

Experts in the e s
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in E e ti n

nature and discursive use of all types of news sources is an integral part of understanding news reports about parliamentary elections. This article examines the use of news sources in the mainstream television coverage of a Canadian election and considers

Although the “primary definer” view of the role of sources has been a d

gether. When are different types of sources used and under what circumstances
What are the patterns of source use, and how do they fit within these two dominant
theories of sources. Studies of election news discourse have often failed to recognize
the media's role in the process of source selection and use.

Similarly, Gans found that the “unknowns” (protestors, victims, voters, participants in events) appeared in American television news only about one-fifth of the available news time, while “knowns” (the elites, such as politicians and government or institutional officials) made up the remaining four-fifths (Gans, 1979, p. 13). This “hierarchy of access” was supported five years later by a published study on Canadian television news indicating that those who are interviewed most often are male politicians, business leaders, and group spokespeople (Hackett, 1985). However, while a 1991 study of local television coverage (vs. national coverage) upheld the findings that group spokespeople and politicians received the bulk of television coverage (about 45% altogether), ordinary people were still quoted almost 25% of the time (Kane, 1991). Kane further suggested that the slightly

quotes were timed (to the nearest second) to calculate the total amount of source time and the average quote length for each source and each source category. Since the focus of this study was on news stories only, units identified by the coders as feature interviews or panel/roundtable discussions were excluded from the analysis.

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More surprising in this case study is the finding that party leaders accounted for only about half of the quotes from political actors and only about 30% of quotes from the total number of sources. As noted earlier, the previous studies had found that as a representation of news space and focus the leaders accounted for about 60% of all coverage (see, for example, Crete, 1991; Fritzsche & Westall, 1989; Johnston et al., 1992; Soderlund et al., 1984). The dominance of news focus on the leaders certainly remains true of this data. Yet while party leaders were the majority focus of the news accounts, they were not the majority of quoted sources, representing only about one-third of the total source quotes in the election stories. Instead, it is the combined quotes of all "political actors," rather than just the leaders, that accounts for approximately 60% of the source quotes in the coverage. Almost one-third of the quotes from political actors came from other candidates, although only a small number of candidates were repeatedly used by the news media for comments. Thus, while previous research on news focus might suggest leaders are the primary focus, a more precise methodology that takes into account the actual quotes from leaders, as used here, indicates that this tendency for news media/outlets to focus on leaders may have been overstated.

Individuals

Those coded as individuals are listed in the following table.

why the number of vox pop sources far outstrips all other types of individual sources put together.

Representatives and experts

The next two categories

received more than one-quarter of the quotes from representatives, even during election stories.

Public officials were the second-most-common represen

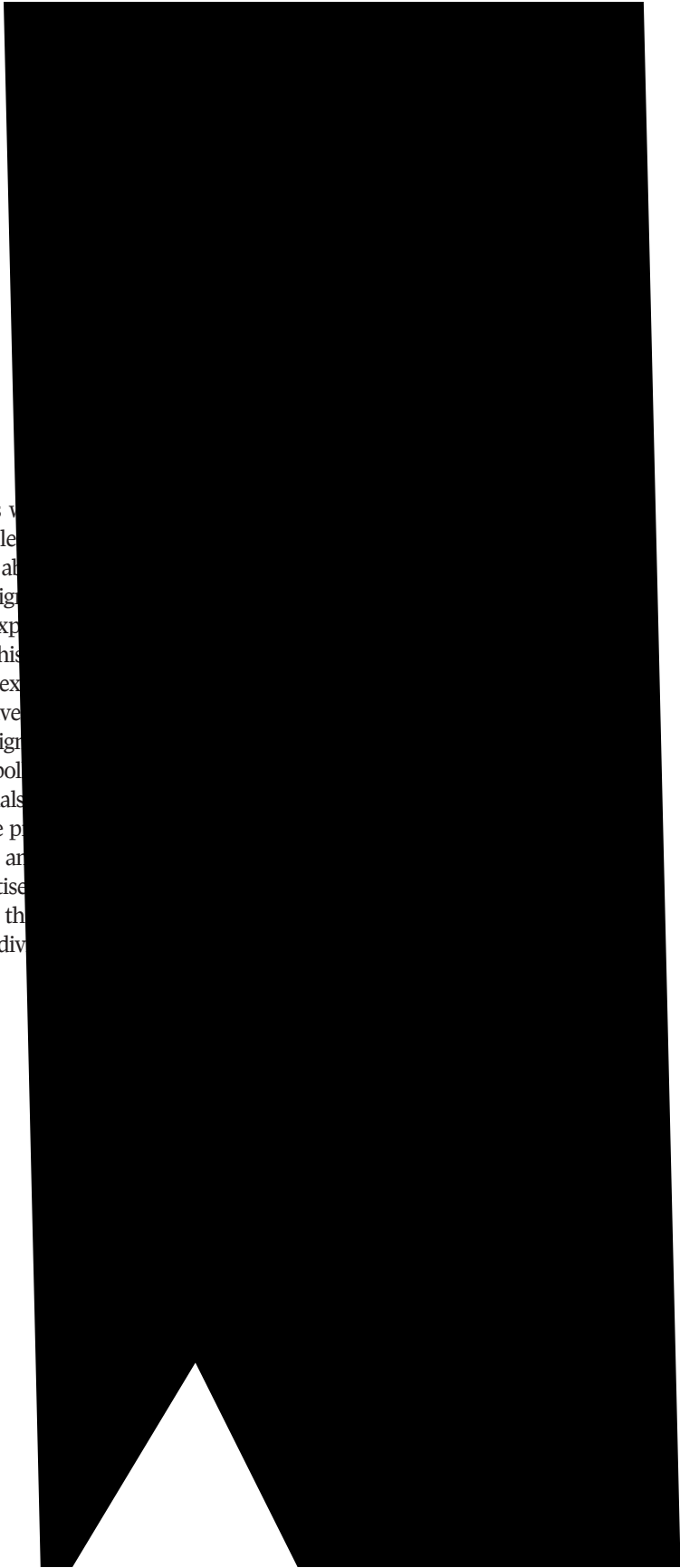
itics were used as sources only 43 times, representing more than half of the experts quoted but only 4 of all the sources quoted in the election news. Therefore, it can be safely concluded that neither *experts* nor *representatives* of organizations oy

journalism” is supported by his findings that “stories with high percentages of time devoted to horse-race themes tended to have short sound bites, while

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stories that were primarily about healthcare (51 sources in total), only two were coded as “experts.” To be fair, there were also a small number of sources from the health profession: doctors, nurses, and union representatives were coded in these stories. However, due to the fact that the nurses were conducting job action at the time due to a breakdown in collective bargaining, these quotes were primarily the result of the labour dispute making it into the election discourse, and consisted of comments about how the nurses’ job actions or bargaining positions would *affect the campaign*, not about the issue of healthcare per se. In addition, within these healthcare stories, almost 60% of the quotes (30) were from political candidates, and a very few (5) were from patients and their families. This suggests that although one of the most prominent issue topics in the election news was healthcare, health stories consisted of the political parties outlining their positions about healthcare or their position on the nursing dispute, but provided very little investigative research into the validity or implications of claims and comments. Few independent researchers, scholars, or practitioners were brought in to discuss the veracity of claims or provide anything more than superficial commentary.

However, and as noted above, although both *experts* and *representatives* were used almost equally as sources, the majority of representatives were used to comment in stories primarily about *policy issues*. Since most of this category was comprised of individuals who represented interest groups, one could presume that their views were representative of their interest group and could not be taken as an “independent” analysis of an issue. This is not to say that the views of interest groups are not valid, only that the news media appear to have relied primarily on “interested” representatives to provide information on issues—representatives who may have their own political agenda in discussing an issue—rather than independent *experts*. Indeed, the relative abandonment of issue discussions altogether, combined with the lack of *expertise* within the limited issue discussions, demonstrates how the television news media prefer to quote from organized interest groups when reporting on policy issues in an election, yet fail to provide information for voters to evaluate the various claims. Ironically, it is the news media who identify the experts as having some claim to greater knowledge of an issue and less of a political or social agenda (except in the obvious case, here, of party pundits). Yet while the claim of an expert’s “objectivity” may itself be suspect, it is noteworthy that the media does not use this expertise as much as they use *representatives* when exploring policy issues.

ources as s m olic re resentations and stor illers

The evidence of this study suggests the need to develop a further understanding of the role of sources in the news media, beyond what the “primary definer” and “political entrepreneur” theories can accommodate. While the “primary definer” thesis sees the media as a “secondary definer” in the discourses of the powerful, and the “political entrepreneur” thesis suggests sources compete for media attention, there is evidence for further complexities to the theories of source use in the news. © 2010 by Sage Publications

quotes and use of source types during elections—leading us to consider adding a much more media-centric theory of source use to the list of possibilities.

For example, we could assume that one type of primary definer in an election study would be political leaders. Yet while 60% of the people quoted in the election news studied here were defined as “political actors,” only about half of the quotes from political actors were from the party leaders. Thus, while party leaders may have been the focus of the majority of news attention, they received significantly less air time than this focus might suggest. Combined with the evidence of an average quote of less than nine seconds from any political actor, the amount of significant information that can be conveyed is clearly restrictive, if not trivial. To be sure, the frequency and length of direct quotes may not indicate the influence of political actors on news discourse as a whole, yet the fact that more than three-quarters of the election stories focused on the campaign rather than policy issues suggests a media fascination with election strategies and activities. Such evidence further reinforces the suggestion that little actual information is translated by political actors during election news coverage. How much of this is due to the actions and speech of political entrepreneurs and how much is due to the choices and conventions of the news organization becomes a question for further investigation.

In addition, the increasing tendency of news coverage to use unaffiliated individuals and “streeters” in election reports indicates a media-centric preference for source types. The individual category accounted for the second-most-frequent use of sources in this election coverage, at 26% frequency. Yet while the overall average length of sound bite for all categories was just under 10 seconds, the average sound bite from the individual category was only about 6 seconds. Such fragments of the pub s

and 42% of the time they were quoted in campaign stories. It appears that when covering issue stories, the news media preferred to quote from interest groups and organizational representatives far more than from experts. Arguably, this tendency in source use on the part of the media provides viewers with knowledge of interest group positions on a policy issue but not necessarily information about the issue itself—and certainly not independent expertise about the policy issue.

Together, the findings in this study point to a much more media-centric view of source use in election news. Political actors and unaffiliated individuals form the largest categories of source use in the news, but both groups are highly mediated by journalistic discourse, as evidenced by the limited length of their quotes. Further, the news topics are dominated by campaign-related stories rather than policy-related stories, suggesting that these sources were used as “symbolic representations” of their role in the election “race” rather than as substantive definers of the news content. It could be argued that political actors and individuals were used primarily as story fillers to pad or punctuate an already framed news story, and experts were sought out by the media to comment on campaign strategy and political marketing rather than policy issues. Thus, as stated earlier, it may be that journalists rely on sources, at least in part, to symbolically (rather than substantively) represent the story they have already chosen to tell. Such a suggestion raises significant questions about the intentions of news organizations and the institutional and social function of the news media in democratic societies. To what extent do the news media themselves become the primary definers of political news? What stories do the news media choose to cover?

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