articles published in March 2005, 77 in April, and 309 in May.

This prominence is made clear in the bottom panel which shows the relative salience of Assembly and STV mentions shifting over time. Starting from January 2005, STV appears to be clearly driving the coverage of the process of electoral change. This shift in media attention takes place in November 2004, a month after the Assembly reached its final decision and recommended STV. Up until then, media coverage focuses more extensively on the Assembly’s work. Indeed, STV only starts to get noticed in the BC and national press in September 2004, when the Assembly considers it more seriously in its deliberation phase. However, the impending referendum on electoral change ignites the press’ interest which starts to more narrowly focus on STV.

[Table 4 about here]

The increased media attention is apparent in Table 4, presenting an overview of the Citizens’ Assembly and STV coverage by newspaper and separated into decision (January to October 2004) and referendum (November 2004 to May 2005) periods. In addition to the number of articles and the proportion of news articles, editorials, opinion pieces and letters to the editors published in each newspaper in these two periods, Table 4 provides the tone used to talk about the Citizens’ Assembly and STV. British Columbia and national papers start to pay closer attention to the process of electoral change once it became clear that a referendum would be held and that STV would be the chosen system. Coverage of electoral reform increases in all the newspapers in our sample during the
referendum period. As can be expected, the two largest British Columbia newspapers – the Vancouver Sun and the Victoria Times-Colonist - provided more coverage of the process of electoral reform during the referendum period. However, the Vancouver Province - the third largest B.C. newspaper - gave much less attention to this process than both regional papers. In the national press, the National Post is noticeably less interested in covering electoral reform in British Columbia than the Globe and Mail.

Coverage is sparse in all newspapers during the decision period, except in the Vancouver Sun, B.C.’s largest newspaper, as the 91 articles it published during this period indicate. The national press pays little attention to the Citizens’ Assembly and STV. However, it can be argued that this provincial matter became newsworthy only in the months leading up to the referendum. Although they provide more coverage that the national papers, the Times-Colonist and the Province devote little attention to electoral reform. Surprisingly, the Prince George Citizen, a smaller regional paper, more extensively covers the Citizens’ Assembly and STV during this period than both the Province and the Times-Colonist.

The positive image that newspapers in our sample have of the Citizens’ Assembly is also apparent in Table 4. Coverage focuses almost solely on the Assembly during the decision period and is overwhelmingly positive; most newspapers are shown to appreciate this new democratic process. However, it is interesting to note that the Assembly receives its most negative coverage in the only region that defeated the electoral system it
recommended. Although the Kamloops Daily News presented STV in a very positive light during the referendum period (see below), it is possible to suggest that its negative coverage of the Citizens’ Assembly could have influenced how the readers came to consider STV.

While most newspapers tend to present the Citizens’ Assembly in a positive light, they are more balanced in their coverage of STV, an admittedly more controversial issue. Both national newspapers, the Vancouver Sun and the Times-Colonist do not take a clear stand on this issue: the proportions of negative and positive articles published on the topic are similar. Regional newspapers, on the other hand, have a more favourable impression of STV. Looking at the referendum period only, net positive assessments of the proposed electoral system can be found in the Prince George Citizen (18%), the Province (15%) and the Kamloops Daily News (28%). It appears that the tone of the coverage did not reflect the outcome of the referendum in the Kamloops region.

The first question that needs to be asked about the coverage of the process of electoral reform is: Is there sufficient information about the Assembly and STV in the press? Both Figure 2 and Table 4 show a reasonable coverage of the single transferable vote system and also indicate that most newspapers refrain from taking a clear stand on it thereby providing a more balanced coverage of the issue. Media attentiveness significantly increases during the referendum period to eventually reach impressive levels in April and May 2005. Coverage of the Assembly’s work is however less important. Apart from the Vancouver Sun—which had a steady coverage of the Assembly during the decision

1 The two electoral districts in Kamloops narrowly missed the 50% mark and lowered the proportion of provincial support for the recommendation. STV received 49.54% of the vote in Kamloops and 49.40% in Kamloops-North Thompson (see Elections BC final Referendum results).
period—newspapers are not very attentive to this new form of public consultation. Although, more extensive coverage of the Citizens’ Assembly could have been considered necessary in large provincial newspapers like the Times-Colonist and the Province, it can be argued that information on STV, about how it works and its characteristics constitutes what citizens really need in order to make an informed decision in the referendum. Consequently, most newspapers’ intense media attention during the referendum period can be seen as an indicator of sufficient coverage. However, the quality of STV coverage and the amount of contextual information it offers also need to be assessed in order to know if the information provided is actually useful to citizens.

[Figure 3 about here]

Figure 3 allows us to more closely look at the amount of contextual information about the Citizens’ Assembly provided in the articles published during the decision period. The top panel presents the proportion of articles explaining the Assembly’s mandate—examining electoral systems and recommending or not a new system for B.C.—by newspaper. At first glance, it is apparent that all newspapers, and especially the national press, provide information about the Assembly’s mandate. All articles mentioning the Assembly published in the Globe and Post’s pages describe its mandate. Among B.C. newspapers, the proportion of articles explaining the Assembly’s mandate varies between 79% in the Prince George Citizen and 54% in the Province.

The provincial press however does not provide a lot more detailed information on the Assembly’s work. The bottom panel of Figure 3, which presents the proportion of articles referring to four different characteristics of the Assembly in each newspaper during the
decision period, makes clear that these attributes only get infrequently mentioned by the B.C. press. However, it appears that the Assembly’s representativeness is the most frequently covered attributes: it gets mentioned in one in four articles published in the *Vancouver Sun* and in the *Prince George Citizen* and in close to two in five articles in the *Kamloops Daily News*. The Assembly’s independence from the B.C. government and democratic process receive some minimal attention from the provincial press, while its competence almost fails to get noticed.

The proportions of articles mentioning these characteristics and therefore providing more detailed information about the Assembly are again highest for the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*. Their limited coverage of the decision period explains their good performance. Even if the B.C. press does not provide extensive information on the Citizens’ Assembly, it is still possible to denote that the *Vancouver Sun*, the *Kamloops Daily News*, and the *Prince George Citizen* perform better on the provision of contextual information than both the *Times-Colonist* and the *Province*.

[Figure 4 about here]

The good performance of the *Vancouver Sun*, the *Kamloops Daily News*, and the *Prince George Citizen* in the provision of contextual information can also be assessed in Figure 4. This presents the proportions of articles mentioning the different electoral system that were studied and considered by the Citizens’ Assembly during the decision phase in each newspaper. Even if these newspapers focus more narrowly on the current electoral system, they still frequently mention MMP- STV’s main contender in the final
deliberation process- and PR systems. The *National Post* also frequently mentions these electoral systems and the majority system, another electoral system studied by the Citizens’ Assembly, in its relatively sparse coverage of the decision period. The *Globe*, on the other hand, does not perform as well on this measure: it solely focuses on FPTP and PR systems and completely fails to cover MMP, a much discussed electoral system.

[Figure 5 about here]

Figure 5 allows us to more closely look at the amount of contextual information about STV provided in the articles published during the referendum period. It presents the proportions of articles that provide some information about how STV works, like mentions of the preferential ballot, by newspaper. Provincial newspapers perform reasonably well on this measure. The *Vancouver Sun* and the *Times-Colonist*, which most extensively cover STV during this period, explain STV in about one in four articles published in this seven-month period. Regional papers, which have a smaller news hole to fill but still manage to focus on STV, also explain the electoral system. Readers of the *Kamloops Daily News* receive some information about how STV works in every four articles they read on the topic, while those reading the *Prince George Citizen* get this information in more than every three articles they read. The *National Post* appears to perform better than the *Globe and Mail* on this measure, with more than one in two published articles explaining STV. However, the *Globe*’s more constant STV coverage and important proportion of articles explaining the electoral system puts it ahead of the *Post* on this measure.
The provision of information about STV during the referendum period can be further assessed in Figure 6. It presents the proportions of articles providing information on the electoral system: Figure 6a looks at the coverage of positive traits while Figure 6b focuses on the negative traits associated with this electoral system. Overall, it appears that proportionality is by far the most often mentioned positive trait in the press: close to three in five articles published in the *Province* and the *Daily News* refer to it, while this proportion drops to close to two in five in both the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Prince George Citizen*. Once again, the *Vancouver Sun* and the two regional newspapers are performing better on the provision of information about the single-transferable vote system. These newspapers provide important information about the workings of this electoral system and about both its potential positive and negative consequences. Even though they focus more specifically on certain aspects of STV, these newspapers cover the majority of STV’s positive and negative traits thereby providing a variety of viewpoints on this electoral system. These three newspapers are indeed shown to insist more than any other provincial newspaper on the possibility that STV will reduce party politics and will allow for greater choice. The *Times-Colonist* also performs relatively well in the provision of information about STV but is shown to focus more intensely on negative traits and to neglect positive traits. A similar observation can be made about the *Province’s* STV coverage. Both these newspapers therefore do not present diverse viewpoints on STV, making it difficult for citizens to get a clear picture of the referendum debate and to make an informed decision. National newspapers on the other hand offer information on the different aspects of this electoral system. But the *Globe and Mail* can be arguably said to
perform better on this measure since it covers STV much more extensively than the Post during the referendum period.

The second question that needs to be asked in this study is: Is the information provided thorough and therefore useful to citizens? Figures 3 to 6 indicate that most newspapers perform well in terms of the provision of contextual information. The Assembly’s mandate is explained in an important proportion of articles published during the decision period and the different electoral systems studied by the Assembly are mentioned reasonably often. More importantly, information about the workings of STV and its many different characteristics and potential outcomes (though perhaps not widely available) is still frequently provided. There are however differences in provision of contextual information among the different newspapers in the sample. The Vancouver Sun, Prince George Citizen and Kamloops Daily News emerge as the provincial newspapers providing more detailed information about the electoral reform process and thereby allowing their readers to make an informed decision in the referendum. Both national newspapers are shown to perform well on this measure, but with its more extensive coverage of the referendum period, the Globe and Mail can be said to perform better than the Post.

[Table 5 about here]

But even if these newspapers provide what appears to be sufficient information, the quality of this information remains unclear. The coding scheme which asked coders to make a qualitative judgment on the information provided in the articles allows us to answer this question. They were asked to code as “high quality” any article that
mentioned most of the following: the Assembly’s selection process, its mandate, its
different phases (educational, public hearings, public deliberation) and the referendum.
Articles on STV had to explain how the system works (mentions of either ordered list,
transfer of vote or multi-member ridings) and mention three or more STV traits in order
to be coded as “high quality”. Table 5 presents the proportion of articles on the Citizens’
Assembly and on STV with low and high quality of information, during the decision and
referendum periods respectively. Both panels first make clear that all newspapers in our
sample did not fare very well on this measure. Newspapers overwhelmingly provide low
quality coverage on both the Citizens’ Assembly (except for the National Post) and STV.
The top panel however indicates that among provincial newspapers, the Sun (proportion
of high quality articles: 29.1%), the Daily News (36.4%) and the Citizen (40%) perform
significantly better than the Times-Colonist or the Province in the quality of information
about the Citizens’ Assembly. Among national newspapers, the Post provides a greater
proportion of high quality coverage than the Globe and Mail.

Similar observations can be made in the bottom panel. Regional newspapers are again
shown to perform better than other provincial newspapers. Almost one in four articles
mentioning STV—published in the Daily News and the Citizen during the referendum
period—provides high quality information. This is partly a function of these newspapers’
more limited STV coverage during this period. The Sun and the Times-Colonist, which
have larger news holes to fill, have a lower proportion of articles that are deemed to be of
high quality. Due to its limited STV coverage the National Post has a higher proportion
of high quality articles about STV than the Globe and Mail.
An overwhelming proportion of the Citizens’ Assembly and STV coverage falls in the “low quality” category. While it is possible to argue that the measures were far too stringent, it remains that these standards at first appeared reasonable and consistent if citizens were to be able to gather the necessary information on both the Assembly and the chosen electoral system. Consequently, the press can be described as falling short of the informed citizen ideal put forward during the Progressive Era. However, while the information provided is not perfectly complete, previous findings indicate that among the provincial newspapers, the Daily News, the Citizen and the Vancouver Sun provide more contextual information on the Assembly and the single transferable vote system compared to the other newspapers.

[Table 6 about here]

While Figure 6 allowed us to test the first part of the civic forum argument, Table 6 offers the possibility of testing its second component: the diversity of viewpoints presented in the opinion and letters pages. The top panel presents the proportion of articles on the Citizens’ Assembly published during the decision period by tone, article type and newspaper, while the bottom panel presents the proportion of articles about STV during the referendum period. Data in the top panel indicates that opinion pieces and letters to the editor discussing the Citizens’ Assembly tend to reflect the newspaper’s editorial stand on the issue and therefore have an overwhelmingly favourable view of the Assembly.

Most newspapers however come closer to providing the platform for public deliberation demanded by democratic theory when discussing STV. Even if they take clear editorial
stand for or against STV, the *Times-Colonist, Globe and Mail*, and *Vancouver Sun* present both positive and negative perspectives on STV in their opinion pages. While it is true that a certain bias is still present in the selection of opinion pieces, it remains that these newspapers attempt to present differing viewpoints in these pages. The same observation can be made about letters to the editor concerning STV: apart from the regional newspapers which have a clearly more important proportion of positive letters, newspapers provide a certain balance in the letters that they pick.

The final question that is asked in this study is: Does the news media present a variety of viewpoints on the topic of electoral reform? The conclusion is that only a few newspapers were shown to perform as demanded by both components of this democratic function. Figure 6 allowed us to test the first part of the civic forum argument and made apparent that only the *Vancouver Sun, Globe and Mail, Prince George Citizen* and *Kamloops Daily News* substantially cover both positive and negative characteristics of STV in their pages. Table 6 on the other hand indicates that only the *Times-Colonist, Globe and Mail, and Vancouver Sun* can be said to perform this part of their civic forum function adequately. They present conflicting perspectives on STV in their opinion and letter pages which in turn do not simply reflect their editorial stand. However, that diversity of opinion is not present in their coverage of the Citizens’ Assembly which tends to be overwhelmingly positive in tone during the decision period. Presumably, this can be attributed to the little controversy surrounding the Assembly’s work. Contrary to the single transferable system which was both widely criticized as too complex and defended as the panacea to B.C.’s electoral ills, there was greater agreement around the Assembly’s
mandate. This would in turn explain why newspapers in this study did not present more diverse viewpoints on the Assembly in both the opinion and letters pages.

Discussion and Conclusions

Do Quebec media act as a Fourth Estate, providing information on what the government is doing, and critically tracking the Government’s performance on key policy issues? Do British Columbia and national media provide enough complete and balanced information? The tentative conclusion here is yes.

The data from the first case study suggest a considerable amount of coverage of the Charest government. They also indicate that newspapers do pay attention to those issues that most mattered to the Liberal Party’s electoral success. Several caveats are in order. First, while major issues certainly garner media coverage, many other issues do not. Indeed, many of the policies discussed over the course of the 2003 election simply did not appear with any regular frequency in the pages of Quebec newspapers. It is accordingly unlikely that citizens have any sense for what the Government is doing in these domains. That this is true highlights the importance of issue salience in representation and policymaking: citizens are more capable of assessing Government activities in more salient domains (Wlezien 2004); Governments are accordingly more responsive to citizen preferences in this sphere (Pétrry and Bélanger 2005; Soroka 2003; Soroka and Wlezien 2004, 2005). Given that legislators’ attentiveness is necessarily limited, the probability of major policy change is fundamentally linked to relevance of an issue (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). It follows that while citizens may be well-equipped
– and governments may be responsive – in salient policy domains, in many other domains the situation will be quite different. That mass media will tend to concentrate on only the most prominent issues presents a rather difficult dilemma.

It is also true that in this particular case – and perhaps in many others – it is hard to distinguish coverage of salient policy promises per se from media coverage of either controversial issues, as Hutchings and Zaller suggest, or of major events, as Patterson’s work suggests. The difficulty lies of course in the fact that salient policy issues are often related to major events or controversies. This is clearly evident in our data, as issue attentiveness moves with major events (discussed above), and as the most contentious issue – de-mergers – receives the greatest amount of attention. What exactly motivated media attention is consequently rather difficult to discern. That said, even if it is controversy or events that drive coverage, the end result is the same: coverage of salient policy domains. Whether the media are or are not altruistically motivated to cover campaign promises may not really matter.¹

The data from the second case study also indicates that the issue of electoral reform was widely covered by both the provincial and national press. It is however true that STV, a more controversial issue, garnered more coverage than the Citizens’ Assembly. Newspapers provide extensive coverage of the issue that mattered most for citizens thereby helping them make an informed decision on an admittedly complex and brand-new issue. Indeed, some scholars suggest that mass media’s democratic functions are even more essential during public consultations and referendums since citizens usually

¹ It is worth noting that education, a domain in which there was only major event since the election, receives relatively little coverage. Still, the proportion of post-campaign coverage dedicated to education is roughly in line with campaign coverage.
know very little about the issue that is put on the ballot at the beginning of the campaign (Cronin 1989; Mendelssohn and Cutler 2000). The detailed information on the recommended electoral system – and its different characteristics and potential outcomes—that frequently appear in the different newspapers in the sample, indicates that the B.C. and national press are performing this crucial function adequately. The issue of electoral reform did not get lost in the frenzy of electoral coverage, as some scholars suggested, but was widely discussed in the news media (Blais et al. 2005).

Some newspapers are shown to perform exceptionally well on both these measures: they cover electoral reform extensively and provide a sufficient amount of contextual information. The Vancouver Sun frequently presents detailed information on both the Citizens’ Assembly and STV. Surprisingly, regional newspapers perform far better than the Province and the Times-Colonist, two larger provincial newspapers. Even if they usually have fewer resources and less editorial space to discuss electoral reform, these newspapers manage to present a clear and detailed picture of STV, thereby allowing citizens to learn about the recommended system and to make an informed decision in the referendum (Kaniss 1991; Just et al. 1996).

The conclusion is definitely more mixed when it comes to the public deliberation function. Many communication scholars indicate that newspapers can rarely perform this function adequately since they tend to present a “middle-of-the-road coverage” or because their coverage is too influenced by their owners’ perspectives on the issue at hand (Norris 2001; Page 1996; Neuman 1986; Saint-Jean 2002). Accordingly, only two

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1 The referendum on electoral reform was held at the same time as the B.C. general election.
newspapers in the sample can be said to perform this function adequately. And even then, certain caveats are in order. A greater depth of analysis would have been necessary to clearly state that the newspapers did present a diversity of viewpoints in their opinion and letter pages. The second measure considered the tone of opinion pieces and letters to the editors, and contrasted it with each newspaper’s editorial stand on STV when it should ideally have considered the arguments being made in these articles. Analyzing the arguments would have allowed us to clearly see how different and conflicting they are, and indeed, if diverse viewpoints are presented. It would also have allowed us to rule out potential “constructed deliberation”, the appearance of diversity that can be created in those pages by a news editor (Page 1996).

Apart from the public deliberation function, the story here seems relatively positive. This may partly be a consequence of very low expectations—admittedly, most communication scholars have conditioned us to expect relatively little of media content. However, these lower expectations can be said to be in line with what the monitorial citizen requires. Where coverage of the Charest Government and electoral reform is concerned, Quebec, British Columbia, and national media may be doing quite a reasonable job.
Keywords used to generate the data in this paper are as follow:

**Healthcare**

"charest" and "listes d'attente"
"charest" and ("listes d'attente") and ("chirurgies" or "chirurgie")
"charest" and "régies régionales"
"charest" and "soins à domicile"
"charest" and "assurance-médicaments"
"charest" and "politique du médicament"
"charest" and "urgences"
"charest" and ("cliniques privées" or "clinique privée") and ("chirurgies" or "chirurgie")
"charest" and "financement" and ("système de santé" or "soins de santé")
"charest" and "commissaire à la santé"
"charest" and ("embauche" or "recrutement") and ("médecins" or "infirmières")
"charest" and ("fusions" or "fusion") and "établissements de santé"
"charest" and "admissions" and ("soins infirmiers" or "médecine")
"charest" and "santé" and ("accréditation syndicale" or "accréditations syndicales")
"charest" and "waiting lists"
"charest" and ("waiting lists") and ("surger*")
"charest" and "regional health boards"
"charest" and ("homecare" or "home care")
"charest" and "drug insurance"
"charest" and "pharmaceutical policy"
"charest" and "emergency room*"
"charest" and ("private clinic*") and ("surger*")
"charest" and "funding" and "health care"
"charest" and ("health commissioner")
"charest" and ("nurse*" or "doctor*") and ("hiring" or "hire" or "recruit" or "recruiting")
"charest" and ("admission*" or "enrolment") and ("nursing" or "medical")
"charest" and "health" and "bargaining unit*"

It was impossible to capture articles covering the mergers in the healthcare system in the Gazette.

**Education**

"charest" and "aide aux devoirs"
"charest" and "décrochage scolaire"
"charest" and "anglais" and "première année"
"charest" and "gel" and ("frais de scolarité" or "droits de scolarité")
"charest" and "ordre professionnel" and ("enseignant" or "enseignant")
"charest" and "financement" and ("université" or "universités")
"charest" and "Bulletin des écoles"

"charest" and "homework*" and "help"
"charest" and "drop out"
"charest" and "english" and ("grade 1" or "grade one")
"charest" and "freeze" and "tuition"
"charest" and "teacher*" and "professional order"
"charest" and "funding" and "universiti*"
"charest" and "report cards" and "schools"

Other promises
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"charest" and "désequilibre fiscal"
"charest" and ("bureau de négociation sur le déséquilibre fiscal" or "bureau sur le déséquilibre fiscal" or "bureau du déséquilibre fiscal")
"charest" and ("congé parental" or "congés parentaux")
"charest" and "places" and ("garderie" or "garderies")
"charest" and "garderies à 5"
"charest" and ("plan vert" or ("plan" and "développement durable"))
"charest" and "commission" and ("forêt" or "forêts")
"charest" and "article 45"
"charest" and "régions" and "décentralisation"
"charest" and "réingénierie"
"charest" and ("partenariats public-privé" or "partenariat public-privé")
"charest" and "gouvernement en ligne"
"charest" and "conseil de la fédération"
"charest" and ("réforme du mode de scrutin" or "réforme des institutions démocratiques")
"charest" and "logement social or logements sociaux"
"charest" and ("défusion" or "défusions")
"charest" and "no fault"
"charest" and "lutte contre la pauvreté"
"charest" and "programme apport"

"charest" and "tax cut*"
"charest" and "fiscal imbalance"
"charest" and "fiscal imbalance" and "office"
"charest" and "parental leave"
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"charest" and "forest*" and ("inquiry" or "commission")
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"charest" and "re-engineering"
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"charest" and ("online government" or "e-government")
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"charest" and "electoral reform"
"charest" and "social housing"
"charest" and "demerger*"
"charest" and "no fault"
"charest" and "poverty"
"charest" and "parental wage assistance"
Bibliography


### Table 1. Issue Coverage

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**santé**

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**éducation**

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Cells contain percentages of total coverage, with the number of articles in parentheses.