

Election News Coverage and Entertaining Politics: A content analysis of infotainment characteristics in Canadian newspapers' federal election coverage

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Table of Contents

<u>1. Introduction</u>	p. 1
<u>2. Literature Review</u>	p. 5
2.1 What is “Infotainment”? Historical Origins and Development	p. 7
2.2 Soft News Programming	p. 12
2.3 Traditional News Media	p. 15
2.4 Media Systems & Global Infotainment	p. 19
2.5 Interaction between Trajectories	p. 23
2.6 Studying the Canadian Context	p. 26
<u>3. Methodology & Case Study</u>	p. 28
3.1 Primary Research Questions	p. 30
3.2 Interpretive Method of Analysis	p. 30
3.3 Defining Infotainment: Conceptualisation and Operationalisation	p. 31
3.4 Defining ‘Serious’/Informative News	p. 34
3.5 Overall Infotainment Scale	p. 36
3.6 Infotainment Scale	p. 37
3.7 Case Study & Data Collection Methods	p. 38
3.8 Filtering Criteria	p. 40
3.9 Final Dataset	p. 41
3.10 Hypotheses	p. 41
3.11 Final Note: Limitations of the Methodology	p. 43
<u>4. Results of the Study</u>	p. 47
4.1 Overview of the Main Findings: Infotainment Scale Results	p. 47
4.2 Towards a Qualitative Understanding of Canadian Newspapers’ Infotainment Format	p. 52
4.2.1 Personalisation	p. 52
4.2.1.1 Personalising the Political Context	p. 54
4.2.1.2 Anchoring Interpretation	p. 61
4.2.2 Sensationalisation	p. 65
4.2.2.1 Politics on the Surface	p. 67

4.2.2.2 Sensational Conflict	p. 70
4.2.2.3 Sensational Scandal	p. 76
4.2.2.4 Framing & Priming the ‘Blackface/Brownface’ Scandal	p. 80
4.2.3 Decontextualisation	p. 88
4.2.3.1 Lacking Context	p. 91
4.2.3.2 Opinions & Speculations	p. 93
4.2.3.3 The Fine Line between Reality and Media Reality	p. 98
4.2.3.4 The Strategic Game	p. 101
4.2.4 ‘Serious’/Informative News	p. 106
4.3 Concluding Notes on the Findings	p. 110
<u>5. Discussion & Conclusions</u>	p. 111
5.1 Understanding the Infotainment Format in Canadian Newspapers	p. 111
5.2 Implications of the Findings: Information, Power-Making, and the Citizen	p. 114
5.3 Findings in Comparison to the Infotainment & Media Literature	p. 123
5.4 Conclusions & Areas for Future Research	p. 128
APPENDIX 1: Detailed Coding Dictionary	p. 132
APPENDIX 2: Data Collection Numbers	p. 147
APPENDIX 3: Quantitative Results Table	p. 148
APPENDIX 4: Comparative Examples of Scandal Coverage	p. 150
APPENDIX 5: Infotainment Scale Comparative Examples	p. 154
APPENDIX 6: Cross-Tabs of Decontextualisation Scale with Personalisation & Sensationalisation Scales	p. 160
News Items Cited in this Study	p. 162
Bibliography	p. 168

1. Introduction

“Cynical attributions of candidate motives, relying on polls to advance a campaign story, and employing the language of wars or games in describing the campaign all seem to impede information acquisition by readers. Even when only one of these several elements of game-schematic coverage is employed, a reduction in information retention occurs.”

- Nicholas A. Valentino et al. (2001, p. 105)

“Media politics is the conduct of politics in and by the media . . . in our historical context, politics is primarily media politics. . . . [M]edia politics is, in fact, one major component of a broader form of politics – informational politics, the use of information and information processing as a decisive tool of power-making.”

- Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (2009, pp. 193-97)

“Let the races begin, in all 338 ridings from coast to coast to coast.”

- Brian Platt, *National Post* article, Sept. 11, 2019 (Platt, 11 Sept., 2019)

Our contemporary era is one of rapid digitization of political, economic, and social discourses. More than ever in our history, social and political life are *mediated* through growing networks and apparatuses of communications technologies. The analysis of politics and processes of democratic power-making must, then, also account for the (techno-)infrastructural bases of contemporary political discourse and their influences on both citizens and political systems. As celebrated media critic, Manuel Castells (2009), has argued, today’s politics is fundamentally a form of “media politics,” wherein the dominant, every-day forms of political discourse and power-making take place through networks of mass communications and media technologies. In other words, the exchange of information and the production of power relations between citizens and decision-makers takes place predominantly within media networks. Insofar as this is the case, we may locate institutions such as the news media as central pillars of the democratic power-making process. The analysis of politics within a media-politics format is thus the analysis of *information* and its production, consumption, and mediation. Information becomes, in a sense, the currency of democratic politics and of citizens’ ability to make informed decisions when electing representatives and undertaking other forms of political action. In light of this contemporary reality, many

researchers have sought to scrutinize the *quality and scope* of the information provided to citizens through some of the more traditional media networks (e.g. the news media) in order to determine the influence thereof on processes of democratic power- and decision-making.

Within this context, the study of news media and political communications has turned increasingly towards the analysis of what has been called “infotainment” - a portmanteau which, as its name suggests, describes the admixture of (politically) informative materials and formats with entertaining and sensational ones. Developing primarily out of the commercial broadcasting system of the United States, the spread of infotainment formats has been widely viewed as a result of the news media weakening its public-interest and political reporting in favour of more sensational, entertaining, and emotionally-arousing news and public affairs coverage. A burgeoning literature has established the global reach of this infotainment phenomenon, sparking ongoing academic debates over the empirical and normative implications for citizens and democratic systems. Recent scholarship has argued that contemporary news media coverage of politics, notably in its market-driven, infotainment formats, has been a key factor in the framing and sensationalisation of winning candidates for political office, such as Donald Trump in America (Azari, 2016; Lawrence & Boydston, 2017; Serazio, 2018) and Justin Trudeau in Canada (Hadfield, 2017; Lalancette & Cormack, 2018; Marland, 2018). Infotainment has thus become a popular and highly contested subject of study and debate across academic disciplines, and by journalists, politicians, and citizens more broadly.

Captivating rhetoric and antics, charismatic celebrity images, and sensational speeches, slogans, and sound bites are packaged together within the infotainment news formats of the twenty-first century, resulting in a phenomenon that implicates populations worldwide and academics of varying backgrounds. However, despite its importance and a proliferating base of literature, infotainment remains highly incoherent and multifaceted, both as a concept and a field of study. This is evidenced by the numerous terms that have now been coined or adapted to speak, generally, of a similar phenomenon: these include, in part, infotainment, politainment, militainment, edutainment, argutainment, tabloidization, sensationalisation, soft vs. hard news, the softening of news, eroding of journalistic boundaries, the decline

of journalism, and several other similar terms. This array of concepts, while lacking standardisation and conceptual clarity, has allowed infotainment researchers to analyse several developments and synergies between journalism, politics, entertainment media, information and communication technologies, and the many hybrid forms of mass communication deriving therefrom. This broadly-defined field is thus well poised to analyse and understand the rapidly changing social, political, and media environment of the twenty-first century.

Infotainment has been heavily researched in the United States, and to a lesser degree in Western Europe (Aalberg et al., 2010; Carrillo & Ferré-Pavia, 2013; Ferré-Pavia & Gaya-Morla, 2011), Latin America (Alonso, 2016; Hallin & Mellado, 2018), and Asia (Shirk, 2007; Taniguchi, 2007, 2011; Thussu, 2007a, 2007b). While these studies have made important inroads into documenting the global rise and spread of infotainment, the Canadian media context still lacks a preliminary base of comprehensive infotainment research. A few studies of infotainment have been undertaken in Canada (e.g. Bastien & Roth, 2018; Onusko, 2011), although the role of infotainment within the Canadian media landscape has not been studied to any considerable degree, and certainly not with a view to the rise of infotainment within traditional news formats or outlets. As such, there is no clear consensus on which dynamics characterize the presence of infotainment in Canada. As mentioned above, some scholars believe that trends in the infotainment coverage of politics may already be affecting the Canadian political landscape, notably through the way political information is presented within the electoral context. Thus, understanding the nature of Canadian news media and the potential place of infotainment therein is important not only for academics, but for policymakers, journalists, and citizens as well. The role of journalists and news media as political watchdogs and the 'fourth estate' is widely viewed as necessary to the functioning of modern democratic political systems, a role which some believe may be undermined by infotainment trends (Aalberg et al., 2010; Blumler, 1999; Graber & Holyk, 2011; Harrington, 2008; Thussu, 2007b). Therefore, since we cannot even begin to consider the potential effects of the rise of infotainment on Canadian politics and society without understanding the nature and extent thereof within Canadian news media, this subject must be given due treatment.

This study seeks to begin filling the gap in the infotainment literature on the Canadian context by analysing the newspaper coverage of electoral politics within Canada, focusing on the 2019 federal election campaign. Why study infotainment within this context? There are many gaps in the literature on Canadian infotainment, opening the possibility for numerous research trajectories. However, a few preliminary efforts at studying infotainment within political entertainment or “soft news” programming have been undertaken, whereas no comprehensive analyses of infotainment within more traditional news formats (e.g. newspapers and broadcast news) exist. This gap suggests an important preliminary research question: To what extent, if any, have traditional news media outlets in Canada incorporated infotainment characteristics into their coverage of Canadian politics? This study seeks to answer this and other questions by undertaking a qualitative discourse analysis of infotainment characteristics within Canadian newspapers’ election campaign coverage.

Before moving directly into the research and its results, however, we must first take a step back and outline both the broader context in which this study exists, and the theoretical framework and methodological approach and choices that characterize it. As such, in the next chapter I will present both a brief historical overview of the phenomenon of infotainment and outline three main trajectories of contemporary infotainment research and academic conceptualization. Chapter 3 will then outline the methodological choices of this study. I will then discuss my findings in detail in Chapter 4, before concluding the thesis with a discussion of the broader implications and contributions of this study in Chapter 5. As such, it is to the literature review that I now turn.

2. Literature Review¹

Infotainment research is a diverse and burgeoning field encompassing an array of interdisciplinary research trends and trajectories. In other words, there is no widely recognised ‘canon’ of literature or set of formative theories providing a base from which to understand the phenomenon. As alluded to above, infotainment is something of a ‘catch-all’ term that explicitly mixes the two sides of the ‘information-entertainment’ dichotomy. As such, defining infotainment becomes problematic due not only to its widespread and varied use, but also due to the inherent difficulty of *deconstructing* the socially-constructed dichotomy (and the normative assumptions that come with it) of information-entertainment so as to gain a more holistic and historical perspective on the phenomenon, its development, and its effects on politics, culture, and society. To begin, then, we must briefly consider the theoretical framework within which the socially-dominant conceptions of news media and journalism, as well as information-entertainment, have developed. In media theory, this framework is most commonly referred to as the ‘liberal pluralist,’ ‘classical liberal,’ or ‘modernist’ approach to media systems and their place within the public sphere (see Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991; Lunt & Livingstone, 2013; Peck, 2000). Theoretically, this approach correlates with philosophical Liberalism, envisioning a rational-agent model of citizenship and public discourse within a deliberative liberal democracy. Langer (1998) pointedly summarizes the role of the citizen and the news media in this tradition:

Liberal democracy, the argument goes, needs an informed citizenry who can make rational decisions on the basis of the kinds of information available, especially in the realm of politics. That information is often complex, untidy or even held back; the task of the journalist is to overcome these obstacles, to shed light in dark corners, to act as the nation’s watchdog, to present information on the events of the day with impartiality and objectivity. (p. 2)

¹ A slightly-altered version of this chapter has been published in the peer-reviewed academic journal, *The Communication Review*, available here: Marinov, R. (2019). "Mapping the Infotainment Literature: Current trajectories and suggestions for future research." *The Communication Review* 23(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2019.1682894>.

The liberal pluralist approach has been perhaps most famously developed by Jürgen Habermas's (1989) work on the public sphere in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which has been taken up and re-worked by scholars in both the liberal pluralist and other media theory approaches (see Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991). This tradition and the assumptions underlying it typically support a firm distinction between information and entertainment. As such, it views journalists and news media as part of a communications network within civil society whose role (in part) is to facilitate discussion/deliberation between private individuals, government agents, and any other stakeholders or groups, often working on the assumption that all are rational agents and thus that rationally-based discussion/deliberation is normatively preferable to experiential or emotionally-based forms of discourse (see Curran, 1991). While the liberal pluralist tradition has been increasingly challenged in the last several decades – especially by postmodern theories of the media, citizenship, and the public sphere that view individuals as affective (and *affected*) subjects rather than purely rational agents (see Dahlgren, 2018) – the liberal pluralist model is still largely assumed, even if implicitly, within much contemporary infotainment and other empirical media research, as will be seen below. Moreover, these models of journalism and political organisation have been historically entwined and conceptually dominant throughout Canadian history (see Hackett & Zhao, 1998, p. 1-2).

Thus, locating the theoretical foundations of infotainment as a concept enables us to understand some of the frequent underlying assumptions that this concept holds: for instance, that information and entertainment are two distinctive categories, albeit categories that can be mixed; that information in its 'pure' form is preferable to information in a 'blurred' form that includes entertaining or otherwise sensational, emotional, or affective characteristics; and finally that the blurring of these two categories within public discourse may be harmful to both citizens and democracy. As we will see below, these underlying assumptions are not shared by all researchers or theorists of infotainment, and indeed a number of scholars have celebrated the potential democratic benefits that the infotainment format may offer (e.g. Baum, 2003, 2005; Baum & Jamison, 2011; Baym, 2005). Nevertheless, these assumptions are important to keep in mind while reviewing the infotainment literature, as they animate a large part of the academic

debate over empirical findings, as well as determine in many cases the methods and conceptualisations used to structure empirical infotainment research. Before reviewing the contemporary trends in infotainment research and academic conceptualisation, however, it is helpful to further contextualize the concept of infotainment by tracing its historical origins and development.

2.1 What is “Infotainment”? Historical Origins and Development

Infotainment has no ‘origin’ per se, and what is perhaps needed is a genealogy of the infotainment format as it has developed and been conceptualised across cultures and societies. Such a project may help to historicise the concept sufficiently so as to unearth its underlying assumptions while deconstructing the dichotomy of information-entertainment upon which it has developed. While such a genealogy is beyond the scope of the present study, an historical perspective on infotainment nonetheless reveals a long line of precedents to the contemporary infotainment format.

Delli Carpini & Williams (2001) argue that the socially-constructed distinction between news and entertainment masks the fact of their early historical admixture, due largely to the mid-twentieth-century growth of an ‘objective’ journalistic standard in America which conceptually isolated the sphere of news from that of entertainment. Indeed, by moving past this dichotomy Bosshart & Hellmüller (2009) have traced the theoretical and artistic origins of infotainment back to ancient Greece with Aristotle’s *Poetics* and the subsequent Western literary tradition of mixing entertainment (understood as something pleasurable) and informative content. They therefore understand infotainment as “the transfer of information in a pleasant way” – an effectively ubiquitous feature of human communications and cultures (p. 6). Leaving aside such broad and sweeping historical traditions, some of the more common origins of infotainment have been traced to the street literature and “penny dreadfuls” of nineteenth-century England, a trend which saw a broader expansion within the American penny press of the 1830s, due in part to America’s strong populist and mass market culture (Brants, 2008; Thussu, 2007b). Borchard (2018) explains that both political and press restructuring after the American and French Revolutions helped inaugurate a more ‘populist’ conception of the press – coming to be known through the French republican

terminology as ‘The Fourth Estate’ – as an institution serving the public interest (p. 46). In this socio-political context, the emerging trend of press marketization served to gradually displace the partisan press model with a news product that appealed to as wide an audience as possible. As Borchard (2018) explains, “[w]hile the content of each newspaper sometimes enlightened and educated these large groups of readers, they more commonly entertained them, grabbing the attention of subscribers and advertisers with sensational stories of scandal, sex, and crime” (p. 47). The financial success of these early market-driven forms of newspaper led to an even more widespread shift in the content and focus of journalistic coverage:

Following the example set by Benjamin Day’s *New York Sun*, Scottish immigrant James Gordon Bennett launched an even more financially successful penny press newspaper in 1835. Bennett modeled the *New York Herald* after the pricing and advertising scheme established by Day, taking content to the next level by providing extensive coverage of sensational and entertaining news, as contrasted with the typically political and national news of the larger papers that still dominated the news industry. (p. 51)

These developments continued to spread throughout the United States during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, at which time a series of developments in journalistic professionalism and conceptions of ‘objectivity’ occurred, due in part to the press’s increasing autonomy gained from higher circulation and advertisement revenues (Krause, 2011, p. 93). As Schiller (1979) explains, conceptions of journalistic objectivity developed during this time, along with codifications and standardizations of journalistic practice. These developments in the journalistic field occurred in response to broader socio-cultural and political changes in the early-twentieth century that necessitated a way for the industry “to distinguish journalism from other occupations in the field of information [e.g. public relations], thus legitimating it” (Mort, 2012/13, p. 98). These developments have resulted in what Delli Carpini & Williams (2001), as aforementioned, claim was a ‘masking’ of the early historical admixture of information and entertainment. The liberal pluralist conception of journalism and news media within the public sphere grew to dominance during the twentieth century, such that by the 1980s the portmanteau term ‘infotainment’ began taking hold to describe what many believed to be a new trend in the media.

The reality, however, is that by the 1980s this trend was nothing new. Technological advancements and the development and spread of radio and television in the mid-twentieth century brought new

possibilities for the presentation and massification of information. Borchard (2018) has thus traced early forms of infotainment in American radio back to the 1930s and in television back to the 1950s – both of whose newfound influence and share of the country’s advertising profits began affecting the style and content of print news. Indeed, Langer (1998) explains that in the United States broadcast journalism and forms of televised news have been historically denigrated by academics and professionals alike for their apparent lack of ‘seriousness’ and sensationalising tendencies (see Ch. 1), thus demonstrating a long history of recognition of the infotainment format in America (even if unconsciously or implicitly), and the role of media technologies in shaping it. Other media critics have also pointed to such early origins of the infotainment format while highlighting the apparent inseparability of information and entertainment inherent to certain mediums, such as televised or illustrated-print news (see Cogan & Kelso, 2009, Ch. 5). In Canada, Bastien & Roth (2018) have similarly traced the origins of infotainment programming in Quebec as far back as the 1950s with programs such as *Carte Blanche* and *Chez Miville* (p. 19). The authors suggest that these programs represented “primitive forms” of the mixture of entertainment and news, although they nevertheless “indicated that the porosity of the line between these two genres is not so new” (p. 16). Similar evidence is found in Europe as well. Brants (1998) argues that infotainment was present in the Netherlands as early as the 1970s, with prime ministers and political candidates appearing on talk shows during their campaigns. Accordingly, he holds that “the phenomenon is not new in the Netherlands” and is likely to have similar early historical examples across Europe (p. 316).

Despite these early origins and long traditions, infotainment is most commonly viewed as a relatively-modern phenomenon that has become increasingly popularised since the 1980s, when the term was originally coined. Numerous causes have been posited for the widespread adoption of infotainment formats since this time. Perhaps the most oft-cited trends are economic, stemming from the growth in market-oriented media deregulation and broader neoliberal trends and logics. The easing of media regulations in the United States from the 1970s to 1990s saw a widespread corporatisation and conglomeration of media industries, resulting in the centralisation of media ownership by a small number of large, often multinational media conglomerates (Krause, 2011; Lule, 2018; Thussu, 2007b). Thussu

(2007b) explains that, in spite of the strong tradition of public broadcasting in Europe, the success of commercial media systems in the United States spread during this time and pressured many European nations to “liberalize and deregulate,” thus opening the door to greater commercialisation and centralisation of ownership across the Atlantic (p. 38). Such trends are found to have occurred and spread around the world, including in Canada (Rose & Nesbitt-Larking, 2010), resulting in a small number of multinational media conglomerates owning and controlling large majorities of global media production (Fenton, 2011; Kellner, 2003; Thussu, 2007b).

These economic and regulatory developments have led to a number of commonly-accepted effects on the journalism and news media industry, which appear to have accelerated the widespread adoption of the infotainment format. Some such effects include: media fragmentation, wherein deregulation and various technological and social developments have opened new spaces for both news and entertainment to be offered in novel and synthesized forms, as well as avenues for citizens to avoid politics and news altogether (e.g. the internet, social media, satellite entertainment television stations, etc.) (Baum, 2005; Just, 2011; Thussu, 2007b); corresponding to this increasingly-fragmented media landscape, research has found that the decline in news audiences has driven news media organisations to sensationalise and render their coverage of current events more entertaining (Harrington, 2008; Langman, 2016; Thussu, 2007b), largely in order to compete with the demand-side (e.g. audience) shift towards the entertainment-oriented journalism found within talk shows and late-night comedy and satire programs (Baym, 2005; Baum, 2003; Harrington, 2008); and finally, declining newsroom resources – often attributed to declining audience and thus advertisement/subscription revenue, the corporatisation and centralisation of news production, and the neoliberal deregulation and market-logics of media industries – have been found to discourage investigative journalism while encouraging the homogenisation of content, the use of public relations agents, partisan pundits, pseudo-experts, and press releases to produce stories, and the piggybacking of network news stories directly into local outlets (Compton & Dyer-Witheyford, 2014; Fenton, 2011; Graber & Holyk, 2011; Krause, 2011; McChesney & Pickard, 2014). While many other factors have helped shape the modern

media landscape, these represent some of the most commonly-accepted trends in the literature on the developments leading to the proliferation of the infotainment format since the 1980s.

In light of this diversified and niche-oriented media landscape, a number of politically-important implications have been studied. Namely, research has shown that many less politically-interested individuals choose to turn to entertainment-based infotainment programming as a means of either escaping political news and coverage altogether or accessing it in a lighter, more amusing way. This is evidenced by falling news media ratings and viewership levels and the sharp increases in viewership of talk shows, political satire or opinion, and other similar programs (Baym, 2005, 2007; Baum, 2003; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Semetko, 2009; Onusko, 2011). Recent surveys show that such ‘news avoidance’ is also increasingly widespread in Canada, due in part to issues of “information overload” (see Leclair, & Charlton, 2019). The *results* of this audience shift from traditional news media towards more entertaining platforms have been even more politically relevant. Many scholars have highlighted the changes to political communications and political campaign strategies over the last twenty years which have seen politicians increasingly turn to soft news or infotainment programs as routine parts of their campaign and political communication strategies. Such unconventional exposure is believed to offer access to wider, less politically-interested or more easily persuadable audiences, namely those who are less likely to be firmly ideological or partisan and open to candidate appeals (Baum & Jamison, 2011; Moy et al., 2005a, 2005b; Panagopolous, 2009; Serazio, 2018). These trends suggest that infotainment programming has become, as Baum & Jamison (2011) suggest, “a critical arena for the playing out of the democratic process,” both in the United States and around the world (p. 134).

Due to these important political implications, infotainment has been conceptualised and researched in diverse forms and across various media formats. A review of the literature reveals that there have been, generally speaking, three primary approaches to the study and conceptualisation of infotainment (none of which should be considered mutually exclusive, as scholars often situate themselves in relation to multiple approaches): (1) research on infotainment or “soft news programming” as a specific *genre* of its own, thus conceptualizing infotainment as the middle ground between pure entertainment and pure informative

content; (2) research on traditional news media outlets as undergoing entertainment- or soft-news-oriented developments and changes to their coverage; and (3) theorizing and developing broader research approaches that study infotainment through the perspective of media systems, both at the domestic level and more broadly at the international level of an integrated and globalising infotainment media system. In the remainder of this chapter I will briefly outline each approach in turn, followed by a short discussion of the interaction between approaches and an explanation of the gap in the literature which this research seeks to fill.

2.2 *Soft News Programming*

Perhaps the largest current of infotainment research, this first approach conceptualises infotainment as an entertainment-based ‘soft news’ genre of programming which has proliferated in response to developments in mass media and broadcast technology. Within this research trajectory scholars are interested primarily with the nature and effects of political comedy and satire programs, as well as other genres of talk shows which fit news and current events information into a more entertaining format. Often referred to as “soft news” or “soft news programming,” research within this trajectory typically focuses on programs that deal with considerable amounts of social and political substance, such as *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *Saturday Night Live*, *The Rick Mercer Report*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and others of that ilk.

A recent example of this approach in the Canadian context is Bastein and Roth's (2018) aforementioned study of infotainment programming in Quebec. Bastein and Roth (2018) conceptualise infotainment as a specific genre of show, such as talk shows or political satire, which is ultimately “a political communication vehicle that competes with journalism” (p. 6). Developing in strides since the early days of Canadian television programming, and with a notable rapidity over the past twenty years, the authors conceptualise modern infotainment as a series of shows which combine news and entertainment in novel ways. Accordingly, the authors define infotainment as “a *program genre* that combines, in both *content* and *form*, some of the attributes *typically* associated with *news* and some associated with *entertainment*,” and which can be found across various mediums (p. 13–14; original emphasis).

This approach to the conceptualisation of infotainment is popular among many leading infotainment scholars. Baum (2003) conceptualises infotainment in a similar manner, as “a new class of entertainment-oriented, quasi-news and information programs” referred to as “the *soft news media*” (p. 16). Likewise, Baym (2005, 2007) takes a similar and notably optimistic view of such programming, understanding it as a site of innovation wherein the journalistic field merges into the entertainment media through what he terms “discursive integration.” Baym (2005) argues that infotainment represents

a way of speaking about, understanding, and acting within the world defined by the permeability of form and the fluidity of content. Discourses of news, politics, entertainment, and marketing have grown deeply inseparable; the languages and practices of each have lost their distinctiveness and are being melded into previously unimagined combinations. Although some may see this as a dangerous turn in the realm of political communication, it also can be seen as a rethinking of discursive styles and standards that may be opening spaces for significant innovation (p. 262).

Thus, rather than entertainment programming trampling on the field of serious journalism, Baym (2005) considers infotainment as a form of “alternative journalism, one that uses satire to interrogate power, parody to critique contemporary news, and dialogue to enact a model of deliberative democracy” (p. 261). Bolin (2014) holds a similar view, arguing that the autonomy within the field of modern journalism has allowed it to adapt to several different models and itself begin “affecting entertainment” (p. 338). While not all scholars are as optimistic about what infotainment programming represents, the general conceptualisation of infotainment as a *genre of program* – often televised but also offered through other mediums such as talk radio – that mixes politically-relevant information or news and entertainment is adhered to by many prominent infotainment researchers (Baum & Jamison, 2011; Brants & Neijens, 1998; Brants, 2008; Grondin, 2012; Ferre-Pavia & Gaya-Morla, 2011; Moy et al., 2005a, 2005b; Onusko, 2011).

The findings from research in this field have been numerous and often highly important for political purposes. As aforementioned, research has shown that infotainment or soft news programs such as (political) talk shows, late-night comedy or satire, and morning news programs have become popular venues for discussing and critiquing politics and interviewing politicians in a light, personalistic, or human-interest-oriented manner (Baum, 2003, 2005; Baum & Jamison, 2011; Bastien & Roth, 2018; Grondin, 2012). As such, political campaign and communications managers have begun incorporating such

infotainment/soft news programming into politicians' campaign strategies (Panagopoulos, 2009; Serazio, 2018), making this genre of infotainment a central aspect of modern political contestation (Baum & Jamison, 2011). Similar research and findings have occurred in various regions around the globe, such as Western Europe (Aalberg et al., 2010; Carrillo & Ferré-Pavia, 2013; Ferré-Pavia & Gaya-Morla, 2011), Latin America (Alonso, 2016; Hallin & Mellado, 2018), Asia (Shirk, 2007; Taniguchi, 2007, 2011; Thussu, 2007a, 2007b), and Canada (Bastien & Roth, 2018; Onusko, 2011). In light of this relatively new political domain, research and debate over the political effects on infotainment *viewers* has also become a lively field.

Research shows that infotainment programming can have numerous effects on viewers, such as facilitating or affecting candidate evaluations (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Boukes et al., 2015; Moy et al., 2005b; Taniguchi, 2011; Young, 2004; Zaller, 1992), affecting levels of political distrust and cynicism (Barthel & Moy, 2015; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Bennett, 2007; Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008), and increasing civic participation (Bennett, 2007; Cao & Brewer, 2008; Hoffman & Thomson, 2009; Hoffman & Young, 2011; Moy et al., 2005a, 200b). In a succinct review and classification of the findings in the literature on infotainment and soft news programming effects, Baum & Jamison (2011) argue that soft news programming impacts voter choice and behaviour through what they term the four "Oprah Effects": namely, the effects of soft news consumption on attention, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour.

Among the most celebrated of effects is 'knowledge' or political learning. Baum (2003, 2005) has found that soft news programming can aid those who are less politically interested or sophisticated in learning about politics, in large part through becoming aware of more political issues and events, but also in terms of evaluating and understanding candidate positions. Beneficial effects on political learning have been found by a number of other researchers as well (Brewer & Cao, 2006; also see Baum & Jamison, 2011 and Delli Carpini, 2014 for reviews of the literature), including in the Canadian context (Onusko, 2011). However, Prior (2003, 2005, 2007) has found contradictory evidence, arguing that viewing infotainment shows no signs of increased political knowledge, and that soft news consumption, while potentially

increasing general political awareness, does not necessarily lead to a “well-informed” electorate or knowledge about serious hard news topics.

It is worth noting, however, that the findings outlined above (and across much of the infotainment research within this approach) are the result of numerous research methods, including content analyses, survey research, controlled media-exposure experiments, and psychological experiments, among others. As such, there are a number of important limitations and methodological uncertainties and incoherence throughout the literature, thus preventing firm, conclusive findings. Moreover, many researchers have begun to show that specific types of infotainment programming (e.g. satire or comedy) impact individuals in different ways and to differing degrees (see Delli Carpini, 2014; Hoffman & Young, 2011), thus further problematizing any coherent generalisation of infotainment’s political effects. Nevertheless, the developments within this research trajectory have arguably succeeded in distinguishing “soft news programming” from other entertainment formats and locating it as an important site of political and social research. In doing so, it has generated an important analytical distinction between soft news programming and other politically-relevant entertainment media, which itself forms an important contribution to more clearly conceptualizing the different genres that occupy the space on the continuum between ‘pure’ information and ‘pure’ entertainment.

2.3 Traditional News Media

The second main approach to infotainment research is situated far more closely to journalism and news media studies. Herein, researchers seek to analyse the sensationalist and entertainment-oriented changes and developments within traditional news media outlets (e.g. televised evening newscasts, newspapers, and radio news stations). The conceptualisation of infotainment within this current of research is thus more closely associated with terms such as tabloidization, sensationalization, and soft vs. hard news distinctions. It is also important to note that within this research trajectory “soft news” is understood differently than the “soft news programming” discussed in the section above. Namely, the study of “soft news” within traditional news media outlets focuses on the tendencies in the news media to focus their

coverage on more sensational, emotion-laden, or fascinating events, such as crime, celebrity, and human-interest stories or perspectives.

There are two main strands of research within this approach. The first looks into the proliferation of soft news stories and their broad displacement of more “serious” hard news stories and political material (e.g. the displacement of stories on politics and public affairs, foreign affairs, economic issues, and sometimes crime and crisis when they have important social impacts). The second looks more directly at hard news coverage and how it is undergoing changes in presentational style to become softer, less serious, or more sensationalised and framed around aspects such as personality, celebrity, human interest, and opinion and speculation.

The displacement of serious political and economic ‘hard news’ by entertaining or emotionally-appealing ‘soft news’ has been heavily researched for many years. To varying degrees in both the United States and Europe, scholars have found that stories which appeal to audience tastes – typically entertaining, emotional, dramatic, or of a general human-interest nature – have come to dominate televised newscasts and print news, displacing much of the more serious and politically-relevant information that is viewed as necessary for the health of the democratic system and the civic role of citizens (Aalberg et al., 2010; Curran et al., 2009; Hamilton, 2004; Iyengar, 2007; Patterson, 2000; Thussu, 2007b). Similar trends are argued to be occurring within Canadian news media as well, in part due to the influence of American media and cultural production on the Canadian media landscape (Cohen-Almagor, 2002; Taras, 2008). This soft vs. hard news distinction is, however, quite problematic and contested in the literature. After a systematic review of the literature, Reinneman et al. (2012) determined that there is a lack of consensus on the conceptualisation and definition of these categories, due largely to the differences in the use of topic, content, and presentation style for definitional purposes. Nevertheless, while there are some scholars suggesting that the news has retained its levels of serious, informative material, there is a broad consensus that, in one form or another, soft news stories have come to displace much of the hard news coverage within newscasts (see Reinneman et al., 2012). In fact, Patterson’s (2000) widely-cited study of over 5300 news

stories in America between 1980 and 1999 found that, regardless of how soft news stories were defined or measured, they had increased considerably over hard news stories during this period.

The second strand of research, which analyses the sensationalist and entertainment-oriented developments within specifically *hard news* coverage, has also found important trends. Research shows that traditional news outlets have increasingly provided less in-depth, contextualised, or well-researched coverage of hard news topics, often as a result of entertainment-oriented framing and the displacement of factual, investigative coverage by opinion and speculation (Campbell et al., 2014; Compton & Dyer-Witheyford, 2014; Graber & Holyk, 2011; Iyengar, 2007; Thussu, 2007b). These trends are understood as resulting, in part, from the growth in media fragmentation, 24-hour newscasts, and internet news, which require constant and newly-developing material even when facts and events haven't been fully established, researched, or documented (Iyengar, 2007; Thussu, 2007b). Furthermore, these changes are understood as resulting from basic economic necessity, attributed in large part to the commercialisation and market competition within the news industry. In short, news audience decline has forced news outlets to render their coverage more amusing and approachable to audiences who would otherwise seek lighter forms of entertainment than serious hard news formats can offer (Graber & Holyk, 2011; Harrington, 2008; Iyengar, 2007; Langman, 2016; McManus, 1995).

Studies of sensationalisation or infotainment framing within hard news coverage have used diverse criteria for analysis. For example, Graber (1994) analyses journalistic *style* through the use of Nimmo & Combs's (1985) four-part classification, which includes a highly comprehensive set of distinctions between populist/sensationalist, elitist/factual, ignorant/didactic, and pluralist/feature approaches to newsmaking and story-telling. Based on the traits for each of these journalistic styles, Graber (1994) codes for a number of aspects to determine the 'infotainment quotient' in routine newscasts, including the use of sensational stories and themes, passionate/dispassionate presentation style, the use of technical or lay language, and the use of visual aspects and symbols. In another comprehensive approach, Carillo & Ferre-Pavia (2013) analyse the use of entertainment aspects within news stories by looking at a number of elements including topic, values (e.g. positive or negative framing and narratives), criticism, fear discourses, and the use of

ambiguity, surprise elements, and polls. Several other operationalisations and modes of analysing infotainment framing within hard news coverage are also employed in the infotainment literature: measuring “journalistic role performance” (Hallin & Mellado, 2018); analysing privatisation and personalisation in media coverage (Jebril et al., 2013); analysing a combination of topic, style, and format evaluations to place media on an “infotainment scale” ranging from pure informational content to pure entertainment content (Brants, 1998; Brants & Neijens, 1998); tallying the amount of partisan cues, issue cues, and valence cues (e.g. positive, negative, praise, or criticism) present in a story or interview (Baum, 2005); and analysing the use of “candidate challenges,” wherein journalists challenge candidates in order to construct a form of entertaining and dramatic “reality news” akin to the sensationalism of some reality TV shows, such as *Survivor* (Bennett, 2005).

A review of the literature thus makes clear, as highlighted by Reinneman et al. (2012) and Otto et al. (2017), that operationalisations and analytical approaches to the study of infotainment and infotainment framing within traditional hard news media are diverse and far from standardised. Most scholars agree, at least in part, with the fact that entertainment and news are not two isolated poles, but rather that this dichotomy is socially-constructed and that most forms of news do in fact contain *some* aspects of entertainment, and vice versa (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Delli Carpini, 2014; Brants & Neijens, 1998). Accordingly, while the field of infotainment research lacks overall consensus, we can see that infotainment is conceptualised broadly within this research trajectory as a set of changes and developments within traditional news media outlets that have rendered the news increasingly soft, sensationalised, personalistic, and entertainment-oriented.

Scholarly debate over the implications and normative evaluations of such developments is often quite polarised. While some view these changes as natural media developments and beneficial insofar as they make hard news more relatable or approachable for viewers (Brants, 1998; Graber, 1994), others remain critical of the loss of a serious journalistic watchdog function and worry about the implications for modern democracies (Aalberg et al., 2010; Blumler, 1999; Stoll, 2006; also see Harrington, 2008, Rasul, 2010, and Thussu, 2007b, Ch. 7 for detailed reviews of such debates). In spite of these normative debates,

researchers have highlighted a number of more concrete and important political consequences resulting from these trends: the promotion and over-exposure of populist and radical right-wing politicians for their news-worthy entertainment and shock value (Ellinas, 2018; Manucci, 2017); the use of emotion and heuristic cues to sway public opinion (Konijn, 2013; Valentino & Nardis, 2013); the potential for civic disengagement due to a lack of contextual information and in-depth coverage of politics (Aalberg et al., 2011; Lazaroiu, 2008); the diversionary effects which have prevented citizens from becoming sufficiently informed of political and international affairs, for example in the case of the Iraq war and the global spread of neoliberalism (Aalberg et al., 2010; Thussu, 2007b); and the trivialisation of politics through its use as a brand marker to differentiate individual news programs and products, thus transforming public life into entertaining performances and corporate brand value (Jones, 2012).

While more work must be done to standardize methods and gain a broader consensus within this research trajectory, it is clear that the entertainment-oriented developments within traditional news media hold important political and social consequences that are in many ways unique from those which arise from infotainment as a genre of “soft news programming.” By distinguishing the study of infotainment in the news media from the study of infotainment in other formats and genres, a more accurate and conceptually-clarified understanding of the infotainment phenomenon may be developed, thus allowing for the specific social and political effects of each form of infotainment to be more effectively dealt with, evaluated, and applied to further research.

2.4 Media Systems & Global Infotainment

The third main approach to the study and conceptualisation of infotainment is often much broader and more theoretical. In general, research within this trajectory combines insights from both approaches outlined above, along with trends and discourses in media and entertainment industries more broadly, in order to study infotainment as a set of overarching developments within both domestic and globalised media systems. Often approaching infotainment from a Marxist or critical theory perspective, scholars within this

approach attempt to understand infotainment from its broader sociopolitical or economic position, namely as the result of increasingly centralized, integrated, and globalising capitalist media systems.

Thussu's (2007b) widely-cited work, *News as Entertainment: The rise of global infotainment*, argues that infotainment has become a globalised industry of highly-centralised multinational media conglomerates which have spread the liberal, market-oriented media systems of the United States around the world to the detriment of public-interest news coverage. Thussu (2007b) defines global infotainment as "the globalization of a US style ratings-driven television journalism which privileges privatized soft news – about celebrities, crime, corruption and violence – and presents it as a form of spectacle, at the expense of news about political, civic and public affairs" (p. 8). However, Thussu's (2007b) analysis goes beyond only the news media, looking rather to the broader media and cultural representations of reality within a globalised corporate media and advertising landscape, wherein entertainment and news industries are often owned and directed by the same multinational companies. Thussu (2007b) thus studies global infotainment across mediums, from television and film to video games and radio, many of which can be analysed together to understand how events and individuals are rendered as sensational global spectacles, or how informational discourses become increasingly merged with entertainment discourses.

In a similar manner, Kellner (2003, 2005, 2009), a leading critical media scholar, has made an important contribution to the global infotainment literature by outlining the modern development of what he terms the "media spectacle," which finds its roots in the highly-publicized "media events" of the twentieth century. Building off of cultural theorist Guy Debord's conceptualization of "the spectacle" and what he termed "the society of the spectacle" (Kellner, 2003, p. 2), Kellner (2003) argues that the corporate synergies at the head of both entertainment and informational media have become so centralised, globalised, and intricately weaved throughout society (e.g. through advertising and staged media spectacles) that the media have come to construct social and political realities out of (pseudo)events, individuals, and objects, in what has become the "mass media spectacle," an ideal phenomenon for political communications and corporate profitmaking through advertisements and ratings. As Kellner (2003) suggests,

[t]oday the society and culture of spectacle is creating a new type of information–entertainment society, or what might be called the ‘infotainment society.’ ... Currently, we are entering a new form of technocapitalism marked by a synthesis of capital and technology and the information and entertainment industries, all of which is producing an ‘infotainment society’ and spectacle culture (p. 11).

Kellner (2003) defines infotainment as “the synergies of the information and entertainment sectors in the organization of contemporary societies, the ways in which information technologies and multimedia are transforming entertainment, and the forms in which entertainment is shaping every domain of life from the Internet to politics” (p. 12). Thus, similarly to Thussu (2007b), Kellner (2003) extends his analysis of infotainment beyond news media or “soft news” and looks at how media spectacles are constructed more broadly through various cultural, economic, and political mediums and discourses within a “networked infotainment society” (p. 14).

These approaches to conceptualising and studying the spread of infotainment on a global scale are accompanied by, and amenable to, a number of theoretical approaches within journalism studies that look at overarching developments in national media systems, notably those looking at the development of “media cultures.” For example, Altheide (2004) explains that, from a media sociology perspective, infotainment in the United States can be viewed as a fairly natural development. He suggests that the “‘infotainment’ news perspective holds that, for practical reasons, any event can be summarily covered and presented as a narrative account with a beginning, middle, and end” (p. 294). Thus, using the concepts of “media logic” and “media culture,” he explains that the repeated use of certain formats, styles, and logics in representing materials accumulates to produce a certain “media culture,” wherein the “form and content” of institutions – including news and politics – can be changed to adapt thereto (p. 294). These new media formats and the logics that they operate on ultimately “blur the connection with the underlying realities they represent” (Bennett, 2005, p. 367). Consequently, “as audiences spend more time with these [infotainment] formats, the logic of advertising, entertainment, and popular culture becomes taken for granted as a ‘normal form’ of communication” (Altheide, 2004, p. 294), and news and politics themselves – along with various related institutions – transform to accommodate and exemplify these new, normalized means of communicating to

publics. In other words, the media logics and culture of infotainment, becoming normalized after repeated use and consumption, may render political and other discourses themselves more entertainment-oriented in order to conform to the new media logic/culture of the infotainment format. In his *Communication Power* and *The Rise of the Network Society*, Castells (2009, 2010) comprehensively studies the ways in which these media systems and networks of infotainment structure and reinforce certain power relations (both political and economic), highlighting the importance thereof to understanding contemporary political discourse and modes of power-making. Castells's (2009) claim that contemporary politics is fundamentally a form of "media politics" thus suggests that infotainment is itself a key site of contemporary democratic contestation, and that the infotainment format may work to structure power relations in complex and multifaceted ways at the media-system level.

Otto et al.'s (2017) framework model for the softening of journalistic boundaries is helpful in conceptualizing this research trajectory. The authors explain that at the highest level of their model, the system level, the "eroding of boundaries describes a macrolevel development of political journalism characterized by the dissolving of [the] journalistic system's boundaries, leaving it prone to the influence of other societal systems" (p. 147). In other words, at the "media system" level journalism is understood as being impacted by other industries, discourses, and systems within any given society, such as the public relations industry, the advertising industry, and other social, political, and economic factors more generally. This erosion of boundaries at the system level may "influence" media at the lower levels of analysis, which is to say the content of journalism, news media, and other genres themselves (p. 147).

As such, the broad-level study of media systems and the erosion of journalistic boundaries therein is an important approach to understanding and conceptualising infotainment in a more holistic and contextualised way. While the study of infotainment at the level of media systems may be focused on either the national or the international context, I have purposively included these two research foci together as a single approach. In a rapidly-globalising world it is important that research on national media systems draws insight from research on the globalisation of media systems, and vice versa. For example, in the view of Thussu (2007b, 2015) and Kellner (2003), the infotainment-oriented media logics and cultures within the

media systems of key global powers, such as the United States and Britain, have been expanded globally to affect and increasingly unify the media logics and cultures of several nationally-based media systems around the world, in part due to the proliferation of multinational media conglomerates. While the socio-political, economic, and cultural particularities of each nation undoubtedly serve to shape national media systems in unique ways, the reality of globalising commercial pressures and their ability to impact media systems cannot be overlooked. As such, infotainment research at the level of media systems may be approached from either the national or international perspective, yet the separation of the two into distinct research trajectories would seemingly be unjustified in light of the many influences of globalisation on media systems worldwide.

2.5 Interaction between Trajectories

The three research trajectories outlined above are by no means isolated one from another. Rather, there are important trends and debates spanning across approaches and research foci that can help us to better understand the infotainment phenomenon. For example, scholars such as Baym (2005), who study infotainment programming within the first approach, still develop and utilise theories such as “discursive integration” to conceptualise broader, system-level developments more akin to research in the third trajectory. Baym’s (2005) conceptualisation of soft news programming as representing an alternative form of journalism, based on his view that “[d]iscourses of news, politics, entertainment, and marketing have grown deeply inseparable; the languages and practices of each have lost their distinctiveness and are being melded into previously unimagined combinations” (p. 262), thus highlights the importance of broad social- or system-level conceptualisations of infotainment and the ability of such conceptualisations to be applied concretely in understanding and analysing more specific infotainment phenomena. Examples of such cross-trajectory research often offer rich analytical insights, for example in Compton & Comor (2007) and Delli Carpini and Williams’s (2001) use of system-level theorisation on “spectacles” and spectacle culture to analyse concrete news and entertainment media representations of political scandal and celebrity events.

As well, across research trajectories there is a notable emphasis on the supply-and-demand aspect underlying the growth of infotainment. While authors place differing emphasis on the various causes of infotainment, there is some broad consensus that there are both supply and demand factors at play (Baum, 2005; Harrington, 2008; Just, 2011). Interestingly, this supply and demand debate highlights an important synergy between the first two research trajectories. A clear pattern is evident in the literature showing that as viewership declined for traditional news media, soft news media increased to fill the gap (Baum, 2005; Graber & Holyk, 2011). As a result, traditional news media have developed to incorporate certain aspects of soft news or entertainment formats in order to remain competitive, while soft news programs, as scholars such as Baym (2005, 2007) and Bolin (2014) argue, have developed to become, in many ways, veritable sources of journalism. Understood in this way, we can see how socio-cultural developments have played an important role on the demand side (e.g. the audience) in transforming media systems and the journalistic field itself. Such developments would not be as clearly evident without full consideration of both trajectories in infotainment research.

However, this trend also highlights an important critique of the synergies at play within infotainment media. As theorists in the third trajectory highlight, the corporate synergies of increasingly-centralised national and multinational media conglomerates, who often own both entertainment and news media outlets, operate to maximize viewership and profitability across their various media platforms and outlets, in part by covering and recycling stories, events, and perspectives in traditional news outlets that can be easily adapted to soft news outlets, and vice versa (Compton & Comor, 2007; Kellner, 2003; Thussu, 2007b). In light of this, we may question whether some of the beneficial effects of infotainment or soft news programming exposure are as pronounced as some believe. For example, while some authors have found that exposure to soft news programming may lead to greater interest in traditional news formats (see Baum & Jamison, 2011), it is not clear, as evidenced by findings in the second approach, whether these traditional formats are themselves providing sufficient substantive political information to their viewers (Graber & Holyk, 2011; Hamilton, 2004; Just, 2011; Patterson, 2000). As such, studying the effects of infotainment on political participation, apathy, interest, and knowledge requires a holistic consideration of

infotainment across the media landscape, in part to comprehensively understand the effects of infotainment, but also to understand whether the effects from one medium are supported or hampered by another. Research within and across trajectories is thus important, as formats and mediums are not isolated, but develop in tandem within certain social, political, and economic conditions.

There is also considerable normative debate that spans all three trajectories, namely on the question of whether infotainment is beneficial or deleterious for democracy. Many scholars hold that sensationalising and rendering the news and political information more interesting and captivating is beneficial to democracy and the political education of citizens, as it appeals to broader, often apathetic audiences, as well as offers numerous possibilities for information retention through affective learning (Baym, 2005; Graber, 1994; Valentino & Nardis, 2013). This optimistic view is countered by those who hold that the gains in exposure to politics and political knowledge that are provided by infotainment are contrary to the role of the informed citizen and their ability to hold leaders to account. Namely, scholars argue that the sensationalisation, trivialisation, and personalisation of politics that infotainment supposedly effects serves to weaken citizens' ability to properly understand and critique substantive issues and policies, even if politics gains a broader exposure or interest. This view is exemplified in Prior's (2003, 2005) countering of Baum's (2003) findings on political learning through infotainment: as Prior (2003) argues, infotainment may indeed affect viewers' political attitudes or voting habits, but at a more substantive level, "[t]he benefits of a *well-informed electorate* ... are unlikely to emerge as a result of greater soft news consumption" (p. 168; emphasis added).

This debate is held across research trajectories, yet appears to be poorly developed insofar as the question of what constitutes a well-informed and responsible citizen are rarely engaged with to a significant degree in the infotainment literature (with the liberal pluralist approach all too often assumed without explicit acknowledgement or discussion of theoretical implications). It has also been poorly developed as a result of the incoherence over the concept of infotainment itself, meaning that infotainment in its different forms is often characterized outright as beneficial or deleterious without distinguishing between the nuances that arise between genres, formats, or media outlets. As a result, scholars often argue past one another when

evaluating the effects of infotainment on the citizen and political systems. In any case, it is clear that these different approaches or research trajectories are both divergent and complementary, with the findings from one being of considerable importance to research in the other. Moreover, studying the interaction and divergence between trajectories is seminal to the broader research and theorisation on the growth of infotainment at the level of the media system and the global spread of market-based, infotainment-oriented media systems, as well as their socio-cultural and political implications.

2.6 Studying the Canadian Context

As suggested above, the gap in the literature on the Canadian context allows for several possible research trajectories. Some research on soft news programming has already been conducted in Canada, although not extensively. In light of the small number of centralised Canadian media corporations and the high viewership levels for American infotainment programs in Canada, further research into this form of infotainment or 'soft news programming' is certainly important, especially with a view to how cross-border cultural influences impact Canadian politics and citizens. Nevertheless, given that some preliminary work has already been undertaken in this area (e.g. Bastien & Roth, 2018; Onusko, 2011), the general lack of scholarship and comprehensive analyses of infotainment within *traditional* news media outlets in Canada suggests that this field of research requires due attention.

Focusing infotainment research on traditional Canadian news media is also supported by findings from the global infotainment and media systems literature outlined above. Namely, empirical research on the Canadian news media is required in order to properly understand and theorise Canada's place within the broader global infotainment network and trends. The globalising trends identified above, along with findings suggesting that Canadian news media are increasingly following in the footsteps of American news media (and in some cases largely owned by American investors) (Edge, 2016; Hackett & Zhao, 1998; Prato, 1993; Rose & Nesbitt-Larking, 2010; Taras, 1990, 2008), all suggest that the news media coverage of politics in Canada (and globally) will indeed be rendered increasingly entertainment-oriented. These trends are supported by findings from Statistics Canada, showing a recent growth in mergers and acquisitions, cuts

in newsroom staff and resources, and some roughly 15% of operating costs on average going towards “subcontracting” – in other words, outsourcing the production of news (see Statistics Canada, 2019). In addition, local publications have been further impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused the Post Media network of newspapers and media outlets to announce layoffs and the closure of some 15 local newspapers (Canadian Press, 2020). As such, the Canadian literature does appear to have the widest – and perhaps most (politically) important – gap within the second research trajectory, the study of infotainment within traditional news media: the bulk of the literature argues that traditional news media, an important democratic institution, is likely to develop increasingly into a market-oriented genre of infotainment; however, research on this subject in Canada has been very sparse, even largely inexistent.

Accordingly, this study is situated within the second approach outlined above, the study of infotainment within traditional news media outlets. More specifically, it is positioned here as a study of the *infotainment characteristics* of hard news coverage, rather than the displacement of hard news stories by soft news. While both of these areas require further research, the study of infotainment characteristics within hard news coverage of politics is a necessary starting point for understanding the dynamics of infotainment and media politics in Canada, as well as for expanding infotainment research further into the field of traditional news media and journalism studies (rather than specifically entertainment-oriented programming alone), not to mention political science. While soft news programming does have important political implications, the central role of traditional news media and journalism within the contemporary democratic process suggests that the existence of infotainment characteristics within this more traditional informational domain would have highly important political influences and effects. As such, by studying infotainment characteristics within traditional news media, we may establish a baseline from which to understand and compare the informational dynamics at play within these and other Canadian media.

3. Methodology & Case Study

As discussed in the last chapter, infotainment research – especially within traditional news media – is generally lacking in standardised methods and conceptualisations for analysis. The array of concepts, definitions, and operationalisations for analysing infotainment within the news do not lend themselves to a neat structuring of similar and comparable research across regions, countries, or even media. In light of this, the challenge of the infotainment researcher is to filter out which methods and conceptualisations from the broad base of emerging literature are more or less helpful to their own media contexts and research purposes. We must therefore take the compatibility of competing research methods into account, as well as their compatibility to the medium under analysis, the case study under analysis, and the regional or national context and its peculiarities. While media and communications theory and research have a vibrant history in Canada (Rose & Nesbitt-Larking, 2010), no comprehensive studies and conceptualisations of infotainment characteristics within Canada’s traditional news media have been undertaken, leaving an important gap in the literature. Many media scholars have indicated the general tendency of Canadian media to follow similar trends to their U.S. counterparts (Edge, 2016; Hackett & Zhao, 1998; Prato, 1993; Rose & Nesbitt-Larking, 2010; Taras, 1990, 2008), suggesting that many research methods from the U.S. context are likely to be broadly applicable in Canada as well. However, Canada’s socio-cultural history and broadcasting traditions do differ from the United States’ and affect Canadian media in a number of ways. As such, the conceptual and methodological choices made to study infotainment within this context must be built largely from the ground up, while still drawing insights from the infotainment literature on other countries and regions.

Studying infotainment within Canada’s traditional news media requires a number of important methodological choices to be made. In today’s growing and fragmented media landscape, one of the first main tasks is to determine which medium or media to analyse. Canadians consume their political news and information through an array of media platforms and technologies, while the country’s geographically-,

culturally-, and politically-diverse landscape tends to further diversify the means through which citizens inform themselves and engage politically. Despite growing media fragmentation, legacy media outlets still dominate the Canadian media landscape, with TV, radio, and print news gaining higher overall consumption than online versions (Newman et al., 2020, p. 90). While online news consumption is growing quickly, compared to a decline in TV and print news (Newman et al., 2020, p. 90), Canadian newspaper readership is actually increasing when accounting for both print and online versions of newspapers (Ladurantaye, 2013), and a recent survey shows that online news consumption is largely preferred in text-based, rather than video-based formats (Leclair & Charlton, 2019, p. 11). Indeed, some 77% of Canadians in major markets read newspapers each week, either in print or online formats, with more than half of newspaper readers accessing their newspapers online (“Snapshot 2016 Daily Newspapers”). Furthermore, legacy news outlets command higher overall levels of trust among Canadians than general online, search engine, and social media sources (see Leclair & Charlton, 2019, pp. 3-4; Newman et al., 2020, p. 90). This holds for both print and online versions of newspapers as well, which command higher overall levels of trust than even television news (“Snapshot 2016 Daily Newspapers”). Legacy outlets are also increasingly shifting traditional broadcast news and newspaper coverage towards online platforms where they can be consumed and shared further, especially by younger generations. Accordingly, the overall importance and relevance of Canada’s legacy media outlets remains strong. For this reason, I chose to study the infotainment characteristics of hard news within Canadian newspapers’ election coverage, accounting for both print and online formats thereof (more on this below).

Given the context and the medium under analysis, the methodological and conceptual design must be guided by a set of primary research questions which this study seeks to answer. The preliminary research question posited at the outset of this study still holds in light of the literature review, as comparable infotainment research in Canada has been largely inexistent. By situating this study within the second approach to infotainment research outlined above, and by determining that newspaper coverage is the most appropriate baseline for the initial study of infotainment characteristics within Canadian hard news media,

the following two primary research questions have been developed to guide both the methodological design and analysis of this study.

3.1 Primary Research Questions

- **Research Question 1:** To what degree do Canadian newspapers' election coverage of Canadian politics contain characteristics of infotainment?
- **Research Question 2:** What is the nature of infotainment and its characteristics within Canadian newspapers' coverage of Canadian electoral politics?

So, how did this study investigate these questions? What theoretical framework and interpretive method of analysis did I employ? And what specific material formed the dataset that was the empirical basis of my analysis? The remainder of this chapter will outline the specific details regarding methodological choices and structure, the case study, and data collection and analysis methods. Supplementary detailed information is also provided in Appendices 1 and 2, which are referred to below as appropriate.

3.2 Interpretive Method of Analysis

In terms of the specific interpretive method of analysis used to investigate the existence and intensity of infotainment in Canadian newspapers, I chose to employ a mixed methods approach – one which is characterized by a manual, qualitative analysis of news items but uses a detailed Coding Dictionary and the mixed methods software '*QDA Miner*' to help organize and analyse the data (thus allowing various types of quantitative analysis to be brought to bear on the data as well).

In this approach, the primary discursive unit of analysis is the individual news item (holistically considered, including both the headline and main text). The Coding Dictionary, moreover, was developed in several stages by condensing the array of methods found in the literature into a comprehensive categorisation of infotainment characteristics, with each main category being comprised of several sub-categories. The Coding Dictionary was then tested on a sample of 60 news items from the dataset and subsequently refined to ensure the clarity of definitions and the applicability of the codes to real-world data from the Canadian context. Once the Coding Dictionary was finalized, the entire dataset was then coded,

and both qualitatively and quantitatively analysed using the *QDA Miner* qualitative data analysis software. After coding all data and categorising each news item on the Infotainment Scale (see below), the dataset was systematically analysed at the category and sub-category levels to determine specific qualitative trends and particularities so as to better understand the nature of infotainment characteristics in Canadian election news coverage.

3.3 Defining Infotainment: Conceptualisation and Operationalisation

How, *specifically*, do I define infotainment for the purposes of this study? And how did I operationalise it into coding questions for my analysis? While infotainment is defined and operationalised in several varying manners throughout the literature, the majority of conceptualisations can be condensed into three main categories.² Accordingly, in this study I define infotainment as follows:

- Infotainment as a phenomenon within traditional ‘hard news’ election coverage consists, generally, of a news item whose content, framing, and presentational style render the news:
 - (1) *Personalised*, for example focusing more on politicians, their style, personal traits, etc., rather than on policies, social/political/economic issues, parties, programmes/platforms, or other more substantive political content;
 - (2) *Sensational* rather than ‘serious,’ analytical, investigative, or otherwise educative and substantive; or
 - (3) *Decontextualized and Speculative*, rather than factually informed, socially and politically contextualised, or consisting of genuine events/information (as opposed to constructed/scripted/staged events/information).

² The original conceptualisation/definition developed during the early stages of this study included a fourth main category focused on ‘Format’ characteristics. This category is more directly relevant to televised/broadcast media, or to content analyses that include the use of photos and broader placement/format characteristics of newspapers and news websites. I have removed this fourth category from my conceptualisation/definition of infotainment for the present study as the dataset consists only of textual versions of newspaper articles collected from the Dow Jones *Factiva* database (a collection of televised newscasts originally intended for analysis was lost in an unfortunate error). As such, the analysis of Format characteristics has been omitted from the present study.

To measure the presence and degree of these three aspects of infotainment, I therefore created a detailed Coding Dictionary that further developed each of these three characteristics and expressed them as coding questions. For reasons of space, here I will simply note the specific questions so that the reader is familiar with the approach. However, the full Coding Dictionary (complete with definitions, explanations, and justifications of the tripartite definition and the specific sub-components of each of the three main Infotainment Categories) can be found in Appendix 1 for readers who would like more explanation of each question.

1. **Personalisation**

Privatisation:

- 1a: *Does the news item present information in a privatised manner?* (Y/N)
- 1b: *If yes, how so?* (Open question)

Celebrification:

- 2a: *Does the news item reference the celebrity status, fame, recognition, or image of politicians, or present politicians through a celebrity lens?* (Y/N)
- 2b: *If yes, how so?* (Open question)

Personalisation:

- 3a: *Does the news item present information in a personalised manner?* (Y/N)
- 3b: *If yes, how so?* (Open question)

Use of (politician's) Tweets & Social Media:

- 4a: *Are politicians' (or others') personal or political communications on social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, etc.) used and commented on as a form of news?* (Y/N)
- 4b: *If yes, how so?* (Open question)

Overall Personalisation:

- 5a: *Based on questions 1-4, what is the overall prevalence of "Personalisation" as a form of infotainment in the news item?*
(little to no personalisation) 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 (highly personalised)

2. **Sensationalisation**

Emotional appeals and narratives:

- 6a: *Does the news item present information through the use of emotional appeals, primers, or narrative structures, including through human-interest perspectives?*
 - Y/N
- 6b: *If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after

Sensational focus on scandal:

- 7a: Does the news item focus on a scandal in a sensational or dramatic, rather than analytical, investigative, or contextualised manner?
 - Y/N
- 7b: If yes, how so?
 - Open question; recode into categories after

Conflict as a form of political sensationalism:

- 8a: Does the news item focus on a political conflict sensationally, or as a form of political campaigning (i.e. non-substantive conflict deriving from politicians and the campaign themselves, rather than substantive conflict over policies, public scandals, platforms, ideologies, etc.)?
 - Y/N
- 8b: If yes, how so?
 - Open question; recode into categories after

Framing stories as exciting or dramatic:

- 9a: Does the news item present stories/events as exciting or dramatic when it is not clear that the events/discourses represented are indeed of such a nature?
 - Y/N
- 9b: If yes, how so?
 - Open question; recode into categories after

Various Sensationalistic Devices:

- 10a: Does the news item present stories with any other identifiable forms of sensationalisation or sensationalistic devices/strategies?
 - Y/N
- 10b: If yes, how so?
 - Open question; recode into categories after

Overall Sensationalisation:

- 11: Based on questions 6-10, what is the overall prevalence of “Sensationalisation” as a form of infotainment in the news item?
 - (little to no sensationalisation) 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 (highly sensationalised)

3. Decontextualisation

Production and coverage of pseudo-events/news reality frames:

- 12a: Does the news item cover or help to produce a “pseudo-event” or “news reality frame”?
 - Y/N
- 12b: If yes, how so?
 - Open question; recode into categories after

Candidate challenges:

- 13a: Does the news item utilise or produce a “candidate challenge”?

- Y/N
- 13b: *If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after

Opinion & Speculation:

- 14a: *Does the news item use opinion and/or speculation?*
 - Y/N
- 14b: *If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after

Ambiguity:

- 15a: *Does the news item cover or present ambiguous information without making attempts to clarify or question it?*
 - Y/N
- 15b: *If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after

Conflict as a lack of investigative journalism ('pro et contra' reporting):

- 16a: *Does the news item cover political/public conflicts (i.e. non-personalised conflicts) by providing adversarial, negative content, without contextualising, investigating, or analysing them?*
 - Y/N
- 16b: *If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after

Strategic Game Framing:

- 17a: *Does the news item present political coverage or other information through a "strategic game" frame in a way that decontextualizes the coverage of politics?*
 - Y/N
- 17b: *If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after

Episodic Framing:

- 18a: *Does the news item frame the story/information in an episodic manner?*
 - Y/N
- 18b: *If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after

Overall Decontextualisation:

- 19: *Based on questions 12-18, what is the overall prevalence of "Decontextualisation & Pseudo-Events" as a form of infotainment in the news item?*
 - (little to none) 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 (highly prevalent)

3.4 Defining 'Serious'/Informative News

In addition to examining each article for the presence (and intensity) of the three characteristics that I argue define infotainment, I also examined each article for the presence (and intensity) of what is usually viewed

as infotainment’s opposite: a more ‘serious’ or informative news standard. To define this standard, I rely on elements of the quintessentially “golden age” standard of journalism and news product. The “golden age” or “high modernist” period of journalism is characterized by a “strong orientation toward an ethic of public service” (Krause, 2011, p. 96), the localised production of news, investigative journalism, a ‘serious,’ ‘objective,’ or analytical style, and a critical approach to or “professional distrust of sources” (Schiller, 1979, p. 56), especially governmental, corporate, and PR sources. For a more detailed definition, explanation, and justification of what this news standard entails, see the “‘Serious’/Informative Coverage & Style” section of the Coding Dictionary in Appendix 1. However, in brief, I used the following coding questions to analyse the presence and intensity of this news standard:

1. **Presentation Style**

‘Objective’ and analytical style:

- 20a: *Does the news item offer information in an ‘objective’, dispassionate, investigative, and/or analytical style? (Y/N)*
- 20b: *If yes, how so?*

Overall ‘Serious’/Informative Presentation Style:

- 21: *Based on question 26, what is the overall prevalence of “‘Serious’/Informative Presentation Style” in the news item? (little to none) 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 (highly prevalent)*

2. **Substance/Information Covered**

Topic & Content:

- 22a: *Does the news item discuss and present substantive information that is informative and socially/politically relevant? (Y/N)*
- 22b: *If yes, how so?*

Conflict as a natural debate over competing options:

- 23a: *Does the news item cover political conflicts as debates over competing options/policies/worldviews/etc., rather than between politicians or competing parties in a personalised or competitive frame? (Y/N)*
- 23b: *If yes, how so?*

Watchdog Role (see Hallin & Mellado, 2018):

- 24a: *Does the news item cover information that is typical of the journalistic “watchdog role”? (Y/N)*
- 24b: *If yes, how so?*

Civic Role (see Hallin & Mellado, 2018):

- 25a: *Does the news item cover information that is typical of the journalistic “civic role”? (Y/N)*

- 25b: *If yes, how so?*

Overall ‘Serious’/Informative Substance/Information Covered:

- 26: *Based on questions 20-25, what is the overall prevalence of “‘Serious’/Informative Substance/Information Covered” in the news item?* (little to none) 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 (highly prevalent)

3.5 Overall Infotainment Scale

To be sure, for a news item to constitute infotainment it does not require the presence of *all* the characteristics outlined in the infotainment definition provided above. Moreover, while the ideal-type concepts of ‘entertainment’ and ‘serious news coverage’ are largely mutually exclusive, empirically speaking, news articles can, and often do, mix characteristics of the two together. As such, a news item may well include elements of both infotainment characteristics and serious news coverage.

Unsurprisingly, then, most prominent media scholars suggest that we should see the information-entertainment dyad more as a continuum between information and entertainment, rather than a dichotomous categorisation (see Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001). This, in turn, suggests that the attempt to analyse the presence of ‘infotainment’ in a given news article (or broader media environment) is not a black and white task best answered by a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Rather, it is one best answered relatively and holistically – by comparing the presence and intensity of the various infotainment and ‘serious news’ characteristics and then identifying where, on the spectrum that stretches from ‘pure’ (ideal type) entertainment to ‘pure’ (ideal type) serious news coverage, a given article/environment falls.

On one hand, the questions in the Coding Dictionary already outlined above afford the opportunity to do precisely this, since they seek to offer a detailed portrait of the presence and intensity of each of the various characteristics of both infotainment and serious news coverage, which in turn offers a strong basis to make judgments about if, how, and to what degree a given article embodies one or more infotainment characteristics. However, there are obvious advantages to systematically and explicitly asking the comparative question of where on the infotainment-versus-serious news coverage spectrum each news item falls. As such, after completing all of the coding questions above, each news item was also ranked

holistically on a 3-point ‘Infotainment Scale’ as a direct means of measuring the relative levels and intensities of infotainment in newspaper election coverage, as well as for answering **Research Question 1**.

3.6 Infotainment Scale

Based on a holistic qualitative reading and coding, each news item is scored on the Infotainment Scale below:

- **1** = predominantly informational, substantive, or ‘serious’ and analytical; there are little to no infotainment characteristics present.
- **2** = some or a significant amount of infotainment characteristics. If a news item falls under this category, is it:
 - **I/E:** generally informative; while infotainment characteristics are present, more ‘serious’ coverage and informative, substantive content are dominant.
 - Or**
 - **I=E:** about equal in terms of infotainment characteristics and substantive, informational characteristics.
 - Or**
 - **E/I:** generally entertaining; while ‘serious’ and informational content and style are present, infotainment characteristics are dominant.
- **3** = predominantly entertaining/infotainment; an almost complete lack of substantive, informative materials and of a ‘serious’/analytical/investigative style (i.e. an almost complete lack of the “golden age” journalistic ideal and standard).

Note: As alluded to above, my definition of infotainment holds that a news item contains elements of infotainment if it includes characteristics from *at least one* of the coding questions outlined in the infotainment categories, and that it contains elements of ‘serious’/informative coverage if it includes *at least one* of the coding questions outlined in the ‘serious’/informative news category. Infotainment Scale

scores are thus reflective of the relative levels and intensities of infotainment characteristics and ‘serious’/informative news characteristics, evaluated qualitatively.

3.7 Case Study & Data Collection Methods

As we all know, however, even the most clearly theoretically-defined and conceptually-operationalised methodology will still run aground on the rocks if it is used to analyse an insufficient or un-representative dataset. As such, if the above details how the study defines and operationalises the concept/phenomenon of infotainment within hard news coverage, it still leaves us with the question of the nature and representativeness of the sample dataset that this study constructed and analysed.

To study infotainment in the Canadian context and answer the research questions posed above, this study chose to focus on Canadian newspaper coverage of the 2019 Canadian federal election as a revealing case study. The use of election campaigns as a form of case study is common throughout much of the infotainment literature (Alonso, 2016; Baum, 2005; Carillo & Ferre-Pavia, 2013; Onusko, 2011). It also represented a nationally-unified topic that allowing me to collect data from across Canada. Both newspapers and broadcast news are routinely used in infotainment research, with the former having historically been praised as the ‘elite’ form of communication and culture, based on the (liberal pluralist) ideal of rational deliberation, while the latter has commonly been viewed as a debasement of both information and culture and inherently sensational (see Grabe & Bucy, 2009, Ch. 1; Hallin & Mellado, 2018). While this debate is largely normative and continually being challenged as we come to understand the complexities of human cognition and information processing (see Grabe & Bucy, 2009, Ch. 1; Kahneman, 2011; Westen, 2007), I have chosen to analyse newspapers in this study in part as a means of testing the assumptions of seriousness, informativeness, and rationality in print news.

Accordingly, the data collected for this study includes newspaper articles covering the Canadian federal election and related subject matter from a selection of broadsheet newspapers from across Canada. These include six national and regional outlets from across the country, chosen based on distribution numbers and in an attempt to garner a breadth of regional and ideological representation, thus ensuring a

sufficient degree of geographical representation and generalisability (at least across Anglophone Canada; French-language newspapers were not included in this study). The following newspaper outlets were chosen for analysis:

- The *Globe & Mail* (national, with some regional coverage)
- The *National Post* (national, with some regional coverage)
- The *Toronto Star* (both national and regional coverage)
- The *Montreal Gazette* (primarily regional coverage, some piggybacking of national stories)
- The *Calgary Herald* (primarily regional coverage, some piggybacking of national stories)
- The *Vancouver Sun* (primarily regional coverage, some piggybacking of national stories)

Why these newspapers? The *Toronto Star*, the *Globe & Mail*, and the *National Post* are the three most widely-circulated daily newspapers in Canada (Newspapers Canada, “Circulation Report: Daily Newspapers 2015”). Conveniently, these also offer a broad ideological representation, with the *Toronto Star* and the *Globe & Mail* offering a more left-wing and centre-left perspective, respectively, while the *National Post* offers a more right-wing or centre-right perspective. Local/regional representation is achieved through the *Toronto Star*, the *Calgary Herald*, the *Vancouver Sun*, and the *Montreal Gazette*. The *Toronto Star* offers representation from the Greater Toronto Area, which holds Canada’s largest population, and is generally a left-wing or centre-left newspaper. The *Calgary Herald* and *Vancouver Sun* offer representation from Western Canada, along with the politically-significant oil-patch perspective in the prairie provinces, and are both generally centrist to centre-right ideologically. Finally, the *Montreal Gazette* offers representation from Quebec (albeit Anglophone representation, as French-language news outlets are not considered in this study), and a generally centrist to centre-right perspective. These regional newspapers are among the most widely-circulated in their respective provinces. While other regional perspectives (e.g. the Atlantic provinces) are not covered directly, they are partially captured by the regional components of news outlets such as the *Globe & Mail* and the *Toronto Star*, and the majority of the Canadian population is nonetheless represented (geographically speaking, at least) within these newspapers.

In terms of the timeframe of the dataset, Canadian election campaigns are mandated to last a minimum of 36 days but may be called earlier at the request of the Prime Minister for the Governor General

to dissolve Parliament. The 2019 federal election was officially launched on 11 September and concluded on 21 October, resulting in a 41-day election campaign. For this study, newspaper articles were collected for every day of the official campaign (including 22 October to account for coverage of election results) on a weekly basis each Monday morning. This data was gathered from the Dow-Jones *Factiva* database using the following search criteria:

Search Terms for *Factiva* Database:

- “Federal election” OR “Justin Trudeau” OR “Andrew Scheer” OR “Jagmeet Singh” OR “Yves-François Blanchet” OR “Elizabeth May” OR “Maxime Bernier” OR Liberal* OR Conservative* OR “Green Party” OR “New Democrat*” OR “NDP” OR “People’s Party of Canada”

3.8 Filtering Criteria

Once all these articles were collected, they were then manually sorted and filtered. Since my research questions focus on hard news in Canada, I examined each article in the initial ‘full’ dataset and eliminated any article that failed to embody two key criteria:

- (1) That the article represented regular ‘hard news’ articles, features on the election or candidates/ parties/ other subject matter related or relevant to the election, or interviews with political candidates, rather than opinion pieces, columns, or letters to the editor; and
- (2) That the article discussed the topic of the federal election more than tangentially, e.g. they focused on one or some of the following:
 - the 2019 federal election/any component thereof or issue therein,
 - main party leaders,
 - any political candidate for office,
 - any political party,
 - families or other personal-life aspects of party leaders and candidates
 - Citizen perspectives on the election/issues (not including letters to the editor, opinion pieces, etc.)

Since the research questions are concerned with ‘hard news’ formats rather than opinion pieces and columnists (for example), and due to the overall unreliability of *Factiva*’s labeling system, I had to filter

out any such pieces that found their way into the initial dataset. As such, for any news items that seemed like they might be better classified as an opinion piece, rather than hard news, I filtered based on (a) web searches, where possible, to understand how the news outlet itself labels or markets the news item; and (b) web search and personal knowledge of self-identification (as reporter vs columnist) of the Canadian journalists/reporters/columnists who wrote the articles.

Finally, to ensure that all of the articles in the dataset were structurally similar enough to support accurate comparative analysis, any broadsheet articles that were less than 250 words were included only if they were deemed to offer enough information to undertake a meaningful ‘infotainment analysis’ on the article.

3.9 Final Dataset

This data collection method resulted in a total of **4627** items being gathered initially. After removing duplicates and filtering any items that didn’t meet the criteria listed above (as well as any post-election coverage from 22 October, which was found to be of such a different and distinct nature that it could not legitimately be included with all of the ‘pre-results’ coverage), the final dataset comprised **969** separate and distinct news items.

3.10 Hypotheses

Based on findings in the literature and the primary research questions of this study, I began my study with the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Canadian newspapers will present the majority of their coverage of the 2019 Canadian federal election campaign with the dominant use of infotainment characteristics (i.e. score higher than a ‘2(I=E)’ on the Infotainment Scale).

Hypothesis 1 is formulated based on the trends identified in the literature at the media systems level, which forecast that the corporate synergies and general trends in journalism and media systems will see all forms of news media grow increasingly entertainment-oriented. In particular, according to Altheide

(2004) “journalistic culture within the context of a capitalist and entertainment oriented news media” has changed the “working assumptions” of both journalists and audiences (p. 293) so as to render the infotainment format a normalised and expected form across news media. Delli Carpini & Williams (2001), along with Baym (2005), also argue that media are transforming to converge both informative and entertaining elements in diverse new ways. As Baym (2005) suggests, the media landscape is undergoing a “fundamental blurring of news and entertainment—a conflation that cuts both ways” (p. 262). This expectation is further strengthened by findings in the literature which argue that news audience decline has resulted in increasing levels of infotainment and sensationalisation within traditional news formats (Baum, 2005; Harrington, 2008; Langman, 2016). As such, there is a broad consensus view which believes that news media are undergoing a fundamental transformation towards entertainment-oriented coverage.

In light of the American influence on Canadian media and culture and the capitalist, entertainment-oriented nature of most contemporary Canadian media (see Cohen-Almagor, 2002; Rose & Nesbitt-Larking, 2010; Taras, 2008; Thussu, 2007b), **Hypothesis 1** tests whether the documented increases in infotainment in American news media (e.g. Graber, 1994; Kellner, 2003; Patterson, 1993, 2000) are mirrored in the Canadian context. Accordingly, **Hypothesis 1** is based on the expectations in the literature that even Canadian news media are likely becoming or will become highly entertainment-oriented.

Hypothesis 2: The presence of infotainment characteristics will be negatively correlated with the presence of ‘serious’ and substantive information offered within election coverage. In other words, the more infotainment characteristics are found within hard news election coverage, the less ‘serious’ and substantive information will be offered.

Hypothesis 2 is tested by considering the overall results of the Infotainment Scale. The potential growth in infotainment that this study seeks to identify and measure in the Canadian context leads to the important question of whether increases in the use of infotainment formats have a negative impact on the supply of ‘serious,’ substantive, and informative content in the news – that which is widely viewed as necessary to the citizen’s democratic role (Aalberg et al., 2010; Bennett, 2003; Thussu, 2007b). There is

much scholarly debate over this question. Research has found that the market-based interests in news production have led to increased infotainment framing of serious news and the displacement of factual, investigative coverage of politics by personalised human-interest perspectives, partisan commentary and opinion, and speculation (Graber & Holyk, 2011; Hamilton, 2004; Just, 2011; Patterson, 2000). While some remain optimistic about changing forms of journalism and the ability of infotainment to replace hard news with a more popularised, accessible format (notably in light of technological changes to media systems; see Jones, 2009; Thussu, 2007b), others argue that we nevertheless “appear to be losing this important kind of [hard] news far faster than we are replacing it” (Jones, 2009, p. 21).

However, some have found contradictory evidence, suggesting that sufficient levels of informative content are still offered in spite of the rise in infotainment (Zaller, 1992, 2003). For example, Zaller (2003) argues that the news media offer a sufficient degree of serious information, acting as a ‘burglar alarm’ for the monitorial citizen by highlighting the issues, scandals, events, and problems that require attention by the average citizen (p. 121). Harrington (2008) also argues that several forms of ‘new’ media offer the potential to both popularise and render the news entertaining while simultaneously using their popularity “to deal with the issues which have the greatest impact within the public sphere” (p. 279). On top of this, Reinemann et al. (2012) review a number of (admittedly dated) findings which suggest that hard news is not diminishing. In any case, a lively debate continues over the question of whether or not the news media supply sufficient levels of serious, informative content to citizens in the era of infotainment (see Bennett, 2003; Just, 2011; Harrington, 2008; Thussu, 2007b; Zaller, 1992, 2003). Accordingly, **Hypothesis 2** is formulated based on the contested assumption that a growth in entertainment-oriented coverage or infotainment framing of news has been accompanied by a reduction in the amount of serious and substantive information offered. **Hypothesis 2** seeks to test whether such a negative correlation exists.

3.11 Final note: Limitations of the Methodology

One final area that merits a brief discussion is the limitations to this methodology or, in other words, a brief outline of what this study *is not* purporting to accomplish. There are three main limitations to this study and

its methodology which merit discussing here. First, this study does not account for the visual or format characteristics of news items. The format and visual characteristics of news have been identified as important components of the infotainment format (Baym, 2005; Brants & Neijens, 1998; Ekman, 1983; Graber, 1994; Thussu, 2007b; also see Brader, 2005) with important effects on audiences. However, given the data collection methods of this study, which uses the Dow-Jones *Factiva* database to source newspaper articles from across the country, such characteristics have been omitted from the analysis. This is in large part due to the fact that the photos accompanying news items are not reliably available through *Factiva* searches, while the broader format characteristics and placements of stories in both physical newspapers and news media websites are also not accounted for. As such, the content analysis undertaken in this study is purely textual.

Second, this is primarily a *qualitative* study of infotainment characteristics. While a minor quantitative aspect is included for the purposes of broadly tracking the frequencies with which infotainment characteristics are used in political news coverage, this study, its Coding Dictionary, and its analytical methods are constructed first and foremost with the goal of understanding the *nature* of infotainment in Canadian election news coverage. As such, many of the quantitative results must be taken with a grain of salt and viewed as relative gauges of frequency, rather than exhaustively-catalogued statistics or figures. Indeed, the quantitative results tracking the *sub-categories* which constitute each major infotainment category (e.g. Personalisation, Sensationalisation, Decontextualisation, and ‘Serious’/Informative News) do not speak to the intensities or qualities of these various characteristics, nor their overall effects on the nature and quality of news items. As such, they should be viewed as general guides for interpretative purposes, rather than firm statistics. In contrast, the *Category Scales* (1-5) for each major infotainment category and for the overall Infotainment Scale (1-3) do represent the most comprehensive overall qualitative reading and analysis of each individual news item. As such, the quantitative frequencies for these categorisations do reflect the quality and intensities of the various infotainment categories much more accurately.

Third, this study does not capture the wide array of trends identified by news media and journalism scholars which serve to drive or manipulate certain political messages and discourses (e.g. agenda-setting, issue priming) or promote discriminatory stereotypes and biases (e.g. racist, sexist, xenophobic/Islamophobic rhetoric, etc.). Furthermore, this study does not capture the quality, accuracy, and diversity of perspectives with which more substantive, factual information is presented. Since infotainment characteristics are the primary focus of analysis, the ‘serious’/informative information that represents the contrast to such characteristics is less rigorously defined and conceptualised. In other words, this study seeks to identify when ‘serious’/informative information is presented along with or in contrast to infotainment characteristics, although an in-depth analysis and evaluation of the quality of such information is not undertaken here. As such, an important caveat to the results of this study is that the categorisation of news items as predominantly informative (i.e. lacking in infotainment characteristics) does not reflect the overall quality of such informative content itself (i.e. it does not actively track issues of agenda-setting, issue priming, racist, sexist, xenophobic, etc. rhetoric which may serve to lower the quality of news items from various critical perspectives). It is thus important to highlight that the overarching goal of this study is to determine the nature of infotainment in Canadian election news coverage, and that the findings may not, therefore, speak to or reflect other issues and critical evaluations of news media coverage.

Finally, while 969 articles is a very large and reliable dataset for this type of study, it is worth noting that some 271 news items from across the Post Media network (which includes the *National Post*, *Calgary Herald*, *Montreal Gazette*, and *Vancouver Sun*, among several others not included in this study) were duplicated across newspapers and geographical regions. Such duplicates were only analysed once and from the newspaper that they most appeared to have originated from (determined in part through Web searches and identification of authors). Two things result from this:

- First, the total number of 969 under-represents the actual reach of the articles analysed, since many were shared or duplicated several times over.

- Second, given the question of duplicates and the frequent trend in sharing news items across their media network, I have chosen to compile all Post Media newspapers into one overarching category rather than break them out into individual newspapers. As such, while each newspaper within the Post Media network was collected and analysed individually, I will discuss the findings from the analysis on the aggregate level of Post Media newspapers, in comparison to the *Globe & Mail* and *Toronto Star*. Where specific peculiarities or findings exist from individual Post Media outlets, I will nevertheless discuss them and their significance for this study. A more detailed chart of collection numbers for each newspaper can be found in Appendix 2.

4. Results of the Study

Having now outlined the structure and methods of this study and its place within the broader infotainment literature, we may consider the results of the study in response to the primary research questions and hypotheses. In this chapter, I will briefly present the main findings on the relative levels of infotainment characteristics in Canadian newspapers' election coverage, followed by a closer look at each of the main infotainment categories (e.g. Personalisation, Sensationalisation, and Decontextualisation) to demonstrate the nature and intensity of each category, the inter-relations and synergies between them, and their overall role in constructing the infotainment format in Canadian newspapers. Finally, I will conclude the chapter with a brief presentation of the dynamics of 'Serious'/Informative news characteristics in a comparative perspective with the infotainment characteristics identified.

4.1 Overview of the Main Findings: Infotainment Scale Results

Two primary research questions guided this study, one questioning the prevalence of infotainment characteristics within Canadian newspapers' election coverage, and another questioning the nature of such characteristics. The results for **Research Question 1** - To what degree do Canadian newspapers' election coverage of Canadian politics contain characteristics of infotainment? – are found in Table 1 below, which provides an overview of the percentage of news items categorised at each interval of the Infotainment Scale.

Table 1: Infotainment Scale Results

	Globe & Mail	Post Media	Toronto Star	All Together
Infotainment Scale				
1	46.60%	28.60%	41.70%	38.30%
2(I/E)	10.30%	9.10%	11.60%	10.40%
2(I=E)	7.70%	10.30%	8.30%	8.90%
2(E/I)	9.80%	15%	14.40%	13.50%
3	25.60%	36.90%	24%	28.90%

Let's first consider the overall findings for all newspapers together. As we see in Table 1, the news items analysed were fairly evenly distributed on the Infotainment Scale, with some 38.30% categorised as

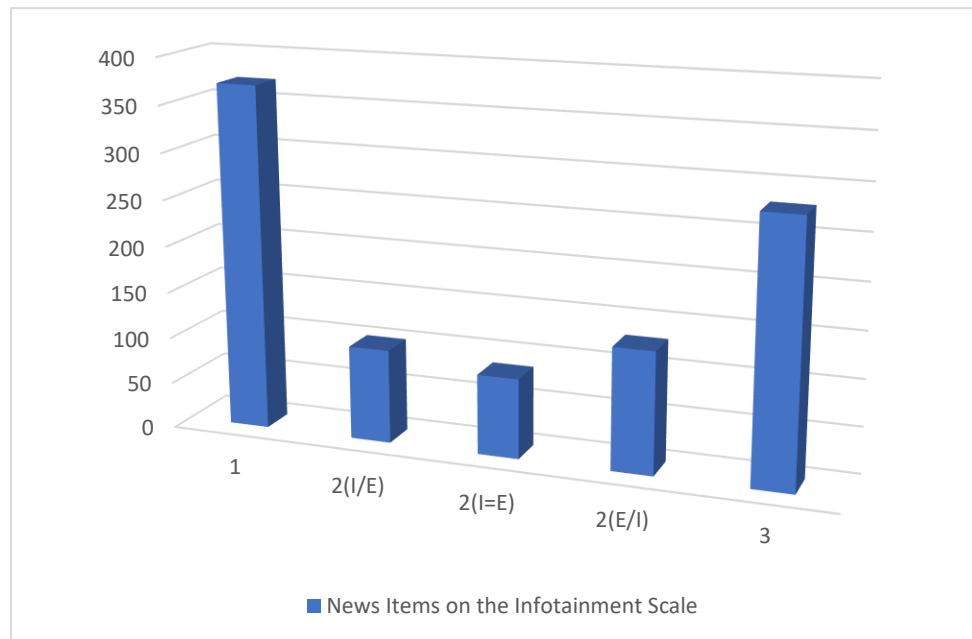
a '1' (containing little to no infotainment characteristics), 32.80% categorised as a '2' (containing some or significant infotainment characteristics), and 28.90% categorised as a '3' (significant or dominant use of infotainment characteristics). An initial impression of these numbers in light of the conceptual framework of this study suggests that a majority of news items (some 57.60% scoring between '1' and '2(I=E)') successfully offer a strong degree of 'serious,' substantive, and informative materials while still incorporating low to medium levels of entertaining or sensational characteristics. By contrast, a still strong minority of news items (some 42.40% scoring between '2(E/I)' and '3') are found to include little to no substantive and informative materials, providing largely entertaining and sensational infotainment characteristics in their place. In light of these numbers, we may reject **Hypothesis 1** (which hypothesised that a majority of news items would score higher than a '2(I=E)' on the Infotainment Scale). Rather, we find that infotainment characteristics are widespread in Canadian newspapers' election coverage (identified in over 60% of news items), yet do not, in the majority of cases, constitute the dominant form of information provided in comparison to a more 'serious'/informative standard. That being said, the fact that more than 40% of news coverage on one of the most quintessentially 'hard news' political subjects (a federal election campaign) still showed strong signs of infotainment style and characteristics demonstrates that this is a phenomenon that has significant purchase in Canadian news coverage, even if it has not yet become the *dominant* mode or style of coverage. As such, the findings regarding the existence and intensity of infotainment in Canadian news coverage underscore the importance of examining the nature and characteristics of Canadian infotainment in much more detail (something which I will pursue in the next section of this chapter).

In terms of **Hypothesis 2** (the hypothesis that we would find a negative correlation between the level of 'serious'/informative information and the level of infotainment characteristics), the findings largely confirmed my hypothesis. It is worthwhile recalling that **Hypothesis 2** was formulated in reaction to observers who argue that infotainment could be a positive phenomenon – e.g. increasing reader/viewer engagement with important policy/political questions – if it was able to mix 'serious'/informative information with more accessible, entertaining information or characteristics. If this was an accurate

portrayal of the nature of infotainment in Canadian news coverage, we would see a large number of news items categorised near the middle of the Infotainment Scale (indicating a positive correlation between these two forms of information and the overlapping of both entertaining, accessible forms of information and ‘serious,’ informative forms), which would create a strong *inverse* U-curve when plotted in a bar chart.

As we see in Chart 1, however, the large majority of news items fall towards each pole of the Infotainment Scale, suggesting that a negative correlation does indeed exist between the levels of ‘serious’/informative information and the levels of infotainment characteristics.

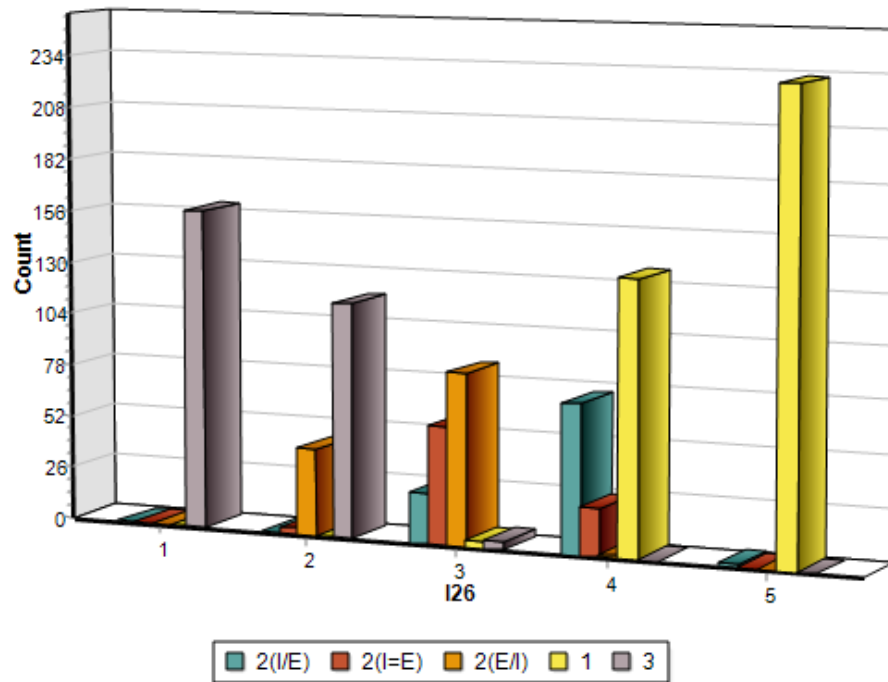
Chart 1: Infotainment Scale Results



In other words, the overall findings suggest that as levels of infotainment characteristics increase, the relative levels of ‘serious’/informative information tend to decrease, rather than remaining prevalent and thus resulting in a middle-ground form of infotainment. While roughly a third of news items fall broadly into this ‘middle-ground’ (i.e. score a ‘2’ on the Infotainment Scale), the large majority of news items fall towards the poles and support the finding of a negative correlation.

This finding is further supported in Chart 2, which shows a cross-tabulation between Infotainment Scale scores (shown here as coloured bars) and the intensity scores on the ‘Serious’/Informative News Scale (shown here on the y-axis, labelled ‘I26’ in accordance with its place in the Coding Dictionary).

Chart 2: Cross-Tab of Infotainment Scale and ‘Serious’/Informative News Scale



Herein, we see that the higher the intensity and presence of ‘Serious’/Informative news elements scores on the scale (towards a highest possible score of ‘5’), the lower the average Infotainment Scale score becomes, indicating a negative correlation between these two types of information and characteristics. In light of this, we may accept **Hypothesis 2**, with the caveat that this negative correlation between types of information provided is not statistically-verified, but rather interpreted from the overall Infotainment Scale results, cross-tabulations with Category Scale results, and evidenced through the qualitative analyses below. Given these findings, we may posit that *any further increases in the frequency and scope of infotainment characteristics will likely reduce, rather than compliment, the relative levels of ‘serious’ and informative information provided* within Canadian newspapers’ election coverage.

If we examine these results not just at the overall aggregate level, but also examine the similarities and differences across the three publishers, we find that the Post Media network of newspapers offers a considerably higher level of infotainment characteristics on the whole than its competitors. A minority (48%) of Post Media news items score as primarily ‘Serious/Informative’ (i.e. between a ‘1’ and ‘2(I=E)’) whereas a strong majority of the *Globe & Mail* and *Toronto Star* news items fall into these categories (64.6% and 61.6%, respectively). Indeed, we find that both the *Globe & Mail* and the *Toronto Star* show very similar scores and levels of infotainment within their election coverage, tending towards a more ‘serious’ and informative standard than their Post Media competitors. Since the vast majority of *Post Media* newspapers tend towards a centre-right or right-wing perspective, whereas in comparison, the *Globe & Mail* and *Toronto Star* would be categorised as centrist and centre-left, these initial findings raise questions about the degree to which ideological or partisan factors may influence the nature and degree of use of the infotainment format. Such findings also appear to corroborate research on the rhetorical and discursive styles of left- and right-wing actors, which has suggested that (in North America at least), the left tends towards more factual, policy-based, or rational styles of persuasion and discourse while the right tends towards a more emotionally-based persuasion and discourse (see Westen, 2007).

On the whole, the results of this study suggest that the infotainment format is widely used in Canadian newspapers’ election coverage. Nevertheless, *while infotainment characteristics are widespread and often replace a more ‘serious’ or informative format, they do not purge the coverage of substantive and informative content entirely*. However, looking at the frequencies on the Infotainment Scale alone offers only a part of the whole story. While infotainment characteristics may be widespread, a qualitative reading of the nature of such characteristics offers a much more holistic picture of both the nature of newspaper election reporting in Canada and the ways in which it helps shape political discourse and decision- and power-making more generally during federal elections. Accordingly, I will now turn to a detailed overview of the various qualitative trends identified for each infotainment category. These findings will clarify the trends and patterns with which the infotainment format takes form in Canadian

newspapers, as well as animate the relative frequencies on the Infotainment Scale with a qualitative picture of what Canadian newspapers' infotainment formats concretely offer to their readers. In doing so, the remainder of this chapter will also serve as a qualitative description of the nature of infotainment in Canadian newspapers' election coverage, thus answering **Research Question 2** (What is the nature of infotainment and its characteristics within Canadian newspapers' coverage of Canadian electoral politics?).

4.2 Towards a Qualitative Understanding of Canadian Newspapers' Infotainment Format

As noted above, even if a 'full-on' infotainment format is not the dominant mode of Canadian newspapers' election coverage, this study has shown that it is still an important and very prevalent mode of news coverage (with characteristics identified in some roughly 60% of news items), particularly in certain publications and (possibly) from perspectives defined by certain ideological and/or partisan commitments. Given these findings, the fact that 'infotainment' is not a monolithic phenomenon but rather one that has various different characteristics (not all of which must be present to create an 'infotainment' format of coverage), and given that there is almost no existing literature on the nature of infotainment in Canadian newspaper coverage, a more detailed examination of the specific characteristics of infotainment in Canada is clearly required. As such, the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to outlining the detailed findings regarding what specific elements of infotainment are and are not present in Canadian newspaper coverage. To do so, I will examine the degree to which each main element of my definition of infotainment was found to be present, or not, in the dataset.

4.2.1 Personalisation

As discussed in the methodology chapter, 'Personalisation' is the first dimension of my definition of infotainment. So, what did I find in this study? Is personalisation a key element of Canadian infotainment news coverage? And if so, what sub-elements of personalisation were the most important/present?

Considering the quantitative results first, this study suggests that the personalisation of election coverage plays an important, although not dominant role in the overall infotainment format identified within Canadian newspapers. As we see in Table 2a, a considerable majority of news items displayed little evidence of Personalisation characteristics. Only about a quarter of all news items (25.9%) scored above a '3' on the Personalisation Scale, indicating the low intensities of personalisation within most news items, when present at all. We again find that Post Media newspapers tend to score higher than their competitors, demonstrating that the intensity of personalised coverage is slightly higher within the Post Media network.

Table 2a: Personalisation Scale Results

	Globe & Mail	Post Media	Toronto Star	All Together
Personalisation Scale				
1 (Little to none)	60.70%	47.50%	54%	53.40%
2	5.10%	9.70%	8.60%	8.20%
3 (Moderate)	11.10%	12.40%	13.60%	12.60%
4	12.40%	13.90%	10.40%	12.10%
5 (Highly Prevalent)	10.70%	16.50%	13.40%	13.80%

When looking at the frequency of Personalisation sub-categories (Table 2b) identified within newspaper coverage, we see that the bulk of personalisation stems from general forms of personalisation and privatisation, with celebrification and the use of social media showing a notably weaker presence.

Table 2b: Personalisation Sub-Category Results

Personalisation Sub-Categories	Globe & Mail	Post Media	Toronto Star	All Together
Privatisation	13.20%	21.80%	21%	19.40%
Celebrification	10.30%	14.50%	13.90%	13.20%
Personalisation	37.50%	50.10%	45.50%	45.20%
Social Media	5.10%	7.10%	5.60%	6%

As mentioned above, these frequencies offer us more of a general roadmap for interpreting the qualitative results, and must be animated with a qualitative description of the trends identified within and between each sub-category. A number of specific and interrelated trends were identified across Personalisation sub-

categories, which I have synthesized into two overarching components of Personalisation: (1) personalising the political context, or in other words, contextualising political coverage with personalised information, frames, and materials, and (2) anchoring the interpretation of political events, issues, and developments on politicians, rather than broader frames of reference, perspective, or social relevance. I will outline these two trends below, along with a discussion of the smaller trends and patterns that comprise them.

4.2.1.1 Personalising the Political Context

By saturating news coverage with personalised information yet still offering politically-substantive materials, Canadian newspapers have broadly achieved what I term the *personalisation of the political context*. This entails a news format wherein the main political issue, development, or story rests as the explicit journalistic focus of the news item, yet the information provided to illustrate and contextualise the story and educate the reader politically is itself personalised and focused on individual candidates or politicians. This occurs in a number of ways. The most common trend is for news items to simply offer a personalised focus on the individual characteristics, traits, style and performance, gaffes, successes, etc. of candidates. It is difficult to pinpoint a general or common set of examples to represent the breadth of such personalised coverage, as it is often weaved throughout stories in myriad ways within each newspaper. However, a few common themes emerge.

Candidates' performances were focused on heavily throughout the election, with campaign events scrutinized and elaborated upon in an often-strategic personalised frame. For example, in a *National Post* story about the opening day of Andrew Scheer's campaign, Scheer's campaign event is framed in light of his style and performance:

Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer sauntered through the campaign starting gate Wednesday with a clear plan to make this election about your finances and Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau's ethics.

It's the sixth federal campaign for the 40-year-old veteran MP, but his first as Conservative leader - a lack of experience belied by the easy confidence Scheer displayed as he took to the podium to savage Trudeau's handling of the SNC-Lavalin affair. (Rabson, 12 Sept., 2019)

This personalistic focus on performance is carried throughout much of the story, which closely chronicles Scheer's moves and strategies as he campaigns and makes attacks on Justin Trudeau's record. A similar tendency animated coverage of Trudeau's campaign launch:

Trudeau entered Rideau Hall as the Liberal prime minister who defeated past Conservative leader Stephen Harper. He emerged 37 minutes later, accompanied by his wife Sophie Grégoire Trudeau, and launched his bid to keep his job by making a familiar pitch. Then he promptly headed out to familiar territory in British Columbia, "my second home." If there were any doubt about the ability of the Trudeau brand to again carry the day, the Liberals seem to have cast it aside, emblazoning the Trudeau name in big red capital letters across the Boeing 737 that winged its way west. (...)

Trudeau never once mentioned Andrew Scheer's name or that of his other political opponents. But he defended his party's attempts to sow fear about what would happen under the Conservatives. In 2015 Trudeau was seeking to contrast his "sunny ways" brand and desire to connect with people with the Harper government's sterner style. Now Trudeau, who styles himself as a son of B.C. where he lived and taught, is seeking to hold ground. He has roots in the province, as the grandson of legendary MP James "Jimmy" Sinclair, and parlayed his ties to the province to seize 17 ridings in the last campaign. (MacCharles, 11 Sept., 2019)

As well, there was a frequent journalistic focus on candidates' gaffes, missteps or contradictions, and failures, evoked especially through journalistic questioning on the campaign trail. For example, Elizabeth May's 'photoshopped cup' debacle (see Forrest, 25 Sept., 2019; Forrest & Thomson, 24 Sept., 2019) and apparent inconsistency on issues of abortion and Quebec sovereignty (Ballingall, 16 Oct., 2019; Riga, 12 Oct., 2019; The Canadian Press, 11 Sept., 2019), as well as Scheer's apparent inconsistency on issues of abortion (Dickson, 15 Sept., 2019a; Ryan, 3 Oct., 2019), Yves-François Blanchet's gaffe of calling Quebec voters to elect 'people who resemble you' (Dickson, 15 Sept., 2019b), and Trudeau's insensitive gaffe when addressing Indigenous rights protestors at a Liberal fundraiser (Campion-Smith, MacCharles, Boutilier, & Ballingall, 19 Sept., 2019; The Canadian Press, 20 Sept., 2019) were all highlighted, reproduced, and commented on in a generally personalistic, strategy-centric, and uncritical way throughout the campaign. This journalistic focus on the minutia and mistakes made by candidates also ties in to minor yet developing trends in the use of social media posts as the objects of news coverage, which was found most prominently through the use of candidates' social media posts and comments as sources of scandal, often emanating from private-life contexts.

Perhaps the most prominent area of personalised reporting was in the coverage of leaders' and other candidates' debates, which were found to be a hotbed for personalised coverage to the detriment of substantive and informative discussions or debates. In nearly every case of debate coverage, the overwhelming focus was on candidates' performance in the battle to outdo their opponents. Often, this resulted in a journalistic focus on the 'knock-out punches' from the debate, such as criticisms, attacks, or insults that were particularly fiery and damaging:

By the time the two-hour debate wrapped up, no single leader had won the night but it didn't seem either that any of them had fumbled badly.

NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh, the standout of Monday's English debate, was less of a presence even as he tried to resurrect some of his choice lines. He tried to reprise a version of his big line from the English debate, when he labelled Trudeau and Scheer "Mr. Delay and Mr. Deny," during a discussion about whether the leaders would support an oil pipeline that crosses Quebec.

"This is Mr. Pipeline, Mr. Pipeline and Mr. Pipeline," he said, pointing to Scheer, Trudeau and Bernier. "Me, I'm Mr. Jagmeet Singh and I will never impose a pipeline That's clear."

Blanchet found himself fending off critiques of his party's policies and its ultimate goal. He came under fire for leading a party that only runs candidates in Quebec, and therefore can't form government. The Bloc leader pushed back against his opponents' assertions that voting for the Bloc will only help the Liberals or Conservatives. (Campion-Smith & Ballingall, 11 Oct., 2019)

In an article whose headline states that "Policy takes centre stage," this excerpt displays the degree to which 'discussions' of policy debates are framed strongly around the debate performances and best candidate attacks of the evening, rather than the actual substance or context of policies and political issues themselves.

In a similarly sensational and personalistic focus, one *Globe & Mail* headline announces a "Flurry of attacks but no knockouts in chaotic federal leaders' debate," which is followed up with a heavy and explicit focus on candidates' performances:

Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau was the target of a series of ad-hominem criticisms, with Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer aggressively challenging him as a "phony" and a "fraud." Other party chiefs pushed Mr. Trudeau on issues ranging from climate change to ethics. (...) NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh, who has fought to break through in the election campaign, had a forceful performance in the debate, taking aim at both Mr. Scheer and Mr. Trudeau and earning a rare round of applause from the audience who had been asked to refrain from clapping. (...) Mr. Trudeau tried to stay out of the fray, and at times even abstained from defending his record against attacks, for example on Indigenous issues. The Liberal Leader was put on his heels by Mr. Scheer over his ethics record. (Walsh, Dickson, & Zilio, 8 Oct., 2019)

Through this lens, candidates' performances in the debate-as-battle-arena were evaluated as the measure of the debate and its winners and losers, rather than any substantive policy or platform-related debates or conversations. For example, narrow policy frames were often used to undertake personalistic attacks or to compare the traits and competence of various candidates during the debate, which were then reproduced uncritically in almost all debate coverage:

Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer pushed back against aggressive attacks from the NDP and Green Party leaders who are fighting for the same left-of-centre votes, while Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau skipped the first televised election debate.

The leaders clashed on the economy, social programs and climate change as they tried to articulate their positions at the Thursday debate hosted by Maclean's/Citytv. But with a key player absent from the stage in Toronto, NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh and Green Party Leader Elizabeth May directed most of their attacks at Mr. Scheer. (...)

Mr. Trudeau's absence did not stop Mr. Scheer from taking every opportunity to compare his plans with Mr. Trudeau's record while spending little time critiquing the plans laid out by Mr. Singh and Ms. May. Mr. Scheer seized on Mr. Trudeau's broken 2015 promise to balance the budget in four years, saying instead the Liberals left Canadians with "massive deficits as far as the eye can see." (...) Mr. Singh called for more government investments in things like housing, pharmacare and dental care because he said "its clear that families are struggling right now." He accused the Liberals of making life less affordable but warned "Mr. Scheer's going to do even worse." Mr. Singh said Mr. Scheer would end up cutting services like other conservative governments in Ontario and Alberta. (...)

Early on, the debate quickly devolved into incomprehensible cross talk between the three leaders. But Mr. Scheer cut through the static, saying he'd found one point of consensus. "I think we can all agree that Justin Trudeau is afraid of his record and that's why he's not here today," Mr. Scheer said. To which Ms. May replied: "we can now sing kumbaya and keep going." (Walsh, Dickson, Kirkup, & Zilio, 13 Sept., 2019)

As these examples display, the journalistic focus on candidates' performances and styles while reporting on leaders' debates serves to displace any sustained engagement with or discussion of the underlying policies and promises that are meant to be debated. Where policy frames are evoked, they are done so narrowly and with little context or sustained discussion, often passing quickly to another evaluation of candidate performances and personalistic attacks.

A second trend that is closely related to the first is the personalised coverage of scandals. Here, the focus rests largely on leaders' or candidates' virtues/vices, failures/successes, or feelings/rationalizations

when embroiled in scandal. This personalised frame was evident in nearly all campaign reporting on scandals, with the exception of a few articles in the *Toronto Star* that brought a more analytical and investigative perspective to some scandals, offering a broader societal/political frame that looked at, for example, issues of historical and contemporary racism in Canada, or at questions of dual citizenship and political leadership (see Appendix 4 for a comparative example of the coverage of scandal). What we find with such a format is that the coverage of scandal is not in and of itself problematic (e.g. nearly all scandals that were covered throughout the election posed genuinely problematic questions of public-interest based on widely-shared values and beliefs in Canada regarding political actors and their behaviour). Rather, the journalistic use of personalised frames and information serves to contextualise the coverage of scandals in a personalised manner, effectively displacing a more serious and socially-relevant analysis and discussion of the issues or wrongdoings at hand. The questions of right-/wrong-doing, forgiveness, and implications are largely overshadowed and indeed answered by the consideration of the candidate's feelings, genuineness in apologizing, or the strategic electoral considerations focused on their person.

A third trend in the provision of personalised contextualising information is the use of candidates' *private-life information* as descriptive context. Information on the private or personal lives of candidates was not often a main focus of news coverage, but it was found to play an important role as a form of narrative and contextualising information to illustrate political stories and events. Such information often served to provide the 'context' of strategic game frames and the horse-race coverage of candidate races, notably when focusing on specific ridings or regional races. A few examples help illustrate the ways in which such information is used to contextualise stories from the campaign trail:

Born in Ottawa, raised in Hudson, Que., and Kingston, she was a 27-year-old single mother and bartender living in her parents' basement in Ottawa during the 2011 election campaign. "My dream before being an MP was to have a unionized stable job, being able to pay down my student debt, get a small apartment, maybe buy a car," Ms. Brosseau says. "My dream was just to be able to stand on my own two feet."

She barely spoke French, but that didn't stop a friend in the NDP from asking her to put her name on the 2011 ballot. The party was desperate for candidates. (...) As the NDP rose abruptly in the polls in Quebec, Ms. Brosseau was in Las Vegas, enjoying a long-planned vacation. She was immediately nicknamed Vegas Girl. (Perreux, 11 Oct., 2019)

Former lawyer and rookie MP Sean Fraser is trying to keep the seat, running against the Conservative's George Canyon — a country singer who moved to Alberta when his music career took off 15 years ago (Ryan & Grant, 20 Oct., 2019).

Mr. Trudeau has spoken of B.C. as a second home. His mother's family is from B.C. and he relocated to the province in his 20s, when he worked as a snowboard instructor and, eventually, a teacher. The remains of his youngest brother, Michel, were never recovered from a remote Interior lake. Mr. Trudeau regularly vacations in the province. (Bailey, 12 Oct., 2019)

Blanchet is a seasoned campaigner and has name recognition in Quebec where he was a commentator on an afternoon TV show, was once president of Quebec's association for music, shows and film, and was the sole candidate who ran to lead the fractured BQ movement in time for the federal election. (The Toronto Star, 11 Sept., 2019)

His optimistic style is appealing at a time when much of politics is dominated by partisan attacks. He has a strong personal story, centred on surviving abuse by a taekwondo coach and helping his family through crises when his father struggled with alcoholism. (The Toronto Star, 11 Sept., 2019)

The incumbent, popular NDP MP H el ene Laverdi ere, is not running again, and the party's candidate there is Nima Machouf, an epidemiologist and wife of wellknown Quebec politician Amir Khadir. (Forrest, 11 Sept., 2019)

Alfie MacLeod was once a shepherd. As Cape Breton tried to boost its economy in 1975, it imported 1,500 sheep from Scotland, and MacLeod was hired to look after them during their years of quarantine.

As the federal Conservative candidate in the riding of Cape Breton-Canso, MacLeod has built a profile from his history of eclectic roles - coal mine inspector, pro bono auctioneer, justice of the peace, member of the provincial legislature of 16 years. To Cape Bretoners, he is the man who can solemnize your marriage, auction off your horse and slow dance at your local dance despite an infection in 2014 that led to the amputation of his left foot. (Campbell, 19 Sept., 2019)

The Liberal candidate in the riding is Lenore Zann, who is also a well-known name as a member of the legislature for six years (she also had an acting career, during which she became the voice of a character in a television series of X-Men). (Campbell, 19 Sept., 2019)

As part of a broader trend in the use of personalised/personalistic information to contextualise political news, private-life information often displaces the use of more factual, policy-relevant, or substantive information as context when covering local ridings and discussing the candidates running therein. In other cases, it is also used to personalise the narrative by centring it on personalistic contexts rather than policy-relevant or socially-based ones.

One notable sub-trend of privatisation was the focus on the personal relationship between Conservative leader Andrew Scheer and Alberta Premier Jason Kenney. While especially prevalent in Post

Media stories, the privatised focus on Scheer and Kenney’s personal relationship was reproduced in all newspapers and served to contextualise a notable amount of coverage on the campaign in Ontario and the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), resulting in a widespread journalistic focus on both the *strategic implications* of Kenney’s role in the campaign and Kenney and Scheer themselves as individuals and friends, rather than on the concrete issues, policies, debates, etc. in the region (more on this below).

Other more minor forms of personalised contextualisation include trends in celebrification that focus on the popularity, recognition, and fame of candidates. Evidenced sporadically throughout newspapers, and at a fairly low intensity, celebrification was found in such tendencies as identifying “star candidates” – a term used frequently across newspapers – when discussing campaign stops and local electoral races. This term was frequently used to describe highly-mediatised candidates (e.g. Montreal Liberal candidate Steven Guilbeault, who once gained widespread media attention by scaling Toronto’s CN Tower to protest the government’s record on the environment), those with a long or highly-mediatised tenure in government, or those with ‘celebrity’ pasts (e.g. former Olympic medalists, Sylvie Fréchette and Adam van Koeverden, or country music singer, George Canyon). Additionally, candidates – especially party leaders – were occasionally discussed in reference to their celebrity relations and endorsements. Perhaps the most mediatised examples were former U.S. President Barack Obama’s controversial endorsement of Justin Trudeau, as well as Trudeau’s meet and greet with Canadian tennis player, Bianca Andreescu, the celebrated champion of the 2019 U.S. Open. Another notable example was Jagmeet Singh’s endorsement from and discussions of his personal relationship with celebrated poet, Rupi Kaur.

Finally, another overarching trend also evoked conceptions of popularity and recognition through the focus on crowd sizes at party leaders’ campaign events. This trend, also falling broadly within the use of personalised information as contextualising information, tends to elicit positive conceptions of the leaders’ popularity, likeability, and recognition by giving the reader an impression of the size, energy, and mood of excited crowds, all gathered closely for a chance to see the leaders. For example, when discussing campaign events and their crowds of supporters, a number of common indicators and terms are used: “speaking to a crowd of over 400 raucous supporters” (Wyton, 13 Sept., 2019); “saw him rally a large

crowd of roughly 800 people” (Laing, 21 Oct., 2019); “Mr. Scheer spoke to an energized crowd of about 200 supporters (...) Mr. Scheer was welcomed by more than 500 fired-up supporters” (Dickson, 12 Sept., 2019); “Hundreds of people chanted ‘Justin, Justin, Justin!’ as he entered the packed hall at the Italian cultural centre to the newly announced Liberal campaign theme song One Hand Up, by Canadian band the Strumbellas” (Zilio, 12 Sept., 2019); “he was greeted by a big crowd of supporters from multiple ridings (...)” (Walsh & Kirkup, 23 Sept., 2019); “An excited crowd grew increasingly impatient at a Liberal rally in Mississauga, Ont. Saturday night (...)” (Zilio & Dickson, 13 Oct., 2019). While these various trends in celebrification are minor overall, they undoubtedly serve an important role in the overall personalisation of the context and information offered in election coverage.

4.2.1.2 *Anchoring Interpretation*

Perhaps the most dominant and overarching form of personalisation found was the use of party leaders (or occasionally others) as the main anchor of interpretation of political issues, debates, questions, and developments, but in this case *without direct reference* to personalised traits, characteristics, etc. Within Canadian newspapers, this form of personalisation sees the journalistic focus shift not to the personalistic characteristics of candidates, but rather to the candidates as voices of authority and political knowledge, using their comments, statements, and opinions to drive political discourse and interpret the public sphere, rather than a broader use facts/statistics, research, or a diversity of perspectives and contextual information from across society and the public/civil sphere. One of the overarching ways in which this occurs is through the presentation of campaign statements, promises, attacks, or other political communications from party leaders on specific issues or questions, which are presented uncritically and without broader context or perspectives to support or question them. The result is a personalised perspective wherein political interpretation and evaluation is anchored in candidates or party leaders, leaving critical or minority perspectives, rebuttals, or criticisms marginalized or simply not covered at all.

However, within this trend there exist a number of more specific tendencies for anchoring interpretation on the individual. The most common tendency was to focus interpretation of political

developments on the party leaders by following closely where they are, are going, or have gone along the campaign trail, and focusing largely on what they are doing at each point. While at first this may appear as the common sense trajectory of coverage for a national campaign, we find that the quality of reporting is undermined by doing so. The horse-race coverage of national campaigns seems to centre on the individual leaders (or sometimes other candidates) and interpret both political and campaign developments *through them* as anchors. The effect is *a decrease in substantive coverage and discussion* of policy options, debates, issues, and perspectives, both local and national, which are effectively replaced by the personalised focus on where the leaders are and what they are doing there. Tying into the strategic game frame and narrative (discussed below), the effect of such personalised anchors of interpretation is to discuss political issues and their importance in terms of strategy, viewing ‘where’ the leaders are as sign-posts for interpreting the relative importance of issues and interpreting those issues accordingly based on who the leaders speak to, what they say, and how they perform in doing so. The main focal point of political coverage becomes the person of the candidate/party leader, and any broader developments, debates, discourses, and perspectives on politics are frequently subsumed to this personalistic anchor and minimized or neglected. Political interpretation becomes, in a sense, the interpretation of politicians and their strategies, with little substance beyond this focal point.

One important example of such a trend is the personalised focus on the Scheer/Kenney relationship as an anchor for interpreting the Conservatives’ campaign strategy in Ontario and Alberta. Across newspapers, a narrative is developed that anchors strategic interpretations on these two characters and focuses on their strategies and likelihood of success as such. By anchoring interpretation in this way, the concrete issues and political or policy debates in the GTA are often overlooked. In a few notable examples, such personalised anchoring results in a privileging of Kenney’s perspective on Torontonians and Ontarian public affairs (consistently pro-Conservative and anti-Trudeau). While undoubtedly experienced and an authority on the region’s issues, this personalised anchoring results in a one-sided perspective and a lack of context, interpretation, and perspectives from competing parties or stakeholders. Interpretation of the campaign in the GTA is thus narrowed in scope, biased, strictly speaking, and overwhelmingly oriented

around strategy, all packaged together through the personalistic anchor of Kenney/Scheer (and indeed, often by brining Ontario Premier Doug Ford into the equation, whose absence from the campaign trail was heavily commented on and used as interpretive and contextualising material throughout the campaign). The result: a simplistic, clear narrative that is easy to remember and interpret, but which offers little in the way of informative and substantive materials or discussions of competing policies and worldviews.

We thus see the recurring tendency of *personalising the strategic game frame* throughout election coverage. This was a rather subtle form of personalisation that often weaved throughout coverage in diverse ways, although some of the most common cases were those in which local ridings and races were discussed through a strategic game frame with little to no meaningful discussion of local issues or debates. In many of these stories, the focus is shifted to strategic considerations and interpretations of the political campaign that are anchored on candidates' characteristics, feelings, or personal evaluations of their likelihood for success:

Hehr, a former MLA who in 2015 became the first federal Liberal to win the seat in 50 years, insists he's never felt so good about a race. "It feels better out there today than it did on election day in 2015," he said. "This campaign is the best one I've ever run. It's the best conversations I've had at the doors, it's the most people who have said they're going to support me. I think we're going to win it on Monday." (Hudes, 18 Oct., 2019)

At 32, Gould's relative youth is somewhat at odds with Burlington's large population of seniors. But she was younger still when she narrowly won in 2015 and, as the youngest woman ever named to federal cabinet, she's a clear rising star in the party. Gould's running against Conservative restaurant owner Jane Michael, who previously chaired the at-times controversial Halton Catholic District School Board. (Tubb, 17 Oct., 2019)

"People have wanted to support our campaign from across the country," Ms. Philpott said. "I've never seen anything like it. ... People keep walking in the door, saying, 'Can I give you money, can I take a sign, what help do you need?'" Still, she said she is in a competitive race with Conservative candidate Theodore Antony, who worked in the financial-planning industry, and Liberal Helena Jaczek, a former Ontario health minister. Ms. Philpott won with 49 per cent of the vote in 2015, while the Conservatives got 43 per cent. Ms. Wilson-Raybould said donations to her campaign, accompanied by cards and messages, "have been overwhelming." (...) "People are very interested in our campaign, certainly me as a candidate, but I think, broader than that, about the idea ... about doing politics differently, and some of the messages I've received have been thanking me for what I did," she said. (Stone, 26 Sept., 2019)

What we see with this trend is that local candidates are not given a genuine platform for sharing their ideas or speaking substantively to local issues in the broader context of federal politics. Rather, national agendas are replicated at the local level, with candidates typically adhering closely to party lines, and the missing substance is replaced with personalised anchors of interpretation: the local candidates themselves and their whirlwind experiences while out campaigning. Where narrow policy frames are evoked, they are often quickly passed over by interpreting more personalised anchors:

But Ramona is well aware she has to grapple with the "Ford factor" - the populist Progressive Conservative government of Doug Ford that swept into power last year. It is an especially strong factor in Brampton, because as one of its first cost-cutting measures, Ford's government cancelled plans for a university campus in Brampton. It was a hugely unpopular decision here. She has a strategy for dealing with that. "I tell them Ontario is in a very difficult fiscal position because of Liberal debt and mismanagement," Ramona said. She then says Trudeau is doing the same thing by running up deficits in Ottawa.

Ramona's campaign is also keenly aware of the NDP's potential strength here - which may be a good thing for them. "When the NDP are strong, it's good for us Conservatives," said one of her experienced volunteers. Then he grinned. (...) But Saranjit's campaign operation - which benefits from many of Jagmeet's own previous organizers - is young, energetic and image-savvy. "Our volunteers range from the age of 13 and 14 to our veterans who are maybe 21," Saranjit joked in his campaign launch speech last Sunday, standing near a DJ booth and a cotton candy machine. (Platt, 20 Sept., 2019)

Finally, in a small number of news items, other prominent individuals and public figures (e.g. former Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien; Calgary Mayor, Naheed Nenshi) were also used as personalised anchors of interpretation for political developments. While the coverage of these individuals' perspectives is not problematic in and of itself, the tendency was to discuss their perspectives in a privileged manner, typically by offering them in isolation from competing perspectives (usually due to their public stature, which gives the perception that anchoring interpretation of political developments on these figures alone suffices or is broadly relevant enough to inform and encourage deliberation among the electorate).

What do we find, then, with personalisation as a component of the infotainment format in Canada? What is clear is that the infotainment format in Canada *does not* employ characteristics of personalisation that produce a celebrity- or popularity-crazed and unrelenting focus on politicians as private individuals (as one might expect with a more entertaining and personalised format akin to celebrity news or in accordance

with a growing celebrity culture). Rather, personalisation in Canadian newspapers serves as more of an interpretive framework for approaching and making sense of politics. Politicians are discussed, on the whole, seriously as experts and professionals in the public domain, although they and their individual lives, characteristics, traits, successes and failures, and personally-held opinions and beliefs are also used interpretively to illustrate and cover election developments and news stories. The result is a growing journalistic focus that serves to displace more substantive and socially- or politically-relevant contextualising materials with personalised materials and forms of political interpretation and understanding.

4.2.2 Sensationalisation

The second component of my tripartite definition of infotainment – ‘Sensationalisation’ – was found to impact newspaper election coverage in several more intensive ways than Personalisation characteristics. Sensationalisation played a key yet nuanced role in Canadian newspapers’ infotainment format during the 2019 federal election. As Table 3a shows, Sensationalisation characteristics were found with a similar intensity to Personalisation characteristics, although in some cases slightly higher.

Table 3a: Sensationalisation Scale Results

	Globe & Mail	Post Media	Toronto Star	All Together
Sensationalisation Scale				
1 (Little to none)	53.80%	39.50%	44.90%	45.20%
2	9.40%	13.90%	16.20%	13.70%
3 (Moderate)	15%	16.80%	13.40%	15%
4	11.10%	15.30%	13.60%	13.60%
5 (Highly Prevalent)	10.70%	14.50%	11.90%	12.50%

As with Personalisation, only about a quarter of news items (26.1%) scored higher than a ‘3’ on the Sensationalisation Scale, indicating a generally low to moderate intensity of such characteristics within a large majority of cases. However, Sensationalisation scores of ‘2’ and ‘3’ are slightly higher than for Personalisation, indicating a more common use of sensationalisation in a lower-intensity manner throughout nearly a third of news items. Comparing results across newspapers, we find that the *Globe &*

Mail offers a notably lower level of sensationalisation than its competitors – seen also in the relatively lower frequencies for Sensationalisation sub-categories in the *Globe* (see Table 3b below). As with Personalisation, Post Media newspapers tend to score slightly higher than their competitors on the Sensationalisation Scale, indicating a stronger use and intensity of sensational characteristics. However, this difference appears to be fairly negligible on the whole.

Looking at the sub-categories of Sensationalisation (Table 3b), we find that the use of sensational narrative and emotional primers, as well as the presentation of sensational political conflict, are the two most frequently-identified characteristics of sensationalisation. The sensational presentation of scandal is also considerably frequent, with evidence of such characteristics found in roughly one fifth of coverage.

Table 3b: Sensationalisation Sub-Category Results

Sensationalisation Sub-Categories	Globe & Mail	Post Media	Toronto Star	All Together
Narrative/Emotion	15%	29.80%	39.40%	30.10%
Sens. Scandal	19.70%	22.40%	17.70%	19.80%
Sens. Conflict	27.40%	41%	38.40%	36.60%
Exciting/Dramatic	9.80%	12.70%	7.80%	10%
Other Sens.	8.50%	2.90%	5.10%	5.20%

As we will see below, these sub-category frequencies tell only a part of the story, as a qualitative reading displays that the sensational coverage of scandal tends to surpass more general forms of sensational narrative and emotional primers in importance to the infotainment format in Canadian newspapers' election coverage. Despite this, however, we do find that the narrative forms developed within newspaper coverage play a key role in the broader sensationalisation of election coverage. To display this, I will briefly discuss the sensational narrativization of political coverage as the construction of an 'on the surface' look at politics, followed by a more in-depth look at how sensational political conflict and the sensational coverage of scandal shape the infotainment format in Canadian newspapers and the coverage of the federal election more generally.

4.2.2.1 *Politics on the Surface*

The key to understanding the role of sensationalisation in Canadian newspapers' election coverage is to conceptualise it, in part, as a measure of the *depth of coverage*, rather than as a set of explicitly sensational and entertaining characteristics as one might expect from, for example, entertainment television. To summarize the several trends in sensationalisation identified in this study, then, it helps to conceptualise sensationalisation as both a narrative and meta-narrative phenomenon that tends to render coverage as an 'on the surface' look at sensational or conflictual political developments and that often fails to go further in-depth or contextualise and inform on the concrete substance of politics. To illustrate this, I will first briefly review the use of language, narrative, and emotion when covering news stories, and their role in the overall sensationalisation of political narratives.

As the quantitative results outlined above show, the use of emotionally-charged or primed language and narratives, as well as human-interest perspectives, is fairly widespread – although to varying degrees – throughout newspaper coverage. However, these numbers do not reflect the intensity and qualities of such narratives and language. Through a qualitative reading, we find that such characteristics are indeed very minor overall, and do not contribute significantly to the infotainment format given their generally low intensities.³ Nevertheless, some important trends were identified within the coverage that are worth briefly outlining. The most common form of sensational language/narrative was the use of a sensational or emotionally-charged introduction, used typically to grip interest while framing the story in approachable terms. Take for example the introduction to a story outlining NDP pledges for the automotive industry and climate change action:

Kyle Pearce is pissed off.

He says the federal government is disappointing, the provincial government is "appalling" and his local city council "unforgivable." Pearce is one of the thousands of autoworkers at the General Motors plant in this city, staring down the end of the line. The manufacturing facility is slated to shut down, first the assembly line for cars on Oct. 31 and then the pickup truck line on Nov. 27.

³ One important caveat to state here is that this study did not dig into and analyse the use of emotion or narrative in a very in-depth or sustained manner, but rather approached it as one generally-defined characteristic of infotainment among several others. As such, there are likely important trends in the use of language and narrative to be analysed in future research that were not captured in this study.

Pearce said his grandfather was a janitor here in the 1980s, and he, himself, has installed mufflers on those trucks for almost five years.

Standing outside the ill-fated plant on Saturday morning, waiting for the New Democratic Party leader to come talk about his plan to lift the auto industry in Canada, Pearce described the "shock" and "fury" in the face of the closure and said he feels abandoned by all levels of government ahead of the federal election on Oct. 21. "I don't know what I'm going to do," he said. "At what point do I start looking at my government and say, 'Start doing your job!'" Minutes later, NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh strolled out of his party-branded bus to try and answer questions such as this. (Ballingall, 15 Sept., 2019)

As we see here, a highly emotion-laden and human-interest narrative is offered to grip the reader's interest and perhaps evoke feelings of empathy or sympathy. This introduction is followed by an outline of policy promises and some conflicting statements, rendering the news item a '2(I=E)' on the Infotainment Scale. A number of potential issues arise with this manner of framing the story (e.g. presuppositions regarding the government's role in upholding big business, or framing the story as a question of creating/saving jobs rather than helping those who lose their employment in other ways), although the sensational narrative that it evokes may well serve to draw the interest of readers who may otherwise not have approached a 'dry' story on policy promises.

As such, we can see the way in which sensational narrative framing becomes a complex phenomenon that poses legitimate concerns but cannot simply be 'written off' as too distractionary or overly sensational. This is especially true of the next example – one of the few more substantive stories on historic issues of blackface in Canada – which arguably offers *too sensational* of a narrative and perspective on blackface, but whose sensational introductory narrative may nonetheless have been key to drawing audiences to read and consider the issue more carefully:

While the practice fell out of favour in film and television in the 1960s, it has been continuing for decades, shifting from mainstream entertainment to more private, elite and predominantly white spaces

The 100 or so costumed guests at the Halloween party were in a big rented hall in Edmonton huddled in groups, sipping beer and chatting when the lights went out. The opening strains of a Gladys Knight and the Pips song came over the speakers and a spotlight turned on, illuminating a group of young men who twirled and danced into the room lip syncing the song's lyrics. One wore a red evening gown and a wig, the others were in rented tuxedos. They, like nearly everyone else in the room, were white law students at the University of Alberta. And they had painted their skin

black as part of their costumes. It was 1977. The crowd erupted in boisterous applause and cheering. Peggy Blair, then a 21-year-old law student, remembers the performance as the highlight of the party. It left such an impression that photos of it were published in the yearbook of Ms. Blair's law faculty. This week, 42 years later, she posted those images on Twitter. (Bascaramurty, 21 Sept., 2019)

Or consider another example from a story titled “One week in, have leaders got your attention yet?”:

The kickoff of the 2019 federal election campaign saw the country collectively shrug while six party leaders threw themselves into a frenzy. The past seven days had an unfocused feel, after a summer-long precampaign campaign of ads, government spending and politicians popping up everywhere on the barbecue circuit. Now there was more of it. For politicians, so much more.

Plane trips. Bus trips. A bus trip into a plane.

Photo-ops with babies, schoolkids, parents, autoworkers, builders, clean tech entrepreneurs.

Selfies. Social media blitzes. Announcements. Promises. Speeches. Speeches interrupted by hecklers. (MacCharles, 18 Sept., 2019)

The tendency in these sorts of introduction is to sensationalise the story by framing it within an interesting and compelling narrative, often within a broader, more interesting meta-narrative of election discourse and developments. In and of themselves, such narrative structures are not pernicious to election coverage, and may indeed serve to make political news and information more accessible and relatable to wider audiences. As we will see below, the general use of a ‘serious,’ ‘objective,’ analytical, or investigative style of reporting was very widespread, speaking to the lack of overall intensity of such emotionally-primed or sensational narrative structures within individual news items. However, when considered on the whole and in relation to the other trends and characteristics found in this analysis, we find that these gripping and relatable narratives often fail to incorporate or lead to a more substantive and informative or contextualised discussion of the political events, issues, or developments that they speak to. Indeed, in a large number of cases, such sensational introductions and narratives fed into a broader form of exciting or dramatic framing of stories with questionable relevance to citizens or the political issues and substance underlying the campaign. These included, for example, stories on campaign theme songs, lawn signs, Doug Ford’s absence from the federal campaign, and the overwhelmingly sensationalised coverage of Jason Kenney’s role in helping the federal Conservatives (many of which were sensationalised through exciting or dramatic headlines and introductory remarks). These and other minor trends in sensationalisation (e.g. the *Toronto*

Star's series on the most popular 'Google searches' during the campaign, the several sensational perspectives and narratives given on Trudeau's blackface/brownface scandal, etc.) often resulted in non-substantive yet exciting stories about topics that were tangential or loosely-related to the campaign, yet offered little in the way of substantive and informative content for citizens. The result in these instances was a news product that is less informative and serving of a 'public interest,' but rather more of a sensational set of mere products-for-consumption.

While the examples outlined above tend to sensationalise coverage in gripping ways, they are nevertheless minor in the overall infotainment format. Sensationalisation in its more common forms, understood as a narrative phenomenon, serves not so much to sensationalise individual news items in intensive ways, but rather to sensationalise both individual news items and the aggregate meta-narratives of the election campaign by rendering coverage 'on the surface' and focusing it on the inherently sensational and gripping narratives of *conflict* and *scandal*.

4.2.2.2 Sensational Conflict

The sensational presentation of political conflict constitutes the dominant trend of sensationalisation identified in this study. This presentational style is essentially part of a broader journalistic style and focus evident throughout election newspaper coverage, one which covers politics by following the 'sensational show' of the electoral campaign, but without often digging deeper into the content and context of the politics behind this show. This stylistic and focal trend thus reproduces politics and the electoral campaign as a meta-narrative of development towards the climactic finish-line of the election, implicitly asking a number of questions that form the basis of political coverage, such as: Where are the candidates/leaders? What are they doing? What are they saying? Are they attacking one another? How do they respond to these attacks? They made a promise? Ok, what do the other leaders/candidates have to say about it? How do their strategies play out and converge or diverge? By animating election coverage through implicitly asking and answering these sorts of underlying questions, the resulting news format becomes an increasingly sensational narrative wherein the journalistic style and focus of political

coverage rests on the surface, acting more as a narrative spectacle of politics rather than an informative, substantiated, or contextualised analysis or representation of political discourses and debates, platforms, policy options, promises, etc. As we will see, this ‘on the surface’ narrative reveals an underlying synergy between characteristics of personalisation and their role in narrative sensationalisation. In other words, by sensationally following the ‘campaign show’ and resting on the surface of political discourse, personalised frames and contexts fit naturally into the sensational narratives and meta-narratives of election coverage. This journalistic focus and style form the core of the sensational coverage of political conflict in Canadian elections.

A few dominant tendencies may be identified to help illustrate the ways in which this style and focus play out concretely to sensationalise the coverage of political conflict and keep it on the surface. One overarching trend was the use and reproduction of attack statements from candidates. This trend demonstrates an important synergy between politicians’ political communications and campaign strategies and the infotainment format of election coverage, as the two styles seem to fit together and reinforce one another.⁴ In these instances, the focus and substance of attacks is often a personalised-negative commentary on competitors, reproduced uncritically within news items. In the overwhelming majority of such instances, concrete and substantive political information and ideas are not discussed or evoked. Rather, generalised and often ambiguous claims are made regarding political opponents, and are then reproduced in media coverage without questioning, elaborating on, or challenging these attacks (but, indeed, presenting them as meaningful public discourse). An example of this within the *Globe & Mail* is worth citing at length, as it clearly demonstrates the manner in which political content and developments are dealt with and ‘brushed over’ at an on-the-surface level that omits informative and contextualising or substantive materials:

“The Conservative Leader acknowledged the 18th-anniversary of 9/11, and highlighted the generosity of Canadians during the terrorism attacks on the U.S. He then launched into his pitch to voters, vowing to balance the budget and lower taxes.

⁴ This trend may be understood, in part, through Altheide’s (2004) work on media culture and the cultural transformation of political institutions in-line with emerging infotainment formats (also see Serazio, 2018).

“You and your family are at the heart of the October 21 election: Who can you trust to help you and your family to get ahead? And the answer is not Justin Trudeau, who will only take more money from your pockets,” said Mr. Scheer. “He doesn’t know what it’s like to raise a family in difficult conditions.”

The Conservatives are hoping to win seats in Quebec, including Trois-Rivières, where New Democrat MP Robert Aubin is seeking re-election. Despite the riding being NDP territory, Mr. Scheer opted to position himself as the best alternative to both Mr. Trudeau and the Bloc Québécois. “This is important: It’s not the Bloc that will replace Justin Trudeau, it’s not the Bloc that will leave more money in your pockets. Quebeckers can only rely on us,” he said in French, adding that Bloc MPs “will always be powerless spectators, just armchair quarterbacks.”

Speaking to reporters, Mr. Scheer said the Conservatives do not have the intention of intervening in the province’s law that bans public sector-employees from wearing religious symbols in the workplace, but it is not something they would bring in at the federal level.

He was also asked about the proposed Energy East pipeline, which Quebec has opposed. “All of our candidates, throughout Quebec, prefer that Quebeckers and eastern Canadians have the ability to purchase Canadian energy, Canadian oil and gas,” he said.” (Dickson, 12 Sept., 2019).

This passage, which represents the most substantive political discussion in the news item, displays a clearly sensational presentation of political conflict. It highlights a *lack* of serious journalism insofar as it simply reproduces Scheer’s sensational and emotionally-primed communications and attacks, with no journalistic effort to question them, their ambiguity, or what they may concretely mean for voters or public policy. Rather, these ambiguous attacks and claims are accepted as they are, largely devoid of substantive or serious information, and are presented as ‘information’ worthy of being read by voters in order to understand the first day of the Conservatives’ campaign. While valid arguments can be made regarding the heuristic and non- or a-rational devices used in such discourses and their potential for affect- and heuristics-based political learning, the fact remains that this form and style of political coverage lacks in substantive and informative information, that which would be necessary to evaluate competing programs and policy options, or even to evaluate political communications themselves for their truth value or underlying substance.

Numerous such examples could be offered from throughout the election coverage, although a few specific examples demonstrate how this sensational, ‘on the surface’ coverage of political conflict helps drive a sensational narrative and displace substantive, informative discussions. For example, taking a story

on the massive climate protests of September 27, 2019, we can see how an issue as important and pressing as climate policy is dealt with superficially, while highlighting sensational forms of conflict and attack but leaving out any substantive discussions, debates, or otherwise informative materials:

When asked about his absence at the climate marches, Mr. Scheer said it is “always encouraging” to see so many people, especially young people, show their concern for the environment. “It is why we have many candidates and members of Parliament who are there,” he said. Canadians who are protesting see that Mr. Trudeau's environmental plan is failing, he added, noting that the Liberal Leader is “protesting his own government's record on the environment.” (...)

Although Mr. Trudeau used the climate strikes to highlight his record on the environment, he was met with protest over his government's purchase of the Trans Mountain pipeline project. As he walked alongside Quebec Liberal candidates, his wife and two of his oldest kids, some protesters criticized him for purchasing the Trans Mountain pipeline, while others were excited and tried to take pictures.

The loudest chants against him came from a group shouting: “No pipeline, no pipeline.” In response, Mr. Trudeau and his candidates chanted in French: “We're moving forward for the planet.” In June, Ms. Thunberg tweeted that the pipeline purchase was “shameful.” When asked by reporters about her tweet, Mr. Trudeau said his response to her and the protesters is that the Liberals would “hit our 2030 targets” while also ensuring the country gets a “better price for our oil resources,” with the profits going toward combating climate change.” (Dickson, Walsh, & Kirkup, 28 Sept., 2019)

This passage represents the bulk of political conflict covered in the story, followed by a few more sentences, two of which contained concrete (i.e. substantive) campaign promises, but were not discussed in any depth or context. As such, we can see that the height of conflict over environmental issues, according to this story, comes from a number of sensational agents: Scheer versus Trudeau, Trudeau versus Thunberg, Trudeau and his fellow candidates versus protesters. At no point are concrete, substantive issues, information, or perspectives discussed regarding the climate or environmental issues, nor are the actual details of Scheer's criticisms, the protesters' criticisms, or Trudeau's defences presented to illustrate the issue in an informative way. The conflict rests on the sensational narrative level of attacks and defences, and no journalistic effort is made to inform the reader or press these competing actors on their claims.

A number of other trends in the sensational coverage of conflict are worth noting as well. Leader and candidate debate coverage was again found to be a hotbed for infotainment characteristics, in this case

sensational conflict. The paradox that a political ‘debate’ be almost entirely void of substantive political information and ideas is not questioned in media representations, but rather assumed as a premise from which to evaluate them. In other words, the evaluation and discussion of debates within newspaper coverage was strongly centred on the sensational question of ‘who won?’ and the evaluation of attacks, parries, and ‘knock-out punches’ in answering it. Along with these, there was also a focus on, as one *Toronto Star* story terms it, “choice quotes” (Ballingall & Boutilier, 12 Sept., 2019) from the debates – often the fieriest attacks and wittiest rebuttals, but rarely anything of substance:

As the two leaders talked over each other, Mr. Singh scolded them both. “What we have here is Mr. Trudeau and Mr. Scheer arguing about who’s worse for Canada,” he said. “We’ve got to start presenting who’s going to be best for Canada.” (...)

“You could have done so much more in the last four years. Please God, you don’t get a majority this time around because you won’t keep your promises,” Ms. May said. “You bought a pipeline.” (Walsh, Dickson, & Zilio, 8 Oct., 2019)

Despite his disadvantage, Scheer did get some jabs in here and there. At one point, he accused Trudeau of hypocrisy in his commitment to fight climate change, attacking him for having two campaign planes, “one for you and the media, and another for your costumes and canoes.” But Trudeau, with his fluent French, was frequently able to talk over Scheer and drown him out. (Forrest, 3 Oct., 2019)

While Green party Leader Elizabeth May and NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh are locked in close competition in the national polls, they presented a united front against Scheer's positions at a leaders' debate hosted by Macleans and Citytv. Pincered onstage between May and Singh, Scheer appeared visibly frustrated at times while his fellow opposition leaders took turns trying to poke holes in his positions.

"(Mr. Scheer) says he would cut taxes, he would certainly cut taxes, there's no question about that. He would cut taxes for the wealthy, and he would cut services for families," Singh said, invoking the spectre of Doug Ford's provincial government. "That's not true," quickly became a frequent refrain from Scheer. As the opposition leaders traded barbs on the economy, environment, First Nations rights and foreign affairs, Trudeau was speaking to hundreds of party faithful in Edmonton. (Ballingall & Boutilier, 13 Sept., 2019)

* “I looked at your policies on foreign policy today Andrew, and I realize, if anyone wants to know where you stand, just figure out what Trump wants.” — Green Leader Elizabeth May

* Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer, when discussing NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh's allegations the Conservatives would cut services:

“Can I just correct you on one point?”

Singh: “I’m not sure you can.” (Ballingall & Boutilier, 12 Sept., 2019)

As these examples demonstrate, the underlying political substance and context of debates was rarely considered with much importance, while the most sensational forms of conflict were highlighted and elaborated upon in often strategic ways and through sensational meta-narratives of competition in the election campaign.

Another trend of interest is the sensational coverage of local races and ridings. In the large majority of such cases, concrete issues relevant to the riding or region are rarely discussed substantively or in-depth, as the focus is typically placed on the candidates in a fairly personalised manner, while the ‘political conflict’ is focused on the campaign strategies and likelihoods of success for competing candidates, often strongly couched within a strategic game frame (as evidenced in the personalisation section above). Where concrete local issues are discussed, their credibility and representativeness of the actual concerns of local voters is questionable, as in almost all instances the reported ‘issues of importance’ for the ridings are invariably the same issues that are set at the top of the agenda nationally (e.g. affordability, gun crime, the environment and energy issues). Indeed, when considering these news items at the aggregate level, it becomes almost suspicious that there would be so few genuinely localized concerns raised by voters in a country as geographically, culturally, and socially diverse as Canada. While there may be understandable explanations for this (e.g. agenda setting, priming, etc. that cause voters to recount nationally pertinent issues rather than more isolated local ones), the immediate impression after analysing the dataset was that a simple lack of investigative focus or importance placed on local issues was at play. Stories were typically discussed with explicit reference to the national context and party leaders, with all information about concrete local issues, contexts, and particularities typically resting on the surface, building towards the overall sensational narrative of conflict and strategy (more on this below).

Finally, one arguably important trend in sensationalising political conflict was the sensational coverage of protestors throughout the election. In a considerable number of stories covering campaign events, groups of local protestors are evoked as a contextualising form of information, often in comparison to the (typically) larger crowds in attendance for party leaders:

A few dozen protesters outside waved placards of opposing messages on pipelines and climate change, while others were anti-fur demonstrators. Inside, another man heckled Trudeau before being removed by security. But the crowd of 500 Liberal supporters ate it up. (MacCharles, 13 Sept., 2019)

A handful of public-service union members blared horns throughout Mr. Scheer's speech, holding signs that said "Stop Scheer." The protesters left before Mr. Scheer's event ended. (Dickson, 12 Sept., 2019)

Anti-pipeline protesters lined up along the street leading into the Italian cultural centre in Vancouver on Wednesday night, with signs reading "stop the pipeline." Mr. Trudeau was also briefly heckled by a man decrying the government's climate policies during his rally, but the protester was drowned out by loud cheers from Liberal supporters. (Zilio, 12 Sept., 2019)

While his appearance was met by many supporters, anti-Trudeau protesters made a showing as well. A handful of them demonstrated outside, wearing sweaters that read, "F--- Trudeau." A few donned yellow vests and held signs denouncing him. A quieter showing of pro-environmentalists were also present, holding up signs that read, "Climate Action Now."

One protester was also escorted outside of the rally by security, after yelling during Trudeau's speech about Canada's alleged \$42-billion construction projects deal with China, which critics say is at the expense of Canadian steel workers. Despite Edmonton Strathcona's position as one of the more progressive ridings in the province, the dislike for Trudeau in Alberta, analysts say, runs deep. MacEwan University political scientist Chaldeans Mensah said he believes the riding may not be a sure win for Trudeau and the Liberals. (Yousif, 12 Sept., 2019)

In these examples, almost invariably, protestors are mentioned in passing as a sensational form of political conflict or context. In no instance was it found that the protestors were discussed seriously as a group with a genuine concern or criticism worthy of discussing and elaborating on, especially in comparison to the messages given from the party leaders. As such, protestors played an important role in providing sensational political conflict for journalists to mention or contextualise their stories with, but they garnered little to no substantial newspaper coverage of their concerns.

4.2.2.3 *Sensational Scandal*

The sensational coverage of scandal during the election campaign was perhaps one of the most complex and arguably important trends identified in this study, notably in light of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's highly controversial and globally mediatised 'blackface/brownface' scandal. The coverage of this and other scandals during the election was heavily influenced by trends in personalisation and decontextualisation, all of which contributed to an overall *lack* of in-depth and investigative or analytical coverage, resulting in a highly sensational reproduction and ultimately 'passing-over' of the

blackface/brownface and other scandals. As will become evident, an understanding of the ways in which political coverage is sensationalised through its ‘on the surface’ style and focus is central to understanding how scandals are also covered sensationally. A few primary trends may be identified to help illustrate the sensationalisation of scandal in newspaper election coverage: (1) scandal as the focus of news items; (2) scandal as a form of contextualising information, and; (3) a short overview and analysis of the priming and framing techniques employed throughout the blackface/brownface scandal. Together, these three general trends help to display the nature and degree to which scandals are covered sensationally in Canadian newspapers’ election coverage.

To begin, we may consider the use of and focus on scandals as the main subject matter of news items. As seen above, some roughly 20 percent of news items were identified as covering scandal sensationally in some way. In many cases this included references to scandals in stories about other subject matter, although the direct focus of coverage on scandals and their reproduction over several stories has had important impacts on the election discourse. In the opening days of the election, a number of smaller-scale scandals animated newspaper coverage, typically involving old social media posts or interviews and videos retrieved from the internet – part of a broader trend in the use of social media for news content and political attacks. In these opening days, the coverage of such scandals brought charges of wrongdoing and calls for apologies and resignations to the forefront of Canadian political discourse, helping to spark a number of (admittedly minor) public discussions on myriad issues ranging from racism to sexism, and from Islamophobia to LGBTQ+ rights. However, such discussions were limited by the lack of depth and context presented in newspaper reports on these issues.

Since problems of racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and sexism were not discussed substantively or contextually at any considerable length in these stories – notably from a broad societal perspective, rather than a personalised focus on candidates and their wrongdoings alone – there is little indication of or perspectives on their implications for Canadians and Canadian politics more generally. In this sense, they remain largely sensational stories pointing out candidates in a ‘gotcha’ manner, rather than evoking meaningful discussions of social justice and what constitutes cause for losing one’s chance at public office

under a partisan banner. In a similar manner to the sensational coverage of political conflict, the sensational coverage of scandal must also be understood along the lines of the quality and depth of information presented. Just as the coverage of political conflict and developments can remain sensational even (seemingly paradoxically) in a fairly mundane way by simply lacking the substance and context to take it deeper than an ‘on the surface’ look at the political narratives of the day, the coverage and re-production of scandals can also remain sensational when there is a lack of educational, investigative, interrogative, and informative reporting through what Hallin & Mellado (2018) call the “watchdog” and “civic” journalistic roles. Such findings of sensational narrativization were mirrored in the numerous stories focused on Justin Trudeau’s SNC-Lavalin scandal, Andrew Scheer’s citizenship and insurance broker scandals, and the controversial scandals involving far-right commentator, Faith Goldy. In these cases, important information was discussed, sometimes along with an indication of broader societal implications, although coverage tended to rest on the surface and focus especially on the strategic and personalised considerations of these scandals. For instance, one major indicator of the general lack of depth and analysis of scandals was in the coverage of the SNC-Lavalin scandal, wherein Trudeau’s claims of undertaking corruption or a ‘breach of ethics’ in the name of ‘protecting jobs and pensions’ was repeated several times but never analysed and discussed in-depth or from critical perspectives. Coverage remained procedural and focused on precedent situations, competing statements and attacks from party representatives, and the strategic meta-narrative of the electoral race.

The analysis of the blackface/brownface scandal below offers a closer look at the intricacies of the sensational coverage of scandal in Canadian newspapers. However, it is worth briefly noting the trend of using scandal as another form of *contextualising information*. With this trend we find a considerably large number of news items in which scandals are referenced or discussed not as the main subject matter of the story but rather as contextualising information on other political and campaign developments. Such instances typically contribute to the meta-narrative of the election by framing new developments in light of past ones, especially those that are more sensational, conflictual, and attention-gripping, such as scandals. A few examples help demonstrate the nature of such contextualising information:

Justin Trudeau promised Sunday to provide Canadians more relief from their tax and cellphone bills, part of the Liberal leader's effort to steer his campaign back toward the issue of affordability and away from the blackface scandal that has dogged him since last week. (Lowrie, 23 Sept., 2019)

On Wednesday he said he would never make any personal attacks but would also never shy from making “very, very sharp distinctions on policy.” He said Canadians “deserve in an election to see clear contrasts between a vision that is open inclusive and respectful of everyone's rights, and a perspective that says they're for the people but then delivers cuts to services and cuts to taxes for the wealthy.”

But Trudeau was dogged by familiar questions about his commitment to ethics, transparency and clean government on a day when the Globe and Mail reported his government has blocked witnesses from freely talking to the RCMP about cabinet secrets in the SNC-Lavalin affair. Once again unapologetic, Trudeau said he'd already issued “the largest” waiver on cabinet confidentiality earlier in the year, cast responsibility for the latest decision on his deputy minister and clerk of the privy council Ian Shugart, and refused to acknowledge he personally had made any mistakes in the SNC-Lavalin affair. Insisting his sole focus and responsibility was to protect jobs and pensions across Canada, Trudeau said “I will always defend the public interest...and that's what I will continue to do.” (MacCharles, 11 Sept., 2019)

The Liberal Party has announced three major planks of its election platform in recent days as it attempts to shift the public's focus away from last week's revelation that Mr. Trudeau wore blackface and brownface in the past. One of the incidents – from a 2001 fundraising event for a B.C. school where Mr. Trudeau was a teacher – was first reported on Wednesday by Time magazine. Mr. Trudeau then admitted to another occasion when he was in high school, before video of a third incident surfaced. (Zilio, 24 Sept., 2019)

A region that was scarred by past boom-and-bust traumas – the collapse of the dot-com bubble; BlackBerry's travails – is maturing into a multigenerational universe of rapidly expanding companies, proliferating startups, angel investors and experienced entrepreneurs. “In every dimension, we are getting better,” Mr. Klugman says.

So what concerns voters in this burgeoning hub of the Next Canada? In a day spent hanging out on the ION and at the local mall, voters talked about the environment, the economy, transportation concerns – roads and highways are chronically clogged; the region desperately needs improved train service with Toronto – and housing costs that are spiralling toward unaffordable. No one mentioned the scandals that have dogged Mr. Trudeau, from the India trip to the SNC-Lavalin affair to the brownface photos.

“It comes up, but it's [part of] a greater conversation,” said Waterloo riding Liberal candidate Bardish Chagger, who served as House Leader in the government. She believes voters will send her back to Ottawa, based on what people are telling her when she canvasses door-to-door. (Ibbitson, 5 Oct., 2019)

In response to the Conservative announcement, Mr. Trudeau summed up the party's proposal as an attempt “to weaken gun control” while the Liberals want to “strengthen gun control.” Mr. Trudeau, who campaigned on Friday in Quebec City, said a re-elected Liberal government would ban and buy back up to 250,000 military-style assault rifles in addition to letting municipalities impose individual handgun bans. The Liberal plan would also suspend gun licences for people suspected of posing a danger to their families, toughen gun-storage laws and crack down on people who buy guns legally and divert them to illegal markets.

The New Democrats have promised to do more to stop gun smuggling, and the Greens say they would further restrict handguns to shooting ranges in urban areas. Mr. Scheer also faced questions

on holding dual Canadian-U.S. citizenship after The Globe and Mail reported the news on Thursday. He said he is in the process of renouncing his status as an American citizen. A campaign spokesman said on Friday that Mr. Scheer registered for military service in the United States when he turned 18, as required by law of dual citizens. (Kirkup, Dickson, & Fine, 5 Oct., 2019)

What we see here is the use of scandal as a contextualising narrative cue for framing the electoral race and its developments, and at least implicitly priming certain conceptions of various candidates. In light of literature on the powerful effects of priming and framing on decision-making, information retention, and cognition (see Castells, 2009), we may seriously question the relevance and helpfulness of such primers and cues of past scandals when they are not discussed in any depth or with any analytical, informative, or investigative weight. This is the case especially insofar as the use of scandals as contextualising information serves to displace substantive and informative discussions of the issues and topics that are themselves the main focus of coverage. Accordingly, these instances of scandal as contextualising information may be understood as an important component of the infotainment format in Canadian newspapers, insofar as such contextualising information effectively displaces more substantive and informative materials from news coverage and actively primes certain narratives and candidate evaluations in the process.

4.2.2.4 Framing and Priming the 'Blackface/Brownface' Scandal

Justin Trudeau's blackface/brownface scandal was, by its very nature, a sensational phenomenon. We cannot reasonably expect that, amongst the shock, pain, confusion, disbelief, and controversy that burst into the political domain when the story broke, the media coverage of the scandal would not be inherently sensational in some ways. This is to be expected even from the most reliably 'serious', analytical, and 'objective' sources of information. As such, the minutia of coverage on the blackface/brownface scandal, especially regarding the language used, the number of stories reproduced, and the extent of the platform given to closely-implicated parties to speak to the scandal, were not closely scrutinized in this study. Rather, from the perspective of an analysis of infotainment, the focus on the blackface/brownface scandal was on the dominant ways in which the story was framed and primed, and especially on the degree to which news coverage sought to engage Canadians in meaningful discussions on the scandal and the underlying issues it brought to light with substantive, informative materials and a diversity of perspectives. In this sense, the

primary criteria for determining the relative degree of sensationalism in covering this scandal was whether the coverage sought to drive a meaningful conversation, as well as offer the necessary substantive information to engage in a such a conversation, on not only the scandal but the broader implications of systemic racism and discrimination in Canadian politics and society. From this perspective, when we take the coverage of the scandal on the whole, we can determine the relative degree to which it was covered and passed over sensationally by Canadian newspapers or, by contrast, engaged upon in an informative and substantive manner. Given the proportionally large amount of coverage that this scandal received throughout the campaign, it is analysed here as a small case study to help illustrate the nuances of sensational election coverage in Canada more generally.

To begin, we may consider the general framing of the scandal. By and large, the dominant frame that was established across newspaper coverage in the first days of the scandal was one of conflict between *disbelief* – ‘How could this happen from such a socially-conscious Prime Minister?’ – and an almost self-congratulatory *belief* – ‘After playing dress-up in India and showing his dark side in the SNC-Lavalin scandal, does anyone expect different from this Prime Minister?’ – that emanated from the partisan campaign itself. Take, for example, these common framing techniques:

American liberals have embraced Justin Trudeau as a bulwark against bigotry and a paragon of inclusivity. They applauded when he greeted Syrian refugees at the airport, tweeted that immigrants were welcome “regardless of faith” and obliquely admonished U.S. President Donald Trump this summer for telling congresswomen of colour to “go back” to other countries. “That is not how we do things in Canada,” the Prime Minister declared. “A Canadian is a Canadian is a Canadian.” Former U.S. president Barack Obama has even maintained a personal friendship with Mr. Trudeau, going for beers in Ottawa with him in May. And Joe Biden, now front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination, once famously declared Mr. Trudeau guardian of the “international order” against attacks from nationalists around the world.

So revelations this week that the Liberal Leader wore blackface and brownface at least three times years ago were met with astonishment in the United States, running counter to the long-held stereotypes of Canadian earnestness and multiculturalism that Mr. Trudeau has sought to trade on. The racist acts put him in the company of Virginia Governor Ralph Northam and Alabama Governor Kay Ivey, only the most recent U.S. leaders to have been exposed for similar incidents. (Morrow, 20 Sept., 2019)

How voters react will likely break down along generational lines, Shachi Kurl, the executive director of the Angus Reid Institute said in an interview. Voters over 50 years of age will care much less than voters under 35, she said. That distinction increases the risks for Mr. Trudeau because it’s those exact people that the Liberal Leader needs to “lock down,” Ms. Kurl said. Young voters gave

the Liberals their victory in 2015 and she said the revelations mean more of them could drift to the NDP and Greens or simply stay home, which would benefit Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer.

This is potentially devastating to Trudeau because it hits at an issue that that progressive young vote would not find any other way to see except for as profoundly wrong and profoundly unacceptable," Ms. Kurl said. Speaking in Windsor, Ont., on Thursday, NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh said he is concerned that the pictures represent an "ongoing pattern of behaviour" for Mr. Trudeau, adding that it is painful for many people to see the images. "I think he's got a lot to answer for," Mr. Singh said. The pictures raise questions about who the real Mr. Trudeau is, he said. (Walsh, Zilio, & Kirkup, 20 Sept., 2019)

Kenney referred to the images, which depict Trudeau in racist makeup on three separate occasions prior to his time in politics, as "insulting racial mockery." "I found the revelations about the prime minister's penchant for blackface frankly bizarre," Kenney said in Calgary. "He's trying to blame this on society - 'we must learn from this.' No, prime minister. This is about you, not us. I'm 51 years old. I have hardly lived a sheltered existence and I've never seen anybody, ever, do that." (...)

Trudeau has apologized for the series of incidents, acknowledging the "racist history of blackface," but claiming he didn't understand "how hurtful this is to people who live with discrimination every single day." "I have always acknowledged that I come from a place of privilege - but I now need to acknowledge that that comes with a massive blind spot," he said last week. Kenney said Trudeau's response is "typical of him." "I don't know why he's trying to blame society," the premier said. "I think it's becoming more clear by the day that we need a new government and a new prime minister." Kenney said Canada needs a prime minister "we can be proud of" like Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer, "who is a person of profound respect who will never embarrass this country either here or abroad." (Hudes, 24 Sept., 2019)

While this framing contest played out, another frame that I refer to as the 'Singh-ethnicity' frame also developed in a number of stories to more consciously take the discussion of the scandal in the direction of its implications for racialized and ethnicized Canadians:

In the wake of his emotional reaction to the images of Justin Trudeau in brownface and blackface this week, NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh says he is wary of being "used" by the Liberal leader as he seeks to make amends for acts he now admits were racist. Singh revealed Friday that Trudeau's office contacted the NDP to see if Singh would speak with him about the situation.

Singh, the first leader of a major party who is not white, said he is open to speaking with Trudeau, but only if it is a "sincere" conversation. "I don't want the conversation that I have with Mr. Trudeau to be used as a tool in his exoneration or to be used as a way for him to say, 'I have had a conversation with a racialized leader and now I've done my job,'" Singh told reporters in Windsor on Friday. (Ballingall, 21 Sept., 2019)

As promising as this frame was, however, it served little in terms of evoking a *meaningful* discussion of the issues and implications of both the scandal and broader forms of systemic racism and discrimination in Canada (at least within newspaper coverage). In most cases, the Singh-ethnicity frame was evoked but quickly passed by towards other foci and framing strategies. These dominant frames in and of themselves speak to the superficial depth of coverage and perspectives given to the scandal, although this will be spoken

to more below. First, it is helpful to consider the ways in which reactions to and understanding of the scandal were *primed* in light of the dominant framing of the story.

Priming is a process of exposure to stimuli which then influence or affect future responses and forms of cognition, typically unconsciously. As Moscrop (2019, Ch. 4) explains, in the context of politics and the media priming influences both the criteria used and the importance given to such criteria when assessing politicians, stories, and issues. As such, priming is believed to play a very important role in how publics interpret and understand political developments. It is inherently wed to the infotainment format insofar as priming strategies can be more or less substantive and informative, or more or less superficial, sensational, and misleading. Three main trends in priming the blackface/brownface scandal were identified in this study: (1) the use of what I term ‘friendlies’ coverage; (2) priming through a focus on polls; and (3) priming through digging-up background information on the scandal. I will briefly outline each in turn, before concluding with a brief discussion of the overall superficiality of depth in the scandal’s newspaper coverage.

While the dominant frames for understanding the scandal were being established (largely personalistic and partisan-oriented), a large number of news reports were being released that offered what I term ‘friendlies’ coverage, or in other words a form of covering the scandal which provides only or predominantly friendly perspectives on and evaluations of the scandal and Trudeau’s personal character. This occurred in two primary ways. The first was to provide a platform for Liberal candidates and insiders, as well as friendly supporters, to express their concerns and shock while also forgiving Trudeau and speaking to his upstanding character and efforts at bringing social justice for racialized and ethnicized – notably Black – Canadians. In articles from across newspapers, Liberal candidates and friendlies were quoted one after another in support of Trudeau:

On Thursday, Premier Stephen McNeil released a statement about the incident to Star Halifax. “I think the prime minister acknowledged that it was wrong. The prime minister apologized to the country and asked for forgiveness and Canadians will decide on the sincerity of his apology and decide to forgive him or not,” the emailed statement says. “I believed in his sincerity and his apology and asking for forgiveness.” (Ryan, 19 Sept., 2019)

Some Liberal candidates running in the Oct. 21 election said they were disappointed and disturbed by the images, some viewed it as an opportunity to learn about racism, and others said it wasn't a big deal. But no one called for Mr. Trudeau to step aside.

Gary Anandasangaree, Liberal candidate for the diverse Toronto riding of Scarborough-Rouge Park, said he was "shocked" when he saw the images of Mr. Trudeau on TV on Wednesday evening. "While deeply disappointing, it's an important learning moment for us to really highlight the issue of racism," he said in an interview. "What's clear is that responsibility has been taken," he added. Mr. Anandasangaree, a Tamil-Canadian, said he has faced racism over years – as have a lot of his volunteers and staff. "There will be ongoing conversations for us," he said, "and we will continue those conversations at the door when we engage Canadians." (...) "The first thing that came to my mind, and I blurted it out, is, 'This is an unintentional mistake of a good man,' " he said. Mr. Arya said he participated in a Liberal conference call on Thursday morning, in which Mr. Trudeau apologized to his party's candidates and expressed regret. (Stone, Baum, & Thanh Ha, 20 Sept., 2019)

"I accept his apology. I watched his comments and, as somebody who knows him, I can tell you it was genuine. He knows he made a poor decision, it was a bad decision. And I could tell that he was hurt that he's hurt people," Liberal candidate and government House Leader Bardish Chagger told 570 News radio in Kitchener, Ont. (...) "Regardless of when it happened, it was wrong then and it's wrong now," Sajjan told CBC about the three photos of Trudeau in either brown or blackface. "But I'm also here to talk about the person I know, in terms of how much he is standing up for people. You need to be judged for your actions."

In a statement he added, "Many Canadians are disappointed by these images. Justin Trudeau has sincerely apologized for these actions & acknowledged that this was unacceptable." (...) Fergus said that Trudeau called him on Wednesday night before the news broke and they had a "really good conversation" about it. From the discussions he was having, Fergus said that people in the black community are ready to cut Trudeau some slack due to his track record. "I don't believe that anybody has ever lived their lives without making errors. The PM last night presented his apologies and expressed his regrets," said Fergus. "The real measure of the man and the thing we need to be talking about are all the amazing things we have done for diversity, specifically for the black Canadian community across this country." (Thomson, 20 Sept., 2019)

These examples (and many others that could be included here) demonstrate the priming effects of such friendlies coverage, which effectively shuts down critique and negative reactions/evaluations to the scandal, priming future reactions and cognition for an implicit (unconscious) association of Trudeau with forgiveness, progress, compassion, and social justice. The few instances of genuine critique after the scandal were generally drowned out by friendlies coverage, and did not succeed in engaging a meaningful discussion to any large degree within newspaper coverage. Indeed, the priming of Trudeau's post-scandal image was positively reinforced by the second trend in friendlies coverage: the selective use of citizen reactions to further prime associations of forgiveness and progress. In a number of articles, reporters visited Trudeau's Montreal riding to speak with local (often racialized) constituents about the scandal. Invariably

– as the headlines all clearly state – these constituents were “unfazed by [the] scandal” (The Canadian Press, 25 Sept., 2019) and forgave Trudeau, speaking to his efforts at helping racialized and ethnicized Canadians. The representativeness of these articles was highly questionable and problematic, thus speaking to their role as primers for the aftermath of the scandal. Take this excerpt, for example:

In Justin Trudeau's multi-ethnic Papineau riding in Montreal, residents questioned about the blackface scandal engulfing the Liberal leader's campaign offered a collective shrug. (...) Sani Piameng, the owner of an African butcher shop and grocery store, said Trudeau has often visited his store and even watched soccer games with him and his customers. "The man is not racist," said Piameng, who is black. "He's open to everybody." His wife, Juliana Owusu, said she didn't feel "at all" offended by Trudeau's actions, which she compared to dressing up for Halloween or a play. (...)

In his riding, none of the residents who agreed to an interview had anything bad to say about the photos or the leader. "It was no big deal, it was a long time ago," said Zahid Nassar, a convenience store worker. Nassar, an immigrant from Pakistan, said he voted for Trudeau in 2015 and will likely do the same this time. If he doesn't, it will be because he's worried about safety in his neighbourhood, not old photos. (Lowrie, 20 Sept., 2019)

As these disproportionately friendly and forgiving primers were being developed, the use and interpretation of public opinion polls was also used as a primer for evaluating and understanding the scandal in the broader context of the election. Numerous reports on Trudeau's and the Liberals' standing in the polls in light of the scandal served invariably to suggest that, quite explicitly, no one seemed to care much about the scandal, and that while immediate declines in the polls occurred, many were still likely to vote Liberal in the election. Leaving aside the question of these polls' accuracy in capturing the diversity of public opinion on the issue, we may understand their use in news reports as priming an association between Trudeau and forgiveness or progress, and indeed as progressively framing the scandal as something to simply pass by as the election campaign further develops (thus tying into the sensational and ‘on the surface’ nature of the meta-narrative developed throughout the campaign). Consider these short excerpts:

“Despite their proliferation in the media, the pictures of the prime minister haven't severely impacted the Liberals yet,” said Lorne Bozinoff, president of Forum Research. “Of course, that could change with four weeks of campaigning left to go. What should concern the Liberal campaign is the approval numbers of Jagmeet Singh. The Liberals are the primary beneficiaries of a weak NDP, and if Singh's approval continues to rise, we can expect to see NDP support rise with it.” (Tubb & Allen, 22 Sept., 2019)

In the immediate aftermath of the shocking Justin Trudeau blackface photos, it remains difficult to see what impact it will have on the election campaign of 2019. Several major national public polling companies are testing the mood of Canadians. So are the political parties, which are holding their

information close. Yet if early polls, the direction of the leaders' tours and the pace of big policy announcements coming from the Liberal campaign are any sign, Justin Trudeau is worried. The Liberal leader is steering the conversation, and his tour, back to where he wants it — the contrast between him and Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer — aiming at the Greater Toronto Area and the swath of middle-class voters in southern Ontario. (MacCharles, 22 Sept., 2019)

The election campaign was rocked Wednesday and Thursday by revelations that Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau had worn brownface and blackface in at least three incidents between high school in the 1980s and when he was a teacher in 2001. Mr. Trudeau apologized this week and acknowledged the actions were racist. Nik Nanos, founder and chief data scientist of Nanos Research, said the controversy this week appeared to have hurt support for Mr. Trudeau. He said support for Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer has increased in recent days. “The next few days will be critical to Trudeau as he attempts to stop the trend which favours the Conservatives,” Mr. Nanos said. “At the same time, expect Canadians to focus more on Scheer as a potential prime minister.” (Hannay, 21 Sept., 2019)

Mr. Nanos said data from the first two weeks of the campaign shows that, while support for the Liberals remains steady in Toronto and everywhere in Ontario, it's their support in the Toronto suburbs that's changed. Specifically, he said, the Liberal “advantage” in the 905 was diminished in the wake of the blackface controversy. He said it shows voters in area region are particularly sensitive to issues and events from the campaign. “With the movement that we've seen, 905 residents are still looking to make up their mind,” Mr. Nanos said. (Hannay, 27 Sept., 2019)

Tying into these trends was a more clearly sensational tendency to dig up background information on the scandal, including numerous articles written on the private school where the first publicised incident took place, the people who were present that night and their reactions, as well as more general inquiries into, for example, the man who first provided the yearbook photo of Trudeau in blackface to *Time Magazine*. Invariably, these ‘background information’ stories failed to draw any substantive or concrete relevance to the political and social implications and underlying issues of the scandal. Rather, such efforts simply drew on the sensational interest in the story and reproduced it in uncritical, non-substantive, and ultimately distracting ways. Indeed, we find that the use of such background information, which often involved interviewing members of the private school community where the first incident occurred, served to further frame the incident in a forgiving and ultimately unserious light, brushing over the systemic factors and implications to give Trudeau a ‘pass’ on his wrongdoings and framing the event as a mere night of fun (e.g. Cox & Keller, 21 Sept., 2019; Kane, 21 Sept., 2019; MacCharles, 19 Sept., 2019; Stueck, Howlett, & Bailey, 20 Sept., 2019).

In light of these trends in framing and priming the blackface/brownface scandal, we may return to the question of sensationalising the coverage of this and other scandals more generally. The use of the

frames and primers identified above served far more than to simply shape or reflect the public discourse on the scandal. Rather, they worked in synergies to effectively pass-over the scandal with as little depth and seriousness of discussion as possible. Indeed, in a handful of news items calls were made by various actors in civil society to ensure that the scandal leads to a meaningful discussion of systemic racism and discrimination in Canada, and to not let it blow over into a sensational campaign story and little more. Almost invariably, such calls are immediately passed over and the journalistic focus returns to the sensational frames of competition, strategy, and forgiveness, offering little to no substance or concrete informative materials to engage in a meaningful discussion. A small handful of news items – notably in the *Toronto Star* – were the limited exceptions, framing and discussing the scandal within a broader perspective on the history of blackface in Canada and the U.S. and the issues of systemic and historical racism that it implies. These articles offered valuable information and perspectives on the issues at hand, although they too were admittedly limited both in themselves and in the broader context of newspaper coverage of the scandal as a whole. Indeed, these few stories were not developed upon any further within the mainstream coverage and discourse of the election, and while the blackface/brownface scandal was repeatedly evoked throughout the rest of the campaign (typically as contextualising information and components of a strategic campaign meta-narrative), Canadian newspapers failed to ever truly engage the public in a meaningful and substantive discussion of either the scandal, its real-world implications, or the broader patterns of systemic racism and discrimination in Canada.

Insofar as this was the case, we may understand the newspaper coverage of the blackface/brownface scandal as highly sensational and on the surface. The scandal was covered and extensively reproduced over the course of a week or so before the main election discourse shifted focus almost entirely, yet at no time during this media frenzy did a genuine and meaningful discussion or engagement with the underlying issues materialize (indeed, even the many claims of Trudeau’s ‘hard work’ for ethnicized and racialized Canadians evident within the friendlies coverage were almost invariably ambiguous and unsubstantiated, leaving the reader to simply accept that these claims are true, but without evidence). This highlights a lack of informative, substantive, analytical, and investigative journalism and reporting on the scandal – perhaps

one of the highest-profile scandals in recent Canadian history – and, ultimately, the ways in which the infotainment format in Canadian newspapers can work in rather mundane ways to sensationalise coverage and neglect needed perspectives and information on important political issues. The superficial depth of coverage was evidenced in the several attempts to call for a meaningful discussion without actually offering or provoking one.

As this brief analysis of the blackface/brownface scandal makes clear, sensationalisation within Canadian newspapers' infotainment format takes form through the coverage and narrative framing of politics and political conflicts or scandals in a superficially deep, on-the-surface manner, rather than through an otherwise 'explicit sensationalisation' of information. In this sense, we may understand sensationalisation in Canadian newspaper election coverage as at times almost mundane or latent, following political developments and discourses as more of an entertaining show to consume and follow than as a real-world democratic space that requires informed citizens and a plurality of substantive information and perspectives for deliberation.

4.2.3 Decontextualisation

The theme of decontextualisation has already been weaved into the above analyses in a number of ways. As this section seeks to make clear, this is because decontextualisation was found to be an overarching and complex, and ultimately *fundamental* component of the infotainment format in Canadian newspapers' election coverage. The findings on personalisation and sensationalisation have highlighted the numerous ways in which an overall lack of substantive and contextualising information on concrete political issues, debates, etc. has been displaced by forms of personalised information and context, as well as sensational frames, narratives, language, and primers. This synergy between infotainment categories is central to the nature of Canadian newspapers' infotainment format itself.

Examining Table 4a, we see that Decontextualisation characteristics are by far the most widespread and intense of all infotainment characteristics analysed in this study. In comparison with personalisation and sensationalisation, decontextualisation scores significantly higher on the Decontextualisation Scale,

with some 39.2% of news items scoring higher than a ‘3.’ This indicates that nearly half of all news items analysed displayed very strong intensities of decontextualisation.

Table 4a: Decontextualisation Scale Results

	Globe & Mail	Post Media	Toronto Star	All Together
Decontextualisation Scale				
1 (Little to none)	38%	28%	39.60%	35.20%
2	15.40%	5.60%	16.70%	12.50%
3 (Moderate)	13.20%	14.50%	11.90%	13.10%
4	15.40%	23.60%	17.90%	19.30%
5 (Highly Prevalent)	17.90%	28.30%	13.90%	19.90%

We also find that another quarter of all news items (25.6%) display evidence of low-moderate intensity decontextualisation (i.e. a score of ‘2’ or ‘3’ on the Decontextualisation Scale), while only 35.2% of news items scored a ‘1’ (compared with 53.4% and 45.2% for Personalisation and Sensationalisation, respectively). These findings alone indicate an overarching lack of substantive and contextual information provided to inform readers of political developments, debates, issues, etc. It is worth noting that scores on the Decontextualisation Scale account broadly for the relative levels of substantive contextualising or explanatory information and perspectives, a lack of which is not always the direct result of the Decontextualisation sub-categories themselves. In other words, the sub-categories of Decontextualisation are some of the more active and recognised ways in which news reporting has been found to be decontextualised, although the Decontextualisation Scale scores are a more holistic measure of the overall level of decontextualisation (or simply the absence of substantive context, explanatory information and perspectives, etc.), whether caused directly by the Decontextualisation sub-categories or not.

Comparing findings across newspapers, we see that Post Media newspapers score significantly higher than their competitors, indicating a very strong level of decontextualisation (with a majority of 51.9% of news items scoring above a ‘3’). Again, we find that results for the *Globe & Mail* and the *Toronto Star* are very similar. Nevertheless, while scoring lower than Post Media overall, these newspapers still offer

roughly a third of news items scoring above a ‘3’ on the Decontextualisation Scale, thus indicating a widespread decontextualisation of election reporting across Canadian newspapers.

When looking at the Decontextualisation sub-categories (Table 4b), we find a considerable nuance between newspapers. For example, while evidence of ambiguity was far less frequent in the *Globe* compared to its competitors, the *Globe* was the only newspaper in which the ‘pro et contra’ format of reporting was found to any considerable degree.

Table 4b: Decontextualisation Sub-Category Results

Decontextualisation Sub-Categories	Globe & Mail	Post Media	Toronto Star	All Together
NRF/Pseudo-Events	8.10%	9.40%	3.80%	6.80%
Candidate Challenge	4.70%	4.10%	4.30%	4.30%
Opinion/Speculation	22.60%	26%	24.50%	24.60%
Ambiguity	10.30%	27.40%	21.70%	20.90%
Pro et Contra	18.80%	8.30%	0.80%	7.70%
Strategic Game	30.80%	43.70%	35.10%	37%
Episodic Framing	47.70%	64%	34.10%	47.80%

We must again take these sub-category frequencies with a grain of salt, as they do not necessarily represent the intensities and overall place of such characteristics within the overall infotainment format. For example, while the pro et contra reporting style was identified frequently within the *Globe*, its overall place within the infotainment format was very minimal, and its intensity and impact on the quality of reporting was very low. Finally, when comparing frequencies for characteristics such as strategic game framing and episodic framing, we find a considerable spread of frequencies across newspapers. Despite this spread, however, such characteristics were found to be relatively equal in terms of their overall importance to the infotainment format across newspapers, when analysed qualitatively.

Accordingly, to present the findings on Decontextualisation characteristics I will briefly outline the general trend of decontextualisation as a lack of substantive and informative materials provided to illustrate political coverage, followed by a closer look at some of the more concrete trends which actively reduce the level of contextual and substantive information provided in news items.

4.2.3.1 *Lacking Context*

Many common conceptualisations of infotainment emphasise the sensational and entertaining components of coverage, although this analysis has found that the driving force and main determinant of the infotainment format in Canadian newspapers is the relative lack of informative, contextualised information presented to animate or illustrate political developments, issues, and stories. No specific code or variable was included in this study to track a relative ‘lack of context and substantive information,’ although we can nonetheless determine these relative levels through holistic qualitative readings and in relation to the many other codes and variables analysed (thus resulting in the Decontextualisation Scale scores).

While some more general and overarching forms of decontextualisation have been outlined in the above analyses, it is helpful to briefly consider some illuminating examples that demonstrate the ways in which news coverage is impacted and rendered more ‘infotaining’ or entertaining. One notable area of decontextualisation is in the presentation of ambiguous statements, promises, attacks, etc. from the campaign trail. Identified to varying degrees throughout coverage, ambiguity is, by and large, found in the *uncritical presentation of political communications*, such as candidates’ statements, speeches, or responses to questions at campaign events. In these cases, claims, explanations, responses, and candidate attacks are offered that often contain little to no concrete information, facts, or clear viewpoints, but rather a vague, ambiguous statement with an either positive or negative valence and a reassurance of the capability and virtue of the candidate or their party, or an assurance of the risk that comes with another candidate or party.

Take this example of Trudeau’s statements to an Edmonton crowd:

Earlier in the day, Trudeau stuck by his decision to participate only in two official debates next month and a third in French hosted by TVA. And he suggested he’d prefer to be on the campaign trail in B.C. and Alberta anyway. "The opportunity to get out across this country, speak with Canadians, listen to them, and talk about how we are going to build a better future for everyone and how we're going to choose a better future for everyone is at the core of what this election is all about for me," he said in Victoria, where he announced an expansion of a program to help first-time homebuyers.

"I'm going to keep doing that." Later Thursday, while his rivals were taking to the debate stage in Toronto, Trudeau was revving up party faithful at the rally in Edmonton, reminding Albertans of everything his government has done to help them weather the plunge in world oil prices, including

buying the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion project. "I've made a point of coming to Alberta, and to Edmonton, many, many times since I became prime minister because this province, its people, matter," he said, promising that a Liberal government "will always have your back."

Scheer and Singh had campaigned in and around Toronto earlier in the day. (Levitz & Bryden, 13 Sept., 2019)

As we see here, Trudeau's statements to the crowd are reproduced uncritically and with no effort to question their ambiguity or vagueness, or simply their general lack of meaning and substance. The statements are presented and immediately passed-by to look at the other party leaders' campaigns. Such ambiguity was commonplace in campaign reporting, reflecting the general sense of authority with which political communications from party leaders are presented – in essence, as a genuine reflection and look at the political developments of the day. Thus, the day's events may be covered 'authoritatively' based on the sources used, yet remain non-substantive all the while. Consider the uncritical reproduction of Jagmeet Singh's pleas as speculation grew over a coalition government:

"I want to be your prime minister. But whatever Canadians vote for come the 21st of October, I want Canadians to win. And, so I'm saying to win, if you vote for New Democrats, we will fight in whatever form the government takes, whatever the power the people give us, to make sure we deliver on the things that people need," Singh said in Toronto. "I'm proud of the fact that I'm ready to fight Conservatives no matter what, and however I can. I think Canadians want that. The majority of Canadians don't vote Conservative. The majority of Canadians want a progressive government." (Blanchfield, 16 Oct., 2019)

Or, consider Scheer's criticisms of Trudeau, again reproduced uncritically:

Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer warned Tuesday that national unity is at risk without a change in government. The federation must be reimagined for the 21st century, Scheer said as he made a direct pitch to Quebec voters, who polls suggest are increasingly supporting the separatist Bloc Québécois. Scheer quoted Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister, as saying that "everything is to be gained by union, and everything to be lost by disunion." "Sadly the wisdom of our first prime minister is lost on our current one," Scheer said. He repeated his pledge to work on a new interprovincial trade deal, announcing he'll convene all of the premiers to get started on it within his first 100 days in office. The existing deal doesn't go far enough to ease the barriers to trade, he said. "When you talk to different manufacturers and producers of all different types of products, there are still many different hurdles," he said. (Levitz, 16 Oct., 2019)

This ambiguity in claims and attacks was a common theme – speaking especially to the poverty of substance in the federal leaders' political communications themselves – which tied-in in myriad ways to the general decontextualisation of political discourse.

Before turning to a consideration of some of the more active forms of decontextualisation, a quick word on the coverage of conflict as a lack of investigation or, as this phenomenon is often referred to, the

‘pro et contra format,’ is in order. This style of coverage seeks to embody an ‘objective’ look at political issues by customarily providing a set of two competing perspectives – hence the term ‘pro et contra’ – to give an air of natural debate, but which serves ultimately to replace any rigorous research, investigation, analysis, or diversity of perspectives (see Patterson, 2000). This style of coverage was only identified to any considerable degree within the *Globe & Mail*, and contributed minimally overall to the infotainment format therein. In many cases, this style also involved ambiguity and attack statements, covering policy debates by pinning two competing camps against each other and showcasing their statements one after the other. However, this often resulted in a superficial look at the policies themselves or their merits and weak points. Also worth briefly mentioning here is the use of episodic framing, which tends to treat political stories episodically (i.e. in isolation from surrounding contexts, histories, and themes) rather than thematically. As a framing technique which limits the degree and scope of context in which stories are told, this frame was found to be widespread throughout coverage (evident in some 47.8% of news items). However, it was implicated in several synergies with other infotainment characteristics and episodic frames were not themselves rigorously analysed. Rather, the general trend in episodic versus thematic styles of framing was monitored throughout and considered in conjunction with the overall levels of contextualisation provided for any given story or topic. As such, clear and concise examples are difficult to offer here. Suffice it to say that a large number of news items were covered episodically – especially when focusing on the policy- or issue-level of coverage – even if couched within a broader meta-narrative of strategic competition throughout the election. Having now outlined a few general and more minor trends in the lack of context provided in news items, I will turn to some of the more active forms of decontextualisation identified in Canadian newspapers’ election coverage.

4.2.3.2 *Opinions and Speculations*

The growing use of opinion and speculation, rather than documented and researched facts, events, and analysis, within news coverage has gained much academic attention, especially in light of developments in 24-hour newscasts and internet news outlets that promote an ‘up-to-the-minute’ coverage of political

discourse. As seen above, explicit forms of opinion and speculation were found in some roughly 25 percent of news items analysed, suggesting a firmly-established place for and use of such information/characteristics in Canadian newspapers' election coverage. The nature and intensity thereof varied greatly between news items, although a few trends stood out. The first was a general tendency to speculate on political issues, policies, and developments by discussing and presenting them through speculative thoughts and opinions, rather than factual, researched, expert, or otherwise authoritative and documented information. For example, when discussing possible taxes on foreign home-owners and changes to mortgage stress tests, industry representatives were frequently called on to give their opinions and speculate on what the results might be, often in lieu of using research, statistics, or attempts to gauge various other perspectives, for example from citizens and groups of varying backgrounds:

Christopher Alexander, executive vice-president of brokerage firm Re/Max, warns that the government could drive away nonCanadian buyers in markets where they pose no threat to affordability. "Limiting it to areas of the country where there are lots of foreign speculators makes sense, but nationally, I don't think we need it," he said. (McFarland, 28 Sept., 2019)

Bank of Montreal chief economist Doug Porter doubted the Liberals' proposed tax could dent the housing market's comeback, if and when it were ever implemented. "I don't rule out that it could have an impact on cities other than Vancouver and Toronto, but I think they're much less influenced by non-resident purchases," Porter told Financial Post. "And what's driven the housing market has largely been healthy job gains, strong population growth and, yes, a pullback in long-term mortgage rates this year." Porter, however, said he also didn't necessarily take issue with such a policy. "In a world where, especially in the big cities, housing affordability is such an issue, I don't really think we can afford to allow any forms of speculation, especially from outside of the country, to be influencing the market." (Zochodne, 14 Sept., 2019)

Barclays Capital analyst John Aiken said the proposed speculation tax looks to be another "incremental factor" for the housing market, which may only slightly reduce demand. "Realistically, the inelasticity in demand that these type of buyers have, I'm not sure if this is going to have an overly material impact on pricing or the housing market," Aiken said. (...) Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer, meanwhile, has previously pledged to "re-work" Canada's mortgage stress test. The real-estate industry says it wants the qualifying rate to be adjusted according to the economic environment and interest rates. (Zochodne, 14 Sept., 2019)

While giving an air of expertise, these sorts of interventions into the public debate are filled with speculative and opinionated terminology ('I think,' 'I don't think,' 'could,' 'may,' 'I'm not sure,' 'he didn't necessarily take issue with,' etc.), rather than substantiated with research/statistics, historical or regional comparisons, or a diversity of substantive and analytical perspectives for citizens to compare and deliberate between. In

a highly speculative – yet not uncommon – example, a poll showing a rise in alienation and separatist sentiment in Alberta is speculated upon in the context of the election:

"Disdain for the federal government in Alberta is rising and sits alarmingly high today," said ThinkHQ president Marc Henry. "For most alienated Albertans, leaving isn't an acceptable answer, so we can expect these sentiments to drive political events in other ways." That frustration would likely increase support for a strong provincial government "to act as a foil to the feds in Alberta's interests," added Henry. A re-elected Liberal government could well heighten feelings of alienation in Alberta, while a Conservative victory could ease those sentiments, he said. But that would depend on what follows, said Henry. "If a Conservative party government is unable or unwilling to address feelings of alienation in Alberta, it would likely be a catalyst for a new federal party in the style of the Reform party," said the pollster. (...)

Kathol said he understands that frustration. "We've been steady contributors for decades and we're in need of some help in our key industry ... I can see wanting a fairer deal, it's legitimate," he said. But Kathol said he also wonders how much of that separatist sentiment is due to "sabre-rattling by (Premier) Jason Kenney." He said most Albertans rightly view their country positively and for good reason. "Canada is the envy of the world, you can read survey after survey saying that," said Kathol. Albertans' penchant for separatism is probably overstated, said Mount Royal University political communications professor David Taras. "If you asked, 'Do you think it'd be a good idea to need a visa to go to Kelowna,' you might get a different response," he said. "Albertans love Canada - just be here on Canada Day or during the Olympics when we're playing the U.S. in a gold medal final." (Kaufmann, 19 Oct., 2019)

As these examples display, the use of opinion and speculation on issues and policies is weaved almost naturally into coverage at the expense of a more factual or information-based discussion, as well as at the expense of a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives. As the Alberta example demonstrates, the potential for influencing voters with such speculative discourses is considerable.

A few more specific campaign discourses also represent the important place of opinion and speculation within election coverage – indeed, many of the trends and discourses outlined above were directly impacted by the use of opinion and speculation. For example, speculation over the Scheer/Kenney relationship and Doug Ford's absence, the strategic motives thereof, and their implications for electoral results were fairly widespread. A few examples demonstrate the speculative tendency when presenting this story:

Ford was pressed several times on his absence from the campaign trail for Monday's federal election, which has seen Alberta Premier Jason Kenney make 23 GTA appearances on behalf of Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer, including one around the corner from Ford's home. (...) Privately, Conservative sources have said they are worried the Ford government's controversial record on increasing class sizes, autism funding, cutting the size of Toronto city council in half and other issues could hurt Scheer in the federal contest. Meanwhile, Ontario Conservative sources

have told the Star's Robert Benzie that Ford - who postponed the return of the provincial legislature until Oct. 28 to stay out of Scheer's way - is "getting sick of the cheap shots" from Trudeau. (...) Meanwhile, Scheer has been distancing himself from Ford, rarely if ever mentioning the premier - even while at the campaign event a short walk from the premier's house in Etobicoke Centre last month. "Mr. Ford made the decision to remain focused on provincial issues," Scheer said in French at a campaign stop Wednesday in Essex. Tensions remain between the Ford and Scheer camps. (Ferguson, 17 Oct., 2019)

Speaking outside of Mr. St. Louis's Ottawa-area campaign office, Liberal Steve MacKinnon said "it's ironic" that Mr. Kenney is in Mr. Ford's province while the Ontario Premier is nowhere to be found. "This must be quite an embarrassment for Doug Ford. Where is Doug Ford?" said Mr. MacKinnon, a Liberal candidate in Gatineau, Que. "Mr. Ford if you're out there, we want to see you. There are lots of questions about the Conservative agenda you put into place."

During the 2015 election, former Ontario premier Kathleen Wynne campaigned for Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau in the province, but the appearance of an out-of-province premier is viewed as highly unusual. During his years in federal politics, Mr. Kenney was the Harper government's lead person responsible for making inroads with ethnic communities. Pollster Nik Nanos said that history means the Alberta Premier and his connections with those communities remains an important asset for the party, particularly in the Greater Toronto Area. "Jason Kenney and his draw in the 905 and among ethnic communities was part of the winning franchise under Stephen Harper," Mr. Nanos said. "He has a lot of credibility in those communities. He has a personal track record reaching out to them and he's a significant asset in the 905, which the Conservatives have to win in order to try to win the election. Right now, he would be more of an asset in those ridings than the sitting Premier of Ontario." (Stone & Curry, 5 Oct., 2019)

These examples demonstrate how the use of speculation displaces a more factual and substantiated discussion of the actual political substance underlying the campaign. What is important is the strategic implications of each actors' choices. Legitimate concerns for Ontarians such as defunding of social services and cutting down representative government bodies (e.g. Toronto city council) are passed over with little thought, with the speculative journalistic focus aimed squarely at the strategic and electoral implications of the "Ford factor" or Kenney's popularity and recognition amongst ethnic communities. Political substance and context are forfeited to speculation over the political horse-race.

Another highly speculative election discourse was the coverage of debates. As outlined above, debate coverage was found to be a hotbed for personalisation and sensationalisation, often providing little to no substantive or informative information on concrete policies, debates, issues, perspectives, etc. An important aspect of such coverage was the speculation used to cover the debates both before and after they take place. Often couched within a strategic frame of winners, losers, and implications for public opinion polls, speculation over debates was rarely substantive or informative:

Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau is expected to be the main focus for party leaders during Thursday's French-language debate in Gatineau, Que., as they seek to challenge him on his record and bid for a second mandate. (Kirkup, 10 Oct., 2019)

Wednesday's federal leaders' debate on the TVA television network could be a pivotal moment in the Oct. 21 election campaign. (...) How will each federal leader approach the debate? And what are their strengths and weaknesses as communicators? Time to take a look. (...) With a four-year track record as prime minister, Trudeau will be the main target, though he has the advantage of being an old hand at debates as he is the only one of the leaders who held the job in the last election. Trudeau is also the only leader who has left the door open to a possible federal challenge to Bill 21, leaving an opening for others to exploit. And he is expected to be attacked for buying the Trans Mountain oil pipeline even as he presents himself as the best leader to combat climate change. On another front, expect Scheer to take Trudeau to task for the Liberal plan to significantly increase the deficit in a second term. (...)

Scheer will be at a disadvantage in the debate because he's not a francophone and he's not well-known in Quebec. And some of his positions - support for pipelines and the oil industry, for example - don't mesh with Quebecers' views. His opponents may try to hammer Scheer on abortion and LGBTQ rights and on claims he may have broken the law by misrepresenting himself as having been an insurance broker. (Riga, 1 Oct., 2019)

As we see here, speculation is often explicit. These examples are representative of a fairly widespread embrace of debate speculation, tying in more broadly to the strategic game narrative and the use of polls.

Opinion and speculation also played a fundamental role in the coverage of the blackface/brownface and other scandals, as well as in the closing days of the campaign through speculative discourses on possible minority government and coalition outcomes. As election polls showed a tight race in the final weeks of the campaign, much journalistic focus turned to the speculation over who may form government, how it may look in a minority situation, and whether or not the parties may be willing to join in coalition forces to overpower a minority Liberal or Conservative government. What we find is that the use of speculation and opinion overshadows and displaces more substantive discussions and coverage of concrete political issues and debates. Election polls are taken as definitive in a sense, and are speculated upon as such, rendering the election discourse less about questioning and comparing policies and promises and more about speculating on who will form the government and how. We may therefore view the use of opinion and speculation as an important and influential component of the infotainment format, as it reduces the scope of substantive, informative materials and increases the scope of speculative materials that either entertain sensationally or influence politically by not reporting on 'news' but rather presenting individual thought and opinion on the likelihood and desirability of certain outcomes, policies, or developments.

4.2.3.3 *The Fine Line between Reality and Media Reality*

It goes without saying that not everything the news media covers is an accurate representation of reality. This study was not directly concerned with the accuracy of coverage compared to the reality of events, although a few common journalistic trends identified in the literature as actively working to distort reality and presenting it in more sensational or attention-grabbing ways were included in the analysis. On the whole, these trends, which include the (re)production of pseudo-events and what Bennet (2005) has termed ‘news reality frames,’ as well as the use of candidate challenges (see Appendix 1), were present only to a very minimal degree in Canadian newspapers’ election coverage (found in only 6.8% and 4.3% of news items, respectively). Nevertheless, the findings merit a brief overview.

The biggest trend in covering or (re)producing pseudo-events was the coverage of campaign stops with little to no substantive information included. In other words, the campaign stop (understood as a pseudo-event in and of itself – see Bennett, 2005) is covered, but politically-relevant information, statements or promises, and discussions of policies and platforms are hardly present (if at all), meaning that the dominant focus of coverage is the pseudo-event itself: a construction of campaign discourse that effectively detaches itself from the substance of politics. This trend was highly frequent throughout newspaper coverage, often found in microcosms of pseudo-event (i.e. campaign stop) coverage dispersed throughout news items, yet sometimes accompanied by small presentations of substantive information. In these cases and for this reason, pseudo-events were not often coded, as the ‘norm’ of campaign coverage in Canada today is to include discussions of the campaign event or stop, even if it is not ‘news’ in the organic sense, but rather a pre-planned, often scripted and staged pseudo-event. As such, when coverage of such events included at least some substantive political announcements or discussions, the pseudo-event code was not applied, so as to avoid skewing the data too heavily for a routine practice. Nevertheless, the routine coverage of campaign stops as pseudo-events merits further, focused research in the Canadian context.

By contrast, news reality frames – understood as “a de-contextualized account based on a documented element of an event that becomes journalistically repackaged in a different story frame,” and which “blurs the connection between the news reality and its original surrounding context” (Bennett, 2005,

p. 370) – played a more important role in election coverage. The biggest trend that stood out was in the coverage of reactions to Trudeau’s blackface/brownface scandal. Here, a number of articles served to construct a news reality frame by detaching the scandal from its concrete implications and underlying socio-political reality and presenting it as a simplistic question of whether or not Trudeau is genuinely sorry, whether he is a racist, and whether or not certain people choose to forgive him. Through these frames of ‘reality’ on the scandal, the journalistic focus shifts almost exclusively to Trudeau, rather than the broader implications and issues related to the scandal. The story is journalistically re-packaged into a news frame that questions Trudeau in a personalistic manner, sensationally frames and primes reactions to the scandal, and offers little else in the way of representing the broader realities in which it occurred. These news reality frames – often built up along with friendlies coverage and strategic framing, as outlined above – actively *neglected* important and relevant information and perspectives on the scandal (e.g. critical perspectives), leading to a constructed frame in which the story is largely detached from its underlying reality (for a thoroughly-researched historical and contemporary look at issues of systemic racism and discrimination in Canada – effectively *none* of which were evoked in newspaper coverage and news reality frames on the scandal – see Maynard, 2017). The analysis of this scandal offered above should make clear the ways in which such news reality frames are formed.

However, a small handful of other news reality frames demonstrate similar trends. Coverage of the climate protests at times aggregated to construct a frame on the issue which neglected or minimised much of the perspective of protestors, privileging the voices of elite actors such as party leaders or celebrity climate activist, Greta Thunberg. In covering this remarkable event (which saw over half a million protestors turn out in Montreal alone), a number of news items repackaged it in strategic terms, or as a contest between party leaders for who can profit most from the event through their show of support. These news reality frames effectively silenced the plurality of voices present at the protests, thus neglecting widely-held perspectives and citizen demands, and rather framed the issue through an ‘elite’ news reality involving recognised political actors and their strategic motivations. In another interesting example, an article distributed across the Post Media network outlines a “glossary of campaign terms for the unwoke,”

which repackages a number of social justice concepts and issues in terms of a distinction between what appears to be ‘elite’ and ‘regular people’s’ knowledge:

Monday night's English-language debate, which pitted the six leaders of the largest parties against one another, featured something approximating an exchange of ideas. It also, though, featured the flinging of terms with which anyone not currently on a university campus might be unfamiliar. Indeed, that's hardly been unique to the debate. The campaign himself [sic] has been awash in terminology that requires a bit of explanation. And so, the National Post presents, a mini Campaign Glossary ... (National Post Staff, 9 Oct., 2019)

While ultimately educational and informative (this item scored a ‘2(I=E)’ on the Infotainment Scale, suggesting a helpful mix of informative and entertaining characteristics), this sort of journalistic repackaging of political issues and events can pose legitimate concerns, for example in citizens’ evaluations of the legitimacy of such social justice concepts/issues when presented through such a frame (e.g. when presented as a set of ‘elite’ or ‘academic’ terms for those who are “woke,” certain populist tendencies amongst parts of the population may render such a frame, and thus the social justice information it presents, less welcome or accepted compared to a more holistic framing and presentation).

A more frequent, yet still minor, characteristic of decontextualisation was the use of a news reality frame which Bennett (2005) terms “candidate challenges” – the “preeminent election news reality frame” wherein journalists raise unsourced or unverified allegations and claims to challenge candidates on how they can handle themselves (Bennett, 2005, p. 365). As described by Bennett (2005), these often include when journalists selectively emphasise “dubious plot elements into a news reality frame to create more dramatic news than the original situation would have” (p. 366). These challenges were often far less sensational than those conceptualised in Bennett’s (2005) work. Nevertheless, they were still present in a number of news items, severing to displace more substantive, factual, or concrete political information and news with fabricated, unproven, or unsubstantiated challenges to the consistency or character of party leaders. A few brief examples of candidate challenges posed to party leaders Justin Trudeau, Andrew Scheer, and Elizabeth May demonstrate the distractionary and non-substantive nature of such decontextualizing tendencies. For example, Trudeau was challenged on allegations regarding his role in the NAFTA negotiations and his alleged relationship with the controversial far-right commentator, Faith

Goldy. Andrew Scheer was challenged on his alleged ‘flip-flopping’ of his abortion stance, his citizenship and insurance broker scandals, and his alleged role in the Kinsella consulting firm’s attacks on the People’s Party of Canada. And finally, Elizabeth May was challenged on her alleged ‘flip-flopped’ stances on both abortion and Quebec sovereignty. Across these cases, journalists consistently challenged the candidates (or their spokespersons) on their consistency of beliefs or on their claims in scandalous situations, based solely on rumors, fabricated ‘flip-flop’ stories, and unsubstantiated accusations (typically coming from competing partisan camps, or from out-of-context historical gaffes or seeming contradictions). The effect, minimal overall in terms of the infotainment format, was a sensational and distractionary ‘filler’ for a number of stories, which served in part to lower the quotient of substantive, contextualising, and informative materials.

4.2.3.4 The Strategic Game

Perhaps the most dominant and overarching of all trends, the presentation of election news through a strategic game frame was by far the most widespread norm and framing strategy in election news coverage. This framing style – argued by many researchers to be widespread today – plays a central role in the overall decontextualisation of news reporting. The strategic game frame fits all political developments and information within the universal frame of competition and strategy, transforming candidates into winners and losers in a tight horse race and political materials such as policy promises, debates, issues, etc. into mere strategic considerations. The strategic game frame, more so than any other characteristic, was found to implicate and shape trends identified across this analysis, forming synergies with personalised reporting styles, the coverage of sensational conflict and scandal, opinion and speculation, ambiguity, and others. In this way, the strategic game frame is found to be a central pillar of the infotainment format in Canadian newspapers’ election coverage. This frame consistently and overwhelmingly decontextualizes election coverage by replacing serious, sustained, and informative discussions of the information, substance, and underlying context of politics with a sensational look at political strategies and horse races, or perhaps more literally, a sensational look at politics *as* a strategic horse race, and little more. Three main

trends in strategic game framing may be discussed to help illustrate the nature of this characteristic: (1) the use of the language of strategic games; (2) the use of polls; and (3) strategic interpretations.

The language of strategic games is peppered throughout almost all of election coverage. Appearing consistently in macrocosms of strategic discourse and sporadically in microcosms of strategic rhetoric, the language of strategic games sets the dominant frame for understanding Canadian electoral politics. Through this frame, democratic politics loses its consensual and deliberative character and takes on a war-time aura. Words such as “battleground,” “fighting,” “competition,” “strategy,” “race,” and “war room” are frequently used to describe and try to make sense of political developments. Take this set of brief excerpts for example:

Were it a province, Toronto's 25 seats - all held by Liberals - would make it the fifth most riding-rich target in the federal election, after Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia and Alberta. The city is a prize. And like any other large, coveted jurisdiction, Toronto has its specific concerns - things like public transit and gridlock, gun violence, the cost of rent and child care, and the on-the-ground impact of provincial cuts. Not solely federal issues - but the kind of things voters may be thinking about when they cast their ballots on Oct. 21, said political science professor Laura Stephenson, who studies voter behaviour at Western University. (...) "People vote for what they care about," she said, adding a swing of just a point or two can tilt any given race. "It's basic math," said Conservative strategist Jason Lietaer. The Liberals are odds-on favourites to hold Toronto, he said, but if the Tories win a few seats in the 416, that may mean they're on track to a majority. (Tubb, 15 Sept., 2019)

Now twice as populous and transformatively more diverse than it was 35 years ago, the GTA stands as the unignorable prize of Canadian politics, as evidenced by the sheer scramble of the campaigns to converge on southern Ontario moments after the election writs were issued for the Oct. 21 vote (Potter, 14 Sept., 2019)

The Conservative campaign has targeted four key battleground regions in the final days of the federal election, with Leader Andrew Scheer focusing on ridings his party needs to win to have a chance at power. Where political leaders spend the dying days of an election is often seen as an indicator for how their campaigns are faring. A leader spending time in regions and ridings they already hold could be playing defence, while a campaign focusing its efforts in hostile territory might be more optimistic, hoping to steal seats from its rivals. (Boutilier, 18 Oct., 2019)

Trudeau took the Liberal campaign to Vancouver on Wednesday, marking his first stop on the party's election tour and setting the tone for a high-stakes race in British Columbia. (...) The Liberals will also be fighting to maintain their presence in the Lower Mainland battleground ridings, through which the Trans Mountain expansion pipeline would run. (Zilio, 12 Sept., 2019)

Local candidates, *war-room staff* and supporters attended the rally, where Mr. Trudeau promised to “see you on the flip slide” after the Oct. 21 election. (Zilio, 12 Oct., 2019; emphasis added)

Major federal party leaders wrapped up their last day of campaigning in the key battleground province of British Columbia on Sunday, as voters prepare to cast their ballots after a deeply divisive election. The Liberals and Conservatives still appear deadlocked in support according to polling by Nanos Research released Sunday, the 40th day of a political race that has produced no clear front-runner. (Chase, Dickson, Kirkup, & Zilio, 20 Oct., 2019)

Scheer's political battle in Quebec is being fought on several fronts. (Levitz, 16 Oct., 2019)

We see here that not only are candidates reduced to strategic actors in competition with one another, but entire regions and populations are reduced to strategic battlegrounds needing to be won at all costs. A “neck-and-neck race” in “battleground BC” may grip attention more so than a “leveled discussion of community perspectives” within a “cooperative and pluralistic democratic space,” although from a political and democratic perspective, such language does not serve the political community or help inform the electorate (see Valentino, Buhr, & Beckmann, 2001). Through the language of strategic games, any and all political information and developments can be fit within the simplistic framework of strategic competition and understood easily as such. The ultimate effect of such language and framing is to replace serious, substantiated discussions of concrete political issues with a horse-race politics devoid of meaningful and informative materials.

Tying into this linguistic framing is the use and interpretation of election polls. The use of polls has been widely recognised as a central aspect of the strategic game frame, as it places the electorate in the position of interested audience, gives a platform for strategic interpretations based on public opinion, and allows day-to-day campaign developments to be more easily and comprehensibly fit into this strategic narrative while always giving the citizenry (i.e. news readers) a role therein. The use and interpretation of polls was widespread in Canadian newspaper coverage, notably in the *Globe & Mail*, which had commissioned the well-respected Nanos Research company to conduct polls for the *Globe's* exclusive coverage (a fact that was frequently advertised explicitly). A close qualitative analysis of the use of polls found that they were consistently used to evaluate and either frame or prime campaign developments, filling in for a detailed or substantiated discussion of concrete political issues and debates. As discussed above, the use of polls was also tied into broader strategic frames involving scandal. In some of the more high-profile scandals throughout the election, including developments in the SNC-Lavalin scandal, the blackface/brownface scandal, and Scheer's citizenship and insurance broader scandals, public opinion polls were frequently interpreted as a gauge of the public's mood after the scandals broke, but these interpretations rarely led to any more substantiated discussions or presentations of different perspectives,

potential implications, etc. on the scandals. Especially in the case of the blackface/brownface scandal, the interpretation of polls played a role within the larger strategic frame and narrative by treating the scandal as merely something requiring a ‘strategy to deal with it.’ Consider this excerpt from a *Globe & Mail* story covering the aftermath of the blackface/brownface scandal:

The images of Mr. Trudeau in brownface and blackface hit headlines around the world and ignited an intense political firestorm with less than five weeks before the Oct. 21 election. So far the polls have shown the Liberals and Conservatives locked in a fierce two-way race. The latest numbers from Nanos Research show that the Conservatives have inched ahead sit at 38 per cent while the Liberals are at 35 per cent. The New Democrats, meanwhile, are at 12 per cent, the Greens 8 per cent, the Bloc Québécois 4 per cent and the People’s Party of Canada 3 per cent. The poll was sponsored by The Globe and Mail and CTV, with a total of 1,200 Canadians surveyed from Sept. 16 to 18. It has a margin of error of 2.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Respondents were asked: “If a federal election were held today, could you please rank your top two current local voting preferences?” A report on the results, questions and methodology for this and all surveys can be found at <http://tgam.ca/election-polls> .

The pictures are a self-inflicted wound that can “only undermine Justin Trudeau’s personal brand,” Pollster Nik Nanos said Thursday. However, he said it’s too soon to say whether that will translate into less support for the Liberals, because it’s possible progressive voters will stick with the party if it looks like the Conservatives will win. (...)

One source said the party *did not have an adequate strategy to deal with the fallout* of the blackface controversy. (Walsh, Zilio, & Kirkup, 20 Sept., 2019; emphasis added)

On the whole, polls were a frequent, although not dominant component of coverage. A small handful of news items did use polls as the main subject matter of coverage, while others used them as the main interpretive content of coverage. Nevertheless, polls were most commonly found to replace an otherwise ‘serious,’ substantiated discussion of political developments and campaign discourses. Polls can be easily plugged-in to serve as a contextualising form of information, yet in doing so they consistently serve to decontextualise and sensationalise political coverage, strictly speaking, by couching it ever further into a strategic and war-like understanding of democratic politics. Through using the language of battle and strategic games along with the interpretation of polls as contextualising material, the strategic game frame takes form in diverse and subtle ways. When we consider such framing techniques on the aggregate, we come to understand the meta-narrative of strategy and competition that takes form. Within this meta-narrative, we can then pinpoint specific campaign developments as strategic points of interpretation that are used commonly across newspapers to illustrate and animate the electoral narrative. In this way, we can

see many of the trends outlined above as coming together to form a broader strategic picture of democratic politics and the 2019 federal election campaign.

For example, the personalised focus on party leaders and where they are going ties into the strategic frame of interpretation. Thus, a general campaign development such as Trudeau campaigning in Vancouver becomes a point of strategic interpretation within the broader narrative of the electoral battle, rather than a point of reflection or discussion on the local politics of the area or the substantive considerations surrounding election issues in Vancouver. Indeed, strategic interpretations of general campaign developments are found throughout diverse areas of coverage. Discussions of ridings in the Atlantic provinces, for example, are presented in terms of offering “clues on vote trends” rather than as regions worthy of substantive consideration (Forrest, 11 Sept., 2019). Often times, even in cases where substantive local issues are discussed, the strategic framing that encloses such discussions (e.g. strategic framing occurs both before and after the discussion of local issues, framing them as such within the broader context of strategy and competition) shifts focus away from the issues themselves and back onto, for example, the candidates competing for office, the Conservatives’ belief in having “a serious bet at winning the island [Nova Scotia],” and the historical voting patterns in the region (Campbell, 19 Sept., 2019). By focusing on the ‘strategy’ to regain seats in the Atlantic, and thus discussing local issues, candidates, etc. in the region in terms of their strategic significance, the effect is that a few local issues are discussed superficially and in-passing while the main focus and anchor of interpretation remains the strategic significance of each region or riding, and the strategic response of parties to local issues, rather than a meaningful engagement with the issues themselves in an informative and contextualised manner. This form of strategic framing is frequently used in the coverage of local ridings. From Vancouver to Calgary, and from Toronto to Halifax, local candidates, races, and political issues are subsumed to the dominant strategic frame and rendered interpretive points within a meta-narrative of strategic competition at the national level. Not only local issues but substantiated and contextualised political discussions more generally are foregone to the strategic frame. In doing so, political coverage is profoundly decontextualised and rendered both sensational and conflictual, evoking associative memories and priming strategic considerations to a high degree.

The effect of the widespread use of the strategic game frame is to draw the journalistic focus of political coverage into a web of strategic considerations which comprehend the election as a mere battle for power or victory, wherein all political developments, issues, and debates can be understood for their strategic relevance to the ultimate goal of winning the election. This frame effectively decontextualizes concrete political materials and discourses from their real-world considerations and repackages them as strategic components of a competition. Thus, with this frame, an issue such as the environment and energy production can be presented largely as a clash of competing camps within an electoral arena (a ‘battleground’), with little to no sustained engagement with the substantive and concrete details of such a debate. In such instances, the environment is, as such, reduced to an issue to be strategically *managed* in relation to other parties and the general public opinion on the issue, all within the referent frame of winning the election – rather than as a real, serious issue to be meaningfully discussed and debated in the public domain. Various other infotainment characteristics and trends fit easily and synergistically with the strategic game frame by funneling political discourse into a simplistic conceptual framework containing a strategic competition with winners, losers, an audience, and a prize. Candidates, as well as citizens (often evoked in self-interest-based terms as voters, consumers, and taxpayers), can all thus be understood within these roles, while experts or other commentators opine and speculate on the strategies and likelihoods of success at various stages. All of this serves equally to open the door to a personalised coverage of candidates, looking at their styles, performances, successes, and failures as reference points within the broader strategic game, points which can be analysed further in speculative ways. What is constructed is indeed a conceptualisation of democratic politics and the political sphere that is akin to a reality television show, more entertaining and less informative, strictly speaking, than a substantive and concrete discussion of political issues, policies, platforms, ideologies, etc. would suggest.

4.2.4 ‘Serious’/Informative News

Before concluding this chapter, it is worth briefly considering the quotient and nature of the more ‘serious’/informative news standard in comparison to the infotainment characteristics outlined above.

Overall, we find significant evidence of such a standard and the elements comprising it. Examining Table 5a, we find that nearly half of all news items analysed (48.5%) scored above a ‘3’ on the ‘Serious’/Informative News Scale, suggesting that this standard of news reporting is both widespread and of a considerably high intensity in Canadian newspapers’ election coverage.

Table 5a: ‘Serious’/Informative News Scale

	Globe & Mail	Post Media	Toronto Star	All Together
‘Serious’/Informative Scale				
1 (Little to none)	16.20%	22.10%	11.60%	16.40%
2	12%	20.40%	16.70%	16.80%
3 (Moderate)	16.20%	22.10%	16.20%	18.30%
4	20.10%	21.80%	29%	24.40%
5 (Highly Prevalent)	35.50%	13.60%	26.50%	24.10%

Moreover, looking at the Style Scale (Table 5b), which measures the relative intensity of an ‘objective,’ investigative, or analytical style of reporting, we find that a large majority of some 59% of news items score above a ‘3’, indicating a strong presence of this quintessentially ‘golden age’ discursive style of news reporting in Canada. Roughly a third of news items (35.1%) display low to medium levels of such a style, while only a small 5.9% show little evidence thereof, offering more explicitly sensational reporting styles.

Table 5b: ‘Serious’/Informative Style Scale

‘Objective’/Investig./Analytical Style Scale	Globe & Mail	Post Media	Toronto Star	All Together
1 (Little to none)	5.60%	5.90%	6.10%	5.90%
2	4.70%	13.30%	9.10%	9.50%
3 (Moderate)	15.40%	34.50%	24%	25.60%
4	21.40%	23.90%	30.80%	26.10%
5 (Highly Prevalent)	53%	22.40%	30.10%	32.90%

Comparing results across newspapers, we find that – in-line with the infotainment characteristics results – Post Media newspapers score lower overall than their competitors in terms of the degree of ‘serious’/informative characteristics of news coverage. Furthermore, while it may be in part a reflection of the different newspapers compiled under the banner of ‘Post Media’, we nonetheless find that Post Media

newspapers have the widest variety of reporting styles, with considerably lower intensities of an ‘objective,’ investigative, or analytical style overall.

Looking at the other sub-categories (Table 5c), we find a more mixed story. For example, evidence of ‘Relevant/Substantive Information’ and Hallin & Mellado’s (2018) journalistic ‘Civic Role’ are found in a majority of news items (75.7% and 51.3%, respectively). By contrast, only a minority of news items are identified as covering political conflict as a more serious form of debate, as well as offering evidence of a journalistic ‘Watchdog Role’ (44.9% and 42.8%, respectively). However, we must once again remember that these frequencies do not speak to the intensity and quality or nature of such categories of information, which in many cases were relatively minor and largely overshadowed by broader infotainment characteristics, even if coded as being present in the news item.

Table 5c: ‘Serious’/Informative Sub-Category Results

	Globe & Mail	Post Media	Toronto Star	All Together
Relevant/Substantive Information	81.20%	67%	80.10%	75.70%
Conflict as Debate	47%	37.80%	49.70%	44.90%
Watchdog Role	47.90%	31.90%	49.20%	42.80%
Civic Role	57.30%	31.30%	64.90%	51.30%

While these relatively high numbers appear promising, we gain a different picture by inverting them and looking at the percentage of news items which *do not* offer these standards of ‘serious’/informative information. For example, the sub-category of ‘Relevant/Substantive Information’ alone displays that in roughly a quarter of all hard news election reporting, there is effectively no identifiable information that meets such a standard (as defined in the Coding Dictionary). Even more problematic, a majority of some roughly 55% of news items fail to cover political conflicts seriously as a form of debate. When understood in this way, we see that while evidence of these ‘golden age’ elements are widely present in Canadian newspapers’ election coverage, there are still large amounts of coverage that fail to incorporate them to a strong degree (if at all) in comparison to infotainment characteristics. Indeed, the qualitative reading of the dataset underscored a notably *low* intensity of both the Watchdog and Civic journalistic roles when they were nevertheless identified. These frequencies thus take a more meaningful shape when

considered in light of the infotainment characteristics and trends identified above. Indeed, when contextualising the ‘Serious’/Informative News frequencies within the broader findings of this study, we see that the considerably high 33.2% of news items scoring a ‘1’ or ‘2’ on the ‘Serious’/Informative News Scale speak to the relatively widespread presence of infotainment characteristics and formats and their general displacement (rather than accompaniment) of more ‘serious’/informative standards.

Accordingly, let’s consider these numbers in light of the nature of the dataset itself. A first impression of these numbers suggests that ‘serious’ and informative reporting is widespread and strong in the context of Canadian newspapers’ election coverage. This is indeed the case, evidenced as well by the Infotainment Scale results, which show a majority of 57.6% of news items with medium to high levels of ‘serious’, informative, and substantive information (e.g. scoring a ‘2(I=E)’ or less). However, when we consider the nature of the dataset under analysis, which has been chosen specifically as a set of hard news items covering the federal election, another side of the story arises and appears more problematic. In other words, while a majority of news items may be generally ‘serious’ and informative, we still find that some 42.4% of election news offers little to no substantive and informative coverage (scoring a ‘2(E/I)’ or higher on the Infotainment Scale), and that a narrow majority of news items (51.5%) contain only low to medium intensities of ‘serious’/informative news elements (scoring a ‘1’ to ‘3’ on the ‘Serious’/Informative News Scale). In a dataset that included a wider breadth of newspaper coverage and topics (e.g. beyond the electoral context alone) this may be a less surprising result, as celebrity and cultural news, crime reporting, business and lifestyle reporting, and other topics may be more amenable to an infotainment format. However, being that the dataset in this study was selected as a set of specifically hard news items directly relevant to the coverage of a federal election, the finding that 42.4% of such news stories offer little in the way of informative and substantive materials for citizens to inform themselves during the election campaign is very telling of the state and quality of election coverage in Canadian newspapers. For a more concrete look at the informational dynamics at play between ‘serious’/informative and infotainment news characteristics, see Appendix 5 for a set of comparative examples of news items classified at various intervals of the Infotainment Scale.

4.3 Concluding Notes on the Findings

The findings outlined above display a complex and multifaceted style and format of newspaper election coverage. While infotainment characteristics were found to be present in at least 60 percent of news items analysed, the intensities and concrete characteristics were diverse, rendering coverage sometimes more and sometimes less informative and accessible. As should now be clear, the infotainment format in Canadian newspapers' election coverage is far from simplistic or universal. It involves a number of diverse, interacting, and synergistic trends that produce a wide array of coverage styles. Nevertheless, by reducing and comprehending these various characteristics within a tripartite conceptualisation of infotainment (i.e. Personalisation, Sensationalisation, and Decontextualisation characteristics), the infotainment format can be closely analysed, scrutinized, and more holistically understood.

The findings outlined above are not comprehensive, insofar as a number of relatively minor trends were identified which were not directly discussed here. Rather, I have synthesized some of these minor trends and patterns into the more overarching and analytically insightful ones outlined in this chapter. While these more minor trends are certainly of interest from different research perspectives, their omission here is a result of their overall insignificance to the infotainment format and the general focus of this study. Perhaps the most important caveat to again stress here, however, is that these findings speak only to the infotainment characteristics identified in the Coding Dictionary (see Appendix 1). They do not, as such, speak to the various issues that media researchers have identified in contemporary news formats, including problems of agenda-setting, priming, framing, and partisan or ideological reporting, among others. Since this study did not undertake a comprehensive evaluation of these factors, there are still, admittedly, a number of news items that were categorised as a '1' on the Infotainment Scale but which contain problematic or less-informative traits and forms of election coverage. Nevertheless, this study has generated a number of important findings on the nature and extent of the infotainment format in Canadian newspapers' election coverage. In the next chapter, I will discuss some of the broader themes and synergies from the

findings as a whole, and evaluate them in light of both their influence on Canadian politics and the expectations in the infotainment literature.

5. Discussion & Conclusions

5.1 Understanding the Infotainment Format in Canadian Newspapers

The results outlined in the last chapter display that a number of interactive and synergistic infotainment trends have animated election coverage in Canadian newspapers, resulting in a relatively widespread use of the infotainment format. But how can we understand this format in an overarching, holistic sense? Or in other words, the infotainment format (as conceptualised herein) consists of numerous characteristics, but how can we understand and speak of this format as a whole, rather than simply aggregating its parts? In the discussion that follows, I will briefly outline the ways in which the characteristics of the infotainment format work practically together to produce an infotainment news standard and media cultural norm within Canadian newspapers' election coverage. This standard and norm, as the findings outlined in the last chapter have sought to convey, is one of what I term 'latent sensationalism.' Accordingly, I will discuss what such a standard and norm entails and, building from this discussion, finish the chapter with an evaluation of these findings in light of the infotainment literature and suggest some potential implications for Canadian politics and the citizenry more generally.

To begin the discussion, it is helpful for us to briefly reconsider how we conceptualise 'infotainment' in light of the findings. What this study displays is that 'information' itself is not so much a pole on the continuum of information-entertainment (let alone one side of a simple dichotomy) as it is *a continuum of its own* which can be more or less substantive and informative (in the sense of politically-relevant, substantive information), and more or less non-substantive and entertaining. In other words, we should not define information at one pole and contrast it with a definition of entertainment on the other (which would make the infotainment scale a measure of the relative frequency or dominance of each category), so much as conceptualise entertainment as merely one *form* of information that may have myriad qualities and tendencies. In this sense, infotainment in the context of hard news coverage cannot be thought of simply as an informative news product that incorporates 'entertainment' or 'sensational' elements in the manner in which we may consider a movie or entertainment television show to be 'entertaining' or

‘sensational.’ Indeed, the ‘entertainment’ aspect of the portmanteau term ‘info-tainment’ must be understood more broadly as accounting for *diverse characteristics and forms of information* that render news items more affective and ‘light,’ or simply less educational and informative and more interesting and accessible/consumable. As such, rather than a pole in contrast to the dry, rational-textual ideal of ‘pure’ information, entertainment must be understood as a part of the information continuum itself, and as appearing through different forms, styles, and contents that expand, in varying and diverse ways, beyond the simplistic ideal of ‘pure’ information. While rather broad in definitional terms, this understanding of infotainment allows for a more nuanced analysis of the ways in which election news coverage is progressively rendered more entertaining than informative, at least in the Canadian newspaper context.

When understood in this way, the fundamental role of decontextualisation within Canadian newspapers’ infotainment format becomes much clearer. While important trends were found in each main category of infotainment characteristics, decontextualisation was undoubtedly the most widespread and synergistic insofar as it implicated and was implicated by all other categories in numerous ways, but also insofar as decontextualisation and a lack of substantive, informative materials more generally were found to be *the overall driver of the infotainment format in Canadian newspapers*. This is, in part, why I argue for a broad understanding of infotainment: Canadian newspaper coverage is, by and large, sensational and entertaining – perhaps paradoxically – in a predominantly *latent manner*. While evidence of more ‘intensive’ sensational and entertaining characteristics exists – especially within sensational and personalised discourses of scandal and political conflict – the dominant factor rendering Canadian newspaper coverage more entertaining and less informative is *the manner through which political information is represented without sufficient context or substance to inform readers on the concrete policy options, platforms, perspectives, and issues being evoked throughout the election*. Politics and elections, in this way, become increasingly akin to a spectacle to observe and speculate over rather than a democratic organisation and structuring of power, while news items become more akin to a cultural commodity or mere product-for-consumption rather than a politically-informative space of public discourse and deliberation (e.g. the liberal pluralist model of news media).

Approaching the infotainment format in this way, we can see the truly central position of decontextualisation when categorising news items. If concrete, substantive, and informative materials, perspectives, and context are necessary to the liberal pluralist ideal, or to a critical and well-informed citizenry more generally, then the progressive displacement of such information with other forms of (non-substantive) information and context becomes the defining principle of the infotainment format, rather than an abstract ‘combination’ of information and entertainment (which always evokes the question: “What is ‘information’ and what is ‘entertainment?’”). This progressive displacement typically occurs when personalised and sensational information act as a form of ‘contextualisation,’ pointing to an increasingly non-substantive journalistic focus and standard of coverage. We thus find a synergy and negative correlation between the levels of ‘serious,’ informative content and the levels of personalised and sensational content. Moreover, when cross-tabulating the overall intensity scores (Category Scales) of decontextualisation with both personalisation and sensationalisation, we find a positive correlation for the intensity of each pair of categories, thus showing that as the intensity of decontextualisation increases, so too do the intensities of sensational and personalised characteristics increase, (see Charts 3 and 4 in Appendix 6). As the Infotainment Scale results display, this news standard is not ubiquitous; a considerable number of news items do still fulfil a more informative role (leaving aside issues of the diversity and representativeness of coverage not analysed in this study). Nevertheless, we may speak of latent sensationalism as the *infotainment news standard* in Canadian newspapers’ election coverage, from which news items deviate from time to time, and in varying intensities, towards a more informative or a more entertaining format. News items fulfil their public-interest role of closely covering political developments and issues, but they often fit these issues within frames and narratives that necessitate or lend themselves to entertaining or sensational contexts and perspectives rather than substantive and informative ones.

Thus, we find that concrete substance is replaced by personalised foci on performance, style, and strategy. In lieu of informative contextualisation, political conflicts, campaign statements, and negative attacks are saturated with sensational, on-the-surface narratives that tie into broader meta-narratives of strategic competition. Synergies are produced between personalised and sensational contextualising

information, the strategic game frame and narrative, and the use of ambiguous statements, opinion, and speculation (along with an overarching tendency towards the use of episodic frames), all of which results *not* in a blatantly sensational news item, but rather in a decontextualised news item that fits into a broader strategic narrative but fails to include informative materials on that narrative or the underlying reality it *claims* to represent. Insofar as this is the case, the news item represents a form of *latent sensationalism* that draws attention and interest, promises gratification and worthwhile information to consume, yet fails to dig deep enough into the concrete and substantive context of politics to inform readers of the complex social and political realities that are represented. This format is replicated to varying degrees and intensities throughout newspaper coverage, yet the overall nature remains fairly consistent throughout, with localised particularities depending on numerous factors, from author to newspaper, and from topic to time or period of coverage. For a set of examples of this infotainment format as they correspond to categorisations on the Infotainment Scale, see Appendix 5.

5.2 Implications of the Findings: Information, Power-Making, and the Citizen

Having outlined the qualitative nature and quantitative frequencies of the infotainment format in Canadian newspapers' election coverage, we may consider some of the implications of these findings for Canadian politics and the citizenry more generally. An overarching principle that I have attempted to build into the theoretical and methodological framework of this study is one of agnosticism, or in other words, attempting to approach the study of infotainment without couching the analysis in a firm set of normative assumptions, such as presupposing the superiority of the rational-agent model of public discourse. Nevertheless, this study speaks to a base of literature that largely presupposes the liberal pluralist model of news media and journalism, as well as analyses discourse from a country with firm historical traditions of Liberalism in both the political and news media systems (see Hackett & Zhao, 1998). This is, in part, why I have employed an altered version of Brants & Neijens's (1998) 'infotainment scale' as a means of capturing the fluidity of the continuum between 'pure' information and 'pure' entertainment and not simply discounting news items outright as 'entertainment' or 'infotainment.' Accordingly, to understand some of the ways in which

Canadian newspapers' infotainment format affects Canadian politics, we must consider *both* the potential benefits *and* problems that the format poses for citizens and the democratic process more generally.

The potential democratic benefits of the infotainment format should not be overlooked, as many scholars have argued (see Literature Review above). Contemporary research in (political) psychology and neurosciences have amassed significant evidence on human cognition regarding the non- and a-rational ways in which humans gain, manage, and retain knowledge and information (Agarwal, 2020; Brader & Marcus, 2013; Kahneman, 2011; Moscrop, 2019; Westen, 2007; Westen et al., 2006). These findings provide a strong case for the infotainment format as a 'middle ground' of sorts between the dry, rational, and often inaccessible ideal of 'pure' information and the sensational, easy-going ideal of 'pure' entertainment. Some of the leading theories in political psychology, including the 'Affective Intelligence Theory' and 'Motivated Reasoning Theory,' argue that affect and emotions are central to human cognition and decision-making (Lyons & Sokhey, 2014; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000), with celebrated political psychologist, Drew Westen (2007), arguing that, at least insofar as political persuasion goes, "the political brain is an emotional brain" (p. xv). Indeed, the well-studied "Hot Cognition" hypothesis within the domain of Motivated Reasoning Theory argues that "all cognitive objects are linked to affective tags in [long term memory] via an associative network, and *cannot be activated without simultaneously activating their affective tags*. The implication is simple: 'cold' cognitive deliberation on political objects is not possible. Affect influences political information processing automatically and regardless of our determination to be 'rational'" (Taber & Young, 2013). As such, the infotainment format may indeed be better suited to human structures of cognition than the idealistic 'rational' standard of pure information. As seen in the Literature Review, empirical evidence of such benefits is emerging, especially within research on 'soft news programming' (see Baum, 2003, 2005; Brewer & Cao, 2006; also see Baum & Jamison, 2011 and Delli Carpini, 2014 for reviews of the literature).

Nevertheless, we should also not overlook the reality of imbalanced power relations that are structured within contemporary media and communications networks, those which are often controlled by increasingly-centralised capitalist industries and implicated within a broader global media network (see

Castells, 2009, 2010; Compton & Comor, 2007; Kellner, 2003; Thussu, 2007b). Castells (2009) has argued in his *Communication Power* that “*the framing of the public mind is largely performed through processes that take place in the media,*” including agenda-setting, framing, and priming, which activate complex neural networks and associations in the mind to help form mental images and conceptions of reality (p. 157-60; original emphasis). Castells (2009) goes on to highlight the (politically) hierarchized nature of news production and the role of ‘elite’ actors in the choice of frames used in presenting news stories to the public (see Ch. 3). While arguing that all actors have varying degrees of agency in both shaping and consuming news through alternative frames, Castells (2009) offers a rigorous analysis of the ways in which power is (re)produced through the interaction of communications networks, the frames and content of information they transmit, and the neural and reality-forming processes of publics. His conclusion merits repeating at length:

Since democracy is essentially procedural, how people decide does not determine what they decide. To elaborate and implement a policy – for instance, a policy on war and peace – is a most important process that should be conducted in the full exercise of the best cognitive capacity available to us. But to reach the level of policy decision-making, democratic procedures have to be followed with the full understanding of the processes involved. And these processes are largely emotional, articulated around conscious feelings and connected to choices that elicit a complex array of responses dependent on the stimuli received from our communication environment. Because professional politicians or naturally born leaders know how to solicit the proper emotions to win the minds and hearts of people, the process of actual power-making overlays the formal procedures of democracy, thus largely determining the outcome of the contest. The rational analysis of power-making processes starts with a recognition of the limits of rationality in the process. Instead, the discussion and analysis presented in this chapter show how, by activating networks of association between events and mental images via communication processes, power-making operates in multilayered dynamics in which the way we feel structures the way we think and ultimately the way we act. Empirical evidence and political communication theories converge toward emphasizing the power of the frame in the process of power-making. (p. 191-92)

As such, the potential for power imbalances that is structured into contemporary communications networks within liberal democracies should not be overlooked, notably in light of the contemporary development of a globalised “network society” of information/communication technologies that holds profound implications for societies, political systems, and cultures around the globe (Castells, 2010). All of this suggests the need for at least some minimal degree of substantive, ‘serious’ political information and

a diversity of perspectives within election news coverage as a safeguard from misinformation and heuristic manipulation (even if it is viewed by some as elitist and inaccessible). Empirical studies of political framing and discourse in the U.S. by Thomas Frank (2005), Mark A. Smith (2007), and Drew Westen (2007) share the common conclusion that the way in which information is framed and presented to publics can have profound impacts on their decision-making, perception of public affairs, and ultimately on electoral and policy outcomes, often to the detriment of voters' material interests and the neglect of their social positions (see also Moscrop, 2019, Ch. 3–6 for extended discussions of democratic decision-making and the potential for elite manipulation thereof in the media).

Accordingly, an 'agnostic' approach to the study of infotainment posits that the 'ideal' of substantive/informative political information that is necessary to a 'well-informed' electorate capable of making informed decisions may indeed be achieved through a sensational, affective, and quasi-entertaining format. In other words, the 'ideal' of news coverage is not necessarily a strict adherence to 'serious', substantive, and informative materials, but may indeed be found in the intricate admixture of such 'serious' information with various infotainment characteristics, thus serving the double purpose of informing the electorate while remaining accessible and sufficiently interesting so as to attract audiences and assist in gaining political knowledge and information retention. So, in light of the findings from this study, how might Canadian newspapers' infotainment format implicate Canadian politics more broadly? Perhaps the most pertinent starting point is to consider the role of the citizen.

In the liberal pluralist tradition outlined above, the citizen is presupposed to be a rational agent acting on informed perspectives and in their own, conscious self-interest. However, as discussed above, this rational-agent model has been largely disproven in recent years through research in political psychology, neurosciences, persuasion, and decision-making (e.g. Agarwal, 2020; Kahneman, 2011; Moscrop, 2019; Westen, 2007), resulting in a much broader understanding of the role of affect and emotions in politics. Perhaps one of the most important implications of such research has been to highlight the overwhelming importance of *narrative story-telling* in cognition, decision-making, persuasion, and information retention. As Westen (2007) explains, associative networks in memory and the use of narrative

are the bread and butter of political persuasion (p. 12), meaning that (emotional) narratives will hold in voters' minds far more effectively than 'rational' ideas. This alone suggests that the narrative forms of infotainment coverage in Canadian newspapers are likely to engage citizens and promote information retention far more than a more dry, rational-textual standard. The evocation of narratives and emotional primers engages cognitive heuristics and associative memories in ways that simplify political discourse into coherent, memorable narratives for citizens. As this study has found, such narrative framing and priming tendencies are widespread in Canadian newspapers' election coverage, forming a fundamental pillar of the infotainment format, and thus suggesting an important influence on citizens' levels of information retention and practices of political decision-making (see Baym, 2005; Graber, 1994; Valentino & Nardis, 2013). As such, we may conclude that this infotainment format is likely to hold a number of benefits in maintaining citizen engagement with the political climate and the developments therein. Indeed, the considerably high levels of consumption and trust in Canadian newspapers, despite growing concerns over media fragmentation and the decline of print news, arguably speak to the manner in which Canadian newspaper coverage succeeds in maintaining interest, engagement, and readership in the face of socio-cultural and economic hardships for the news media/journalism industry.

Recalling Altheide's (2004) work on media logic and culture, wherein he argues that the modern immersion of news and politics within an entertainment format "has changed the organization as well as the working assumptions and culture of journalists and audiences," (p. 293), we may understand the contemporary standard and norm of latent sensationalism as a working cultural assumption of what constitutes a 'quality' news product. Thus, we may argue that a widespread lack of substantive and contextualised political information, a generally low intensity of 'watchdog' and 'civic' journalistic roles, and the proliferation of personalised and sensational contextualising information within a strategic narrative format represent *a cultural norm of heuristic and narrative persuasion* in Canadian journalism and news reporting.⁵ In other words, this infotainment news standard is arguably well-suited to human structures of

⁵ To be sure, I do not claim that this is a 'newly-developed' norm, as this study does not account for historical developments, and histories of journalism in both Canada and North America more broadly suggest that these

cognition and memory retention. Nevertheless, we must remain critical even in the face of such stylistic benefits or strengths. While Canadian newspapers successfully offer an accessible format for readers and citizens to remain engaged and informed, the narrative and infotainment characteristics found in this study suggest that this format has a strong tendency to *overshadow* critical information and reflections on the actual substance and implications of public policies and party platforms. In place of offering in-depth or well-researched and contextualised perspectives and information on concrete policies, party platforms, and debates within their otherwise accessible narratives, Canadian newspapers typically offer heuristic cues and affective primers centred on the strategic narrative of competition in the election and the personalistic character traits and performances of candidates. While this norm is not universal, we nevertheless find it to be an overarching norm of coverage from which more substantive and contextualised forms of coverage simply deviate from time to time.

Thus, from the perspective of the citizen – whether we view them as rational agents of self-interest or not – this lack of substantive political information may be an *expected and accepted cultural assumption*, yet it may be viewed as problematic since it serves to construct superficial political narratives and understandings of the public domain while reinforcing certain patterns of (partisan) identification and heuristic decision-making (see Agarwal, 2020; Kahneman, 2011; Moscrop, 2019; Valentino & Nardis, 2013). By failing to provide sufficient levels of substantive, informative material, newspaper election coverage tends to encourage partisan and affect- or heuristic-based political decision-making (operating largely on narrative structures of cognition) rather than a more informed and engaged form of decision-making that may be achieved by incorporating more accessible narrative discussions on the details, merits, and critical evaluations of policies and promises for their public-interest (or even private-interest) value. Even if we concede that higher levels of such substantive information may result in a less accessible news product, thus turning potential readers away, we nevertheless find that the infotainment alternative or ‘ideal’ of an admixture of informative and entertaining characteristics is quite low, evidenced in only about one

infotainment characteristics may have long histories (see Hackett & Zhao, 1998; Rose & Nesbitt-Larking, 2010; Taras, 1990).

fifth of news items (i.e. news items which show evidence of infotainment characteristics, but which still supply a considerable amount of ‘serious’/informative material, scoring a ‘2(I/E)’ or ‘2(I=E)’ on the Infotainment Scale; see Chart 1 from Chapter 4 above). As such, we find that infotainment characteristics, when employed, all too often *displace* informative and substantive materials rather than accompanying them or offering them in novel and accessible (e.g. narrativized) ways.

Therefore, while readership and consumption may be encouraged through latently-sensational political narratives and developments, citizens’ individual decision-making capacities and ability to critically hold public officials to account is, when based off of information gathered from newspaper consumption, likely to suffer or at least be influenced in a number of heuristic ways. The importance, then, of finding a healthy balance between substantive, informative materials and accessible, narrative formats is key. As Bennett (2005) explains, “[t]here is no reason why news cannot be both entertaining and usefully informative (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001). Indeed, if people beyond political junkies are going to watch it happily, it should be both. The problem comes if news logic is drifting toward reality formats that increasingly float freely from the underlying social or political contexts” (p. 367). In the case of Canadian newspapers’ election coverage, the infotainment standard and ‘news logic’ appear to be doing just this – floating freely from underlying socio-political contexts and realities by simply failing to mention the details, information, and context necessary to comprehend the ‘sensational campaign show’ from within its underlying reality. We may conclude, then, that the infotainment format identified in this study is likely to engage readers and encourage citizens to pay attention to and remember political developments, but unlikely to inform readers of the information and perspectives necessary to critically evaluate such developments.

Taking a broader perspective on the implications for Canadian politics, the findings from this study suggest that newspaper election coverage and the widespread use of the infotainment format are likely to reinforce many of the status quo structures of deliberation and discourse which privilege certain groups of powerholders. Taking the frequent use of polls and the strategic game frame and meta-narrative as an example, we find that a strong emphasis and predominance is given to the two major political parties, the

Liberals and Conservatives. These two parties and their leaders are discussed as the most prominent and popular amongst the electorate, with the general campaign narrative structured around them and including other parties almost as ‘secondary’ contenders. Personalised and sensational narrative structures and forms of contextualising information are thus disproportionately offered for the major parties and candidates, while more (implicitly) negative primers and heuristics are frequently offered for the other parties and candidates by virtue of their secondary position in the electoral and political hierarchy (e.g. they are discussed, at least implicitly, as unlikely to be winners, as struggling for support, funding, etc. rather than as commanding widespread respect and support as the major parties do). The infotainment format in Canada inherently drives this disproportionate narrative, in part by shifting the journalistic focus to infotainment characteristics of ‘contextualisation’ or narrative rather than more ‘serious,’ informative narrative discussions of competing policies and platforms. When these narrative trends are considered in the context of decision-making and cognition, we find that a number of heuristic cues and influences may arise from such disproportionate foci. Taking Nobel-prize winning psychologist, Daniel Kahneman’s (2011, Ch. 7), cognitive principle of “what you see is all there is,” which describes the intuitive and heuristic forms of reasoning or decision-making that people use when dealing with incomplete information, we may understand how these disproportionate forms of coverage and a lack of substantive contextualising information may facilitate and encourage the use of heuristic reasoning among news readers (also see Castells, 2009, Ch. 3 for an application of such psychological findings to media production and consumption in a political context).

For example, simple yet effective cognitive heuristics such as the ‘availability heuristic’ and ‘availability cascade,’ the ‘likeability heuristic,’ and the ‘halo effect’ can be evoked and reinforced by giving a narrative predominance to certain parties and candidates, while other possible heuristic biases such as the ‘anchoring effect’ and ‘loss aversion’ may influence citizens’ decision-making when repeatedly viewing narratives and polls that reinforce the dominance, popularity, and overall likelihood of success of

the two main parties over their contenders.⁶ In Canada, which has a plurality voting system and a long history of strategic voting practices (albeit contested in terms of how widespread strategic voting really is; see Blais et al., 2001; Blais, 2002; Fowler, 2012; Merolla & Stephenson, 2006), these heuristic trends are likely to have been amplified in the closing days of the campaign as speculation grew widespread on the likelihood of a minority government and possible coalition (including explicit discussions of strategic voting and its role in the 2015 federal election within newspaper coverage itself). As speculation grew and voters came closer to casting their ballots, the heuristic cues and most readily-available associative memories that had been reinforced throughout campaign coverage are brought more easily to mind to evaluate and make decisions on election day or in advance polls. These heuristic patterns, when combined with weeks worth of poll coverage anchoring the relative levels of support and likelihood of success for each party, may well serve to favour the dominant parties and candidates over others (notably in light of

⁶ The ‘availability heuristic’ occurs during decision-making when the most readily-available information is recalled and viewed as most important (typically due to a higher rate of exposure) to the neglect of other pieces of relevant information. Availability heuristics can also be reinforced by media coverage and reproduction into what has been termed an ‘availability cascade’ (see Kahneman, 2011, “Introduction” and Ch. 12-13). As Kahneman (2011, “Introduction”) states: “People tend to assess the relative importance of issues [and decision-making criteria] by the ease with which they are retrieved from memory – and this is largely determined by the extent of coverage in the media.” The ‘halo effect’ is a widely-recognized heuristic that causes a tendency to ‘like’ or ‘dislike’ everything about a person or object based off of first impressions and single or limited criteria. It is often evoked in personalistic evaluations or when specific policy preferences are in play (see Kahneman, 2011, Ch. 7). The ‘likeability heuristic’ (also known as the ‘affect heuristic’) is similar to the halo effect, although broader in the sense of simply driving political decision-making based off of what the individual likes or dislikes, more so than based off of rational deliberation or categories of education, gender, class, interests, etc. (see Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004).

The ‘anchoring effect,’ which impacts evaluations of probability and value based on an initial ‘anchoring point’ (e.g. a position in the polls anchoring interpretations of the probability of a party’s electoral success), is likely to work in synergy with cognitive heuristic principles of ‘loss aversion’ that see potential losses weighed more heavily in decision-making than potential gains, so as to heuristically guide decision-making when voting, especially in situations of strategic voting that are mediated by speculations on possible minority and coalition governments (see Kahneman, 2011, Ch. 11 and 26 for details on these heuristic processes). As Kahneman (2011, Ch. 11) explains, anchors, even when true or statistical forms of information, are ‘suggestions’ that act as primes (priming) and unconsciously evoke compatible information to generate coherent narratives justifying them: “any prime will tend to evoke information that is compatible with it.” As such, information that is compatible with narratives and anchors showing the dominance and likely success of the main parties are likely to be associated and recalled more easily among newspaper readers than information that challenges these assumptions and encourages critical reflection and equal consideration of all competing parties/platforms. As Valentino & Nardis (2013) explain, “even the dissemination of information about public opinion itself can sway individual views” (p. 576).

findings on the importance of subjective evaluations of candidates' and parties' probabilities for success on strategic voting practices; see Blais, 2002; Blais & Turgeon, 2004).

As Patterson (2005) explains, polls are used by journalists as a non-partisan interpretive tool for campaigns (in-line with dominant North American conceptions of 'objectivity'), which allows journalists to construct explanations for the relative success or slide in the polls based on frames of candidate personality, strategy, etc.: "When a candidate gains ground, reporters can attribute it to favorable aspects of his personality or campaign style. When a candidate starts to slide, negative qualities can be singled out" (p. 721). Patterson (2005) thus finds that the overwhelmingly polls-driven election coverage in America effectively "squeezes out content that would inform voters' judgement" (p. 722). This appears to be the case in Canadian election coverage as well. Valentino & Nardis (2013) explain that "[h]olding socioeconomic and political characteristics of the voter constant, increasing substantive knowledge changes policy and candidate preferences quite dramatically" (p. 571). As such, the heuristic cues of a polls-driven, strategic narrative which tends to displace substantive and contextual information is very likely to influence certain voting patterns. While these are speculative hypotheses requiring further research that includes evaluations of Canadian news coverage's influence on audience decision-making and political perceptions, these well-established heuristics have been widely studied and recognised for their profound impact on contemporary democratic politics in the U.S. In light of this and the findings from this study, it would be unlikely – indeed very surprising – if the trends in personalised and sensational contextualisation, narrative heuristics, and strategic speculation would not play an important and wide-reaching role in encouraging heuristic decision-making among newspaper readers and helping to preserve the status quo of power structures in Canadian politics.

5.3 Findings in Comparison to the Infotainment & Media Literature

This study is positioned within the second branch of infotainment research outlined in the Literature Review, the study of infotainment within traditional news media. This branch of research is arguably the least well-defined and the most heterogenous of the three main branches within the field of infotainment research. Accordingly, this study has sought to synthesize and standardize the many conceptualisations,

definitions, and operationalisations from the literature into one comprehensive framework for the infotainment format in traditional hard news coverage. By applying this conceptualisation to a study of the Canadian context, this study has taken the first step towards comprehensively understanding the infotainment format within Canadian newspapers. While studies of a similar nature have not been undertaken in the Canadian context, we may still evaluate the present findings in light of broader research trajectories on Canadian news media and comparable findings in the U.S.

Rose & Nesbitt-Larking (2010) explain that the corporate business model of news media in an age of rapid globalisation has seen Canadian media face the same consequences as their American counterparts:

A major political consequence of [the trends in globalization] is to be found in the growing commodification of the news product, evident in shrinking and deskilled staffs, a growing dependency on the dominant wire services, an increasing resort to “pack journalism,” the expansion of “infotainment” and tabloid reductionism, and the homogenization of the news genre. Such trends have been as apparent in Canada ... as they have in the United States... (p. 285).

Empirical studies of the quality and nature of such changes in Canada are piecemeal and have not systematically engaged with the question of infotainment in the context of hard news coverage. As such, we cannot directly compare the findings from this study with others of a similar nature, although we may posit that the infotainment format and the general trends identified by Rose & Nesbitt-Larking (2010) and others (see Edge, 2016; Hackett & Zhao, 1998; Statistics Canada, 2019) are indeed present in Canadian newspaper election coverage, with varying impacts and intensities identified on a large majority of news items. Compared to an early study in the U.S. by Graber (1994), which found that entertainment features in broadcast news tended to overshadow the policy-relevant information needed to meaningfully contextualise stories, we see that a similar trend constituted a central pillar of the infotainment format in Canada (e.g. ‘latent sensationalism’ and lack of substantive context). The findings also mirror early research from the European context. Blumler (1992) argues that an increasing “infotainment of politics” is evidenced by a number of trends in European journalism and public communications, which Brants (1998) succinctly summarises as follows:

The content of political communication . . . is marked, first, by a degree of depoliticization. Policy decisions are more liable to be influenced by how they will play in the arena of media-filtered mass

perceptions (is the appearance of things right?). Second, politics is predominantly presented as game. As a result of the provision of ever shorter sound bites, there is diminished space and time devoted to policy substance. Third, political personalization is advanced because it is easier to project than the hard stuff of issues and policies. Finally, there are signs that the media promote an increased circulation of negative messages about political actors, events, and decisions. The consequence of all this is an ‘over-supply of oxygen for cynicism’ and ‘less and less of the political communication diet’ serving the citizen role. (p. 320)

As the results outlined in the last chapter display, these trends all appear in diverse ways within Canadian newspapers’ infotainment format, resulting in a narrative depoliticization of Canadian political discourse and a diminishment of substantive, informative materials for citizens to perform their civic role (thus risking the potential for civic disengagement; see Aalberg et al., 2011; Lazaroiu, 2008).

Despite growing evidence of these trends in Canada, however, we must not overlook the considerable quotient of ‘serious’/informative materials that persists. Similarly to Graber (1994) and Brants & Neijens (1998), this study finds that the actual level of informative and serious information in news coverage is still fairly high – indeed higher than many researchers and media commentators would likely assume given contemporary trends. This is reflected in the large number of news items categorised as a ‘1’ or ‘2(I/E)’ on the Infotainment Scale (some 48.70%). These findings thus mirror those from other contexts, such as the U.S. (Druckman, 2005; Graber, 1994), Chile (Hallin & Mellado, 2018), and the Netherlands (Brants & Neijens, 1998), where entertainment characteristics were found to be prevalent in coverage of hard news topics, but not to the extent of displacing informative materials and serious reporting styles entirely. Accordingly, we may posit that newspaper election coverage in Canada is very likely to engage citizens in the political process, grip interest, and still inform them to varying degrees of politically-relevant information. Looking at the distribution of news items on the Infotainment Scale (showing a strong U-curve; see Chart 1 from Ch. 4 above) suggests that the theoretical ideal of a mix of informative and entertaining characteristics is broadly achieved in roughly a third of news items. Another two thirds tend to either present predominantly informative or predominantly entertaining materials, respectively. In this way, readers are given a breadth of coverage styles and differing levels of substantive information. Considering this, the probability of beneficial impacts on political knowledge and information retention is arguably high, although firm conclusions are difficult to arrive at considering the wide variations identified.

Nevertheless, when we consider Prior's (2003) distinction between an electorate that simply knows about what is happening in the public domain and an electorate that is *well-informed* about public issues, the findings from this study become less promising. The general lack of substantive context and information, and the general lack of diversity in perspectives and localised coverage all limit the degree to which newspaper readers are likely to be well-informed on the complexities of political life and public policy – even if they are aware of political developments more broadly. Zaller (2003) has proposed a 'burglar alarm' standard of informativity in news media, operating on principles of 'feasibility' and 'critical potential' and "tailored to the needs of low information voters" (p. 117), which follows Schudson's (1998) ideal of the "monitorial citizen" who, rather than following all political developments in-depth, "scans the environment for events that require responses" (Zaller, 2003, p. 118). While insightful in considering the practical realities of contemporary citizenship, such a standard seems to contradict Zaller's (2003) own call for a news standard that doesn't "simply accept whatever exists as sufficient and good" but points "toward feasible improvement" (p. 112). In an era of rapidly-polarizing and conflictual democratic politics, as well as rapidly-expanding social and economic inequalities (see McBride & Whiteside, 2011), we may seriously question the degree to which simplistic and sensational narratives, personalised anchors of interpretation, and heuristics-based news reporting is leading to a well-informed citizenry and a well-functioning public sphere. To begin moving beyond heuristics and polarizing tendencies, critical reflection and evaluation must be encouraged, as well as exposure to a broader diversity of viewpoints and perspectives on socio-political, cultural, and economic issues.

Such a conclusion is supported by research on Canadian news media's role in stifling debate and shutting out or marginalizing valuable perspectives on important issues such as nuclear energy (Clow, 1993) and climate change (Stoddart, Haluza-DeLay, & Tindall, 2016), censoring information and coverage on the war in Afghanistan and other military conflicts (Bergen, 2008), ignoring or misrepresenting Black activism and liberation movements, as well as issues of systemic racism and discrimination (Cole, 2020), or on the power relations that have historically structured conceptions of 'objectivity' in Canadian news to the benefit of political actors and powerholders (Hackett & Zhao, 1998). In this sense, insofar as we may speak of

infotainment as a benefit for democracy, we must expect of the infotainment format an accessible and entertaining style, a humanisation of the coverage and discussion of politics, but also a reinvigorated commitment to furnishing the substantive and diverse forms of information necessary to critical reflection and deliberative decision-making – even if offered through narrativized, accessible forms. Based on this study, the infotainment format of Canadian newspapers' election coverage may be understood as fulfilling the first two criteria, yet as largely failing the last.

With conceptions and standards of journalistic 'objectivity' and professionalism developing historically from their nineteenth and early-twentieth century positivist ideal of reflecting the 'world out there' to an investigative and professional distrust of sources and facts in the mid-twentieth century (see Hackett & Zhao, 1998; Schiller, 1979), and today moving towards more of a partisan and fragmented niche-market standard that risks widespread issues of echo chambers and divergent media realities (see Campbell et al., 2014; Iyengar, 2007; Jacobson, Myung, & Johnson, 2016; Moscrop, 2019, Ch. 6), any news standard that strives towards democratic empowerment and the facilitation of a vibrant public sphere must be formed in the direction of providing a *diversity* of substantive perspectives and contextual information on any given issue (see Barkho, 2016 for an interesting presentation of this sort of 'standard of objectivity' as developed, in part, by former head of the CBC, Tony Burman). While 'low-information rationality' has been well-established in the domains of political science and psychology and driven many scholars to study the benefits of media heuristics for citizens' political decision-making (see Andrew, 2007; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Popkins, 1991), we must refrain from naively accepting the progressive displacement of substantive and informative materials in the name of abstract democratic ideals of 'accessibility' and 'anti-elitism,' notably when diverse and systemic forms of ongoing manipulation and superficial representation have been extensively researched and documented. Insofar as this is the case, the current cultural norm and standard of infotainment news coverage in Canada does not fulfill a strong public-interest role, thus leaving legitimate concerns over the potential for elite manipulation in Canadian federal election campaigns.

5.4 Conclusions & Areas for Future Research

The basis for a reinvigorated form of deliberation and accessibility within the Canadian news media and public sphere is already present in the infotainment format identified by this study. Canadian newspaper election coverage is far from a dry and boring, rational-textual look at politics. Journalists successfully engage in entertaining and gripping narratives, use national and local cultural references, human examples, and human-interest stories to humanise political coverage and relate it to the average Canadian, all while providing a close coverage and scrutiny of politicians and political developments throughout the election campaign. However, the quotient of *substantive* political information and contextualising materials, including the presentation of a diversity of perspectives, is lacking considerably in newspapers' election coverage. While basic factual presentations of policy promises and party platforms are frequently offered throughout the election, such presentations are often done in a 'bare-bones' manner, providing a minimal description and little in the way of context, research, debates, or competing perspectives to aid or encourage critical reflection and evaluations. The latter are, in a large amount of coverage, replaced by personalised and sensational contextualising information, which often leave political coverage 'on the surface' and framed in a strategic manner. Such trends risk engaging citizens in a number of heuristic biases without also encouraging critical reflections on party platforms and political developments.

While this study has taken a preliminary step in researching and outlining the prevalence and nature of infotainment characteristics in Canadian newspapers' election coverage, it has also sparked a number of questions which merit future research. The nature and prevalence of infotainment within hard news coverage of Canadian politics must be researched further and in different contexts. Research on infotainment characteristics in hard news, and even research on the displacement of hard news with soft news, is very minimal to non-existent in Canada. Since this study has focused only on the electoral context, the findings may not be broadly generalizable to the everyday coverage of politics between election periods. As well, this study accounts only for newspaper coverage, while the contemporary media landscape is increasingly saturated with new and different forms of media technology and news consumption. As such, research on broadcast and Internet news platforms in Canada must also be expanded and compared with

findings on newspaper coverage. Where possible, research should also attempt to incorporate methods for gauging the relative impact and influence of the infotainment format on audiences' political perceptions, levels and diversity of political knowledge, and decision-making. Such research will help us to better understand the overall nature of infotainment in Canada, as well as the concrete impacts of the infotainment format on Canadian politics.

Another area of research requiring further development is on the synergies between political communications strategies and the development of the infotainment format. While these two fields are distinct in many ways, an inter-disciplinary perspective reveals that the rise in infotainment may be heavily influenced by politician's campaign and communications strategies, and vice versa. Infotainment researchers have established several preliminary insights into the synergies at play between these discourses (see Baum & Jamison, 2011; Serazio, 2018). However, by incorporating a broader set of literature on political campaigning, we find that strategies of celebrification and personalisation in campaigning, including more focus on the private lives of politicians, may have positive effects on young peoples' willingness to vote or support political causes (Inthorn & Street, 2011). Moreover, the images and feelings of credibility and authenticity that result from such processes have been found to encourage political participation or attention to politics, especially among youth (Guthey, 2016; Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2016; Street, 2012; Van Elteren, 2013). Similar findings have been noted within trends in negative campaigning as well, all of which suggest (either implicitly or explicitly) that the relationship between media coverage of politics and the changing nature of political campaigning/communication strategies produces a number of intricate synergies, resulting in a mutual development of personalised, celebritised, and sensationalised political communications processes and media representations thereof (see for example Gross & Johnson, 2016; Haselmeyer, Meyer, & Wagner, 2019; Holtz-Bacha, Ines Langer, & Merkle, 2014; Lau & Brown Rovner, 2009; Porath, Suzuki, & Ramdohr, 2015; Pruyers & Cross, 2016; Tue Petersen, 2014; Walter & Vliegthart, 2010). Clearly then, the modern trends in political campaigning and communications hold numerous similarities to the trends in infotainment outlined above. The positive forms of political engagement that such trends create are likely to be capitalised on by political campaigns and

communications strategists, which are in turn likely to influence news coverage, and vice versa (a synergy outlined by Altheide, 2004, when discussing the transformation of political and social institutions based off of media logics and culture). Focusing more directly on the synergies between these interdependent discourses and how they mutually shape the nature of both contemporary politics and the media coverage thereof is thus an important direction for future infotainment research.

To conclude, I would like to consider Brants's (1998) brief description of infotainment as a 'hideout' from or bypass of critical scrutiny:

If a campaign strategy is aimed at infotainment in order to avoid the professional scrutiny of political journalists, we might have a problem. And it is worse if it is meant to mislead, or at least to hide something from the public, not to tell the whole story and thus to project an image which, if unveiled, might have made people decide otherwise. One of the pivotal functions of journalists in a participatory democracy – holding officials to account for how they have exercised power – cannot be fulfilled. (p. 330)

While this description speaks to politicians' campaign strategies and the use of soft news programming within an infotainment-media framework, I believe it is equally pertinent to the journalism and reporting found in Canadian newspapers' election coverage. Regardless of the specific strategies and motives of politicians, a news product cannot fulfill a public-interest role without itself taking a critical and explicit stance in the pursuit of 'the whole story' and all of the details necessary to informed decision-making. These details can be provided in more or less entertaining and accessible formats, and much leading infotainment research supports the notion that they indeed *should* be presented in such a way. Nevertheless, presenting news in such a way does not preclude the public-interest necessity of the details – the 'whole story' or what some might consider the 'objective' perspective. As this study has demonstrated, a very considerable proportion of newspaper election coverage in Canada fails to take this stance and offer these details. Even if journalists must confront such 'hideout' or 'bypass' communications strategies by politicians (not to mention largely non-substantive speeches, statements, and attacks), there is little evidence on the whole to show that they are themselves countering such strategies by searching out alternative sources of information and perspective to animate election coverage in substantive, meaningful ways. Rather, the results of this study point towards an embrace of infotainment characteristics and a generally uncritical stance towards

politicians and their communications. Without sufficient levels of scrutiny on the part of journalists, and without sufficient levels of substantive information to encourage scrutiny on the part of citizens, the infotainment format in Canadian newspapers' election coverage risks trading marketability for democratic empowerment.

APPENDIX 1: Detailed Coding Dictionary

Interpretive/Analytical Method: I use a qualitative coding dictionary to systematically analyse each news item in the dataset for evidence of infotainment characteristics. The three primary coding sections flow directly from the three categories which I argue define the infotainment format in hard news coverage (Personalisation, Sensationalisation, and Decontextualisation), serving to break each infotainment category down into a number of more specific sub-category characteristics, expressed as coding questions, for undertaking a more nuanced and holistic analysis.

Unit of Analysis: News item (inclusive of headlines and main text).

- Using the entirety of each news item as a unit of analysis allows for the most holistic qualitative coding, as it is capable of capturing all different lengths and forms of framing and discursive strategies used to present a news item (e.g. operating on the principle that coding will attempt to capture insights from data that are as small and discrete as possible, yet as large as necessary – e.g. from a single word to an entire narrative). All instances of coding for each news item will be considered together as a whole for the purposes of making a qualitative judgement and categorisation of each news item on an ‘Infotainment Scale’ (see below).

Coding Questions for Infotainment Characteristics:

I. Personalisation

Privatisation:

- *1a: Does the news item present information in a privatised manner?*
 - Y/N
- *1b: If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after
- **Definition:** A focus either on the private lives of politicians or the private, individual implications of policies, rather than broader public or social implications. This can include scandal in politicians’ private lives.
- **Justification:** Researchers such as Jebril et al. (2013), Hallin & Mellado (2018), and Carillo & Ferre-Pavia (2013) have argued that privatisation is an important element of infotainment and have included it in their own analyses. Moreover, Van Elteren (2013) argues that the use of information from the private sphere or politicians’ private lives is increasingly used within political communications and media framing strategies to help win support through emotional attachment. As such, privatisation is an important element of infotainment, one falling more broadly within the category of personalisation, as it serves to shift the focus of political discourse onto the individual, rather than more publicly-relevant or substantive policies, debates, ideas, etc.

Celebrification:

- *2a: Does the news item reference the celebrity status, fame, recognition, or image of politicians, or present politicians through a celebrity lens?*
 - Y/N
- *2b: If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after

- **Definition:** Presenting politicians or candidates as celebrity-like individuals, notably through a focus on “charisma, beauty, and fame” (see Lofton, 2012). If a politician’s charisma, beauty, fame, or popularity are referenced, it will be coded as celebrification (as opposed to covering politicians as experts, professionals, public representatives, etc. in a non-fame- or celebrity-oriented manner). Alternately, celebrification may include when politicians or candidates are discussed alongside celebrities or other famous individuals, for example in cases of celebrity endorsements.
- **Justification:** As seen in the celebrity politics literature, celebrification occurs largely through personalisation and privatisation. However, authors such as Lofton (2012) have highlighted that celebrification often occurs through a focus on “charisma, beauty, and fame” (p. 426). Rojek (2012) also explains that descriptions of celebrity politicians (e.g. Obama, David Cameron, etc.) as "bold," "charismatic visionaries," and other fame- or celebrity-invoking phrases are used often in the media without analysis, explanation, or deeper consideration of their truth and meaning. As such, the celebrification and uncritical focus on fame, beauty, popularity, etc. is a clear example of the personalisation of the news (and politics), and thus characteristic of the infotainment format.

Personalisation:

- 3a: *Does the news item present information in a personalised manner?*
 - Y/N
- 3b: *If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after
- **Definition:** A focus on politicians as individuals, notably through emotional or empathetic appeals, or appeals/references to their virtues/values, failures/shortcomings/successes, or a focus on looks, personal characteristics, performance, or style, rather than focussing on them as public figures/representatives, experts, professionals, etc. – the politician becomes “the main anchor of interpretation and evaluation in political reporting” (Otto et al., 2017), rather than the policies or actual substance of politics. Other elements include:
 - A focus on party leaders rather than parties themselves, or individual politicians rather than parties, when the story is relevant to their ridings.
 - The presence of (a) a human example or human face to the story in order to illuminate developments in politics or society (e.g. by explaining an event/policy through providing the experience of a citizen). This may be understood as a form of *personalised-episodic framing*, wherein the episodic framing is focused on an individual (a politician/candidate, a citizen, an employee, etc.) and their story, detached from broader contexts.
 - Explicit references to feelings or sentiments of individual politicians.
 - The use or coverage of negative campaigning that is targeted at individual politicians in a personalised way, rather than at their ideas, positions, policies, party, etc. (e.g. personalised negative campaigning).
- **Justification:** Personalisation is widely recognised in the literature as a central aspect of infotainment. Researchers including Brants & Niejens (1998), Carillo & Ferre-Pavia (2013), Jebri et al. (2013), Hallin & Mellado (2018), Patterson (2000), Castells (2009), Otto et al (2017), and Manucci (2017) have all recognised the importance of personalisation to the infotainment format, and used it within their own analyses. As well, Van Elteren (2013) argues that personalisation is encouraged and increasingly used as a

political communications strategy for connecting more personally with voters. Accordingly, this category takes definitions and operationalisations directly from these various researchers to cover what is the base or commonly-accepted understanding of the term ‘personalisation.’

Use of (politician’s) Tweets & Social Media:

- 4a: Are politicians’ (or others’) personal or political communications on social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, etc.) used and commented on as a form of news?
 - Y/N
- 4b: If yes, how so?
 - Open question; recode into categories after
- **Definition:** The use of Tweets and other personal social media communications as a form of ‘news,’ notably with the use of negative campaigning material or sensational, fiery statements (e.g. see Manucci, 2017; Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010).
- **Justification:** The use of politicians’ political communications on social media as the basis of news stories is argued to personalise the political process by generating political news based on the statements of individual politicians, rather than investigative, analytical coverage, or otherwise politically-substantive and socially-relevant information on policies, ideas, platforms, etc. (see Gross & Johnson, 2016; Manucci, 2017; Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010).

Overall Personalisation:

- 5a: Based on questions 1-4, what is the overall prevalence of “Personalisation” as a form of infotainment in the news item?
 - (little to no personalisation) 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 (highly personalised)

II. Sensationalisation

Emotional appeals and narratives:

- 6a: Does the news item present information through the use of emotional appeals, primers, or narrative structures, including through human-interest perspectives?
 - Y/N
- 6b: If yes, how so?
 - Open question; recode into categories after
- **Definition:** This category applies notably through human-interest perspectives (e.g. presenting people and their stories in a personal, emotional way, such as their problems, struggles, complaints, achievements, etc., so as to arouse empathy, motivation, and other emotions), but generally any emotion-laden appeals and narratives that are offered to connect with or draw the attention of the audience, especially when information could be offered in a more analytical or ‘objective’ manner.
 - One important narrative structure here is the Hero-Villain-Victim narrative, but also personalised narratives more generally that focus heavily on individuals, rather than broader political perspectives and substance: these tend to be constructed “as close as possible to tales of intrigue, sex, and violence. Naturally, while maintaining noble themes about democracy, patriotism, and the well-being of the nation on behalf of the common folk (the man in the street, this mythical

creature who has replaced citizenship in the media world)” (see Castells, 2009, p. 203).

- **Justification:** Numerous scholars (Brants & Niejens, 1998; Castells, 2009; Graber, 1994; Graber & Holyk, 2011; Hallin & Mellado, 2018; Just, 2011; Patterson, 2000; Thussu, 2007b) have recognised sensationalism as a key element of infotainment (indeed, it is, for many, a definitional prerequisite for infotainment to exist at all). Moreover, they have recognised emotional appeals, narratives, and human interest perspectives as key to such sensationalism, as they present stories/events/politics in a manner that is often far more sensational and entertaining than the real events (which are often far more mundane), in part by gripping the interest and emotional connection or sympathy of the viewer. Castells (2009) has also highlighted the importance of emotion-laden narratives, notably the Hero-Villain-Victim narrative but also others, in generating such emotional appeals. Indeed, as Altheide (2004) has argued, the infotainment format is an inherently *narrativized* format: “The ‘infotainment’ news perspective holds that, for practical reasons, any event can be summarily covered and presented as a narrative account with a beginning, middle, and end” (p. 294).

Sensational focus on scandal:

- *7a: Does the news item focus on a scandal in a sensational or dramatic, rather than analytical, investigative, or contextualised manner?*
 - Y/N
- *7b: If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after
- **Definition:** If a scandal is focused on without being contextualised, scrutinised/investigated for its truthfulness, or discussed with substantive information and implications, but merely used as dramatic or breaking news, competitive campaigning, etc., it may be considered as a sensational use of/focus on scandal.
- **Justification:** Most infotainment researchers include coverage of or focus on scandal as an element of soft news or infotainment (e.g. Brants & Niejens, 1998; Hallin & Mellado, 2018; Jebiril et al., 2013; Thussu, 2007b). I have included private-life scandals under privatisation (see above), although coverage of scandals may indeed be in the interest of citizens as it can often have political implications or help to uncover corruption and abuses of power. As such, I have chosen to incorporate scandal in a varied manner into the Coding Dictionary (e.g. as a form of personalisation when it is a private-life scandal with questionable public relevance; as a form of sensationalisation when it is publicly/politically relevant but not contextualised, investigated, or discussed substantively and for its implications). If scandals are covered in an investigative, challenging, or contextualised manner, they may be seen as important events to cover, rather than simply “newsworthy” sensationalism. If they are simply provided as dramatic or sensationalised coverage without attempting to be investigative, critical, skeptical, or educational, they will be coded as sensational and a characteristic of infotainment.

Conflict as a form of political sensationalism:

- *8a: Does the news item focus on a political conflict sensationally, or as a form of political campaigning (i.e. non-substantive conflict deriving from politicians and the campaign themselves, rather than substantive conflict over policies, public scandals, platforms, ideologies, etc.)?*
 - Y/N
- *8b: If yes, how so?*

- Open question; recode into categories after
- **Definition:** This form of conflict is found notably within negative campaigning, which is to say deriving *from politicians' statements, attacks, etc.* in order to gain support or lower support for other parties/individuals (rather than a debate-styled conflict over substantive views/issues/policies/etc.). More generally, however, non-substantive conflict may be focused on or emphasised as a means of sensationalising the news (e.g. charges that one party, leader, government, etc. is failing in their role or through their policies and actions, but with no substantive discussion of how they are failing and how it could be done differently). This may also include coverage of populist discourses/statements, which are found to be increasingly used as sensational devices within an infotainment format by commercial media (see Manucci, 2017).
- **Justification:** Conflictual negative campaigning is often focused on by the media during campaigns for its entertainment value (Tue Petersen, 2014; Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). I have broken down conflict into a number of different forms for the Coding Dictionary, as there is also debate over whether or not the coverage of conflict represents a form of infotainment (e.g. Graber, 1994 codes emphasis on conflictual elements as a form of “populist/sensational” coverage, while Hallin & Mellado, 2018 consider it a function of the journalistic “Watchdog Role”). As such, I have included forms of conflict which are less informational, substantive, or socially/politically relevant as aspects of infotainment, while also including coverage of more informational, relevant, and substantively-based conflicts (e.g. over policies, laws, or ideas) under ‘serious’/informative news.

Framing stories as exciting or dramatic:

- 9a: Does the news item present stories/events as exciting or dramatic when it is not clear that the events/discourses represented are indeed of such a nature?
 - Y/N
- 9b: If yes, how so?
 - Open question; recode into categories after
- **Definition:** This broad category may apply when it is not clear that a story is indeed exciting or dramatic in real life, but clear efforts are made *on the part of the news outlet* to render it as such (e.g. through the reporter’s choice of language or narrative; through unverified or unsubstantiated claims). Adjectives are especially relevant here.
- **Justification:** Brants (2008), Brants & Neijens (1998), Brewer & Cao (2006), Castells (2009), Graber (1994), Patterson (2000), and others all highlight the dramatic and exciting devices, framing strategies, and foci of coverage which are inherent to the infotainment format. The definitions and operationalisations of these devices/strategies differ across researchers and are often not clarified. As such, I include this category as a fairly openly-defined one, wherein it must be clear that some effort is made on the part of the news outlet to render the story more dramatic or exciting than its underlying socio-political reality would suggest, thus hinting towards an explicit form of sensationalism. While many such instances will likely be covered by the “emotional appeals and narratives” coding question above, this broader category allows for a more nuanced analysis in the case of unforeseen or unexpected material and discursive strategies.

Various Sensationalistic Devices:

- 10a: Does the news item present stories with any other identifiable forms of sensationalisation or sensationalistic devices/strategies?
 - Y/N

- *10b: If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after
- **Definition:** This category is openly-defined so as to capture any forms of sensationalisation not expressly included in the Coding Dictionary. Some examples could include: (Over-)Simplification of issues and political discourse in order to make a story more entertaining or comprehensible, rather than informative or making an attempt to teach the audience about real-world political complexities; the use of surprise to shock the audience; the use of ambiguity to create drama or suspense; etc. (see Carrillo & Ferre-Pavia, 2013)
- **Justification:** Similarly to “exciting and dramatic framing,” this category allows for a more holistic analysis, as it accounts for unforeseen characteristics, as well as certain aspects of sensationalism that have been tested in the literature but which are not widely used nor included expressly within the Coding Dictionary (e.g. such as those included in the definition above) (see Carrillo & Ferre-Pavia, 2013 for some such examples).

Overall Sensationalisation:

- *11: Based on questions 6-10, what is the overall prevalence of “Sensationalisation” as a form of infotainment in the news item?*
 - (little to no sensationalisation) 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 (highly sensationalised)

III. Decontextualisation

Production and coverage of pseudo-events/news reality frames:

- *12a: Does the news item cover or help to produce a “pseudo-event” or “news reality frame”?*
 - Y/N
- *12b: If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after
- **Definition:** A pseudo-event is an event that doesn’t simply ‘happen’ in the world and become reported on by the media; it is an event that is created by the media as a newsworthy phenomenon: “News is no longer something that happens, news is what the media make happen” (Kent, Harrison, & Taylor, 2006). “According to Boorstin, a pseudo-event is a ‘happening’ that possesses four characteristics: (1) Pseudo-events are planned, planted, or incited events (not spontaneous)—an interview rather than a train wreck or an earthquake (1972, p. 11). (2) Pseudo-events are “planted” primarily (though not exclusively) for the immediate purpose of attracting media coverage and are arranged for the convenience of the media (p. 11). (3) Pseudo-events are ambiguous—they are not about reporting ‘news’ the way a reporter might cover a fire or an assault. The link between reality and the event is ambiguous. That is, pseudo-events (like interviews) are contrived— pseudo-events “happen” in the sense that an interviewer really talks to an interviewee, however, pseudo-events do not “happen” in the way that a fire does (p. 11). And finally, (4) pseudo-events are intended to be self-fulfilling prophecies (p. 12). The media creates reality by defining it into existence. As Boorstin suggests of a hypothetical hotel’s 30th-anniversary celebration: “by saying that the hotel is a distinguished institution, actually makes it one” (p. 12) in the minds of the public” (Kent, Harrison, & Taylor, 2006, p. 305).

- This can include showing an event with no political substance or substantive political/societal importance, such as showing a politician in a celebrity-type role, or simply showing a campaign stop or other event with pre-scripted sound bites, images, or video footage (in essence, controlled communications) and presenting it uncritically as a real, rather than staged event (e.g. the famous Bush aircraft landing). “For example, reporting on the ways in which a typical campaign stop in Iowa is staged for the local news would only reveal the obvious, and leave many viewers with a “So what?” reaction. After all, the beauty of television is the sense of being there without really being there. The campaign appearance pseudo event is the event, and there is simply no meaningful reality outside it.” (Bennett, 2005).
- To code, the article must frame the story or event in a way that clearly distorts some underlying reality or avoids discussing any significant *substantive* political content. (To be sure, this phenomenon requires a certain degree of background knowledge/context of political events/discourses on the part of the researcher in order to determine when certain news reality frames are being produced/driven to the neglect of other aspects of reality which would otherwise inform the story).
- It can also include taking a sound bite, a gaffe or miscommunication from a speech and detaching them from their broader context so as to produce an interesting, dramatic, or sensational news frame.
- A news reality frame is “a de-contextualized account based on a documented element of an event that becomes journalistically repackaged in a different story frame. The resulting news reality frame blurs the connection between the news reality and its original surrounding context.” (Bennett, 2005, p. 370). A more detailed definition of the news reality frame can be found in Bennett, 2005.
- **Justification:** Pseudo-events have been recognised as important media constructions used to produce attention-grabbing spectacles (Bennett, 2005; Kellner, 2003, 2009; Thussu, 2007b). In light of declining news media audiences, this form of news product is argued to be widespread as a means of generating audience interest. As well, Marland (2012) explains that this sort of pseudo-event is often used by politicians or leaders as a communications strategy (e.g. Stephen Harper in Canada), wherein control over media access and what is said, photographed, or videotaped is exercised by politicians and their teams so as to control the message, image, and affective cues associated with them. The uncritical or unchallenging coverage of such pseudo-events (when it is sufficiently clear that such manipulation of events/images is occurring and not challenged or investigated by the media, but rather accepted and represented) by the media can thus be considered an aspect of decontextualisation inherent to the infotainment format.
- “. . . what Daniel Boorstin (1961) referred to as “pseudo-events,” in which people pay more attention to media-produced spectacles than to pressing concerns in the sociopolitical world and everyday life (Kellner, 2003, p. 20).

Candidate challenges:

- 13a: Does the news item utilise or produce a “candidate challenge”?
 - Y/N
- 13b: If yes, how so?
 - Open question; recode into categories after
- **Definition:** The Candidate Challenge has been defined as the “preeminent *election news* reality frame” (Bennett, 2005, p. 365; emphasis added). However, the “candidate challenge” may be distinguished more specifically from regular news reality frames: When journalists cite unsourced criticisms or challenges to politicians to see how they

respond and handle themselves (e.g. bringing up a rumor that is unsubstantiated as a test to the politician), thus creating a challenging, dramatic test with sensational appeal akin to some reality television shows and competitions (see Bennett, 2005). Another example: “when the press prolongs a ‘flip-flopper’ story, wherein a candidate is challenged continually over an issue that they did, or at least are made to appear to have, changed position on.”

- **Justification:** Bennett (2005) argues that these decontextualized pseudo-events and challenging frames/tests mimic the logic of reality television shows such as *Survivor*, as they use decontextualized information and frames that distort the underlying reality which they claim to represent, as well as unsubstantiated or unverified allegations, questions, and concerns, all towards the end of producing an entertaining challenge for candidates – something which is “newsworthy” and entertaining, but which is ultimately a false representation and coverage of politics. I have distinguished this category from the more general “pseudo-events/news reality frame” category above because it is more directly focused on a challenge to candidates (something constructed and undertaken by the media itself) than on the coverage of pseudo-events that may not produced by the media outlet itself, but simply uncritically represented by them.

Opinion & Speculation:

- *14a: Does the news item use opinion and/or speculation?*
 - Y/N
- *14b: If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after
- **Definition:** When pundits, experts, or others offer opinion and speculation on developing events/stories, rather than a discussion of known facts, analytical accounts/evidence/ideas, or contextualising materials. Especially with the use of tangentially-related information or unsubstantiated/unverified information as news stories develop but lack sufficient information for continual, meaningful, and interesting coverage.
- **Justification:** The news, as a medium for gaining a ‘matter-of-fact’ perspective on current events, is not a suitable platform for offering opinion and speculation (according to a quintessentially “golden age” conception of the news and journalism). As such, scholars have argued that increases in the use of ‘expert’ pundits to offer opinion and speculation, namely as a means of making up for cuts to investigative journalism and newsroom resources, constitutes an aspect of the shift towards infotainment in news reporting (see Carillo & Ferre-Pavia, 2013; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Fenton, 2011; Graber & Holyk, 2011; Thussu, 2007b). Indeed, some use the admixture and lack of distinction between facts and opinion/speculation in the news as a definitional aspect of infotainment (e.g. Carillo & Ferre-Pavia, 2013; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001).

Ambiguity:

- *15a: Does the news item cover or present ambiguous information without making attempts to clarify or question it?*
 - Y/N
- *15b: If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after
- **Definition:** If information is provided (e.g. statements, promises, or explanations) that is not clear, with no effort on the part of the news outlet to clarify or challenge it, it may be

understood as decontextualized, non-informative material (this will often derive from statements or speeches by politicians/others).

- **Justification:** Carillo & Ferre-Pavia (2013), borrowing from Edelman (1988), argue that ambiguity is a propagandistic strategy which allows for the continual reconstruction of social/political events, issues, discourses, and individuals. Notably, it is argued to go against the journalistic ideal of accuracy and rigour in reporting known and verifiable facts/information. In light of the wealth of research on affective heuristics and the use of emotions/affective appeals in political communications, I believe that the widespread use of ambiguity may be a highly important factor in contemporary politics, as ambiguous messages/promises can be powerful affective devices which do not require meaningful, substantive, or factual backing. Thus, the uncritical, unchallenging, or un-investigative use or coverage of ambiguity in the news can be seen as a form of decontextualisation and lack of responsible, investigative news: in short, a component of the infotainment format.

Conflict as a lack of investigative journalism ('pro et contra' reporting):

- *16a: Does the news item cover political/public conflicts (i.e. non-personalised conflicts) by providing adversarial, negative content, without contextualising, investigating, or analysing them?*
 - Y/N
- *16b: If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after
- **Definition:** When political/public conflict is presented using contradictory, adversarial statements that seek to attack or defend from one another: “most of the negative content [in the contemporary news] is supplied through journalists’ use of sources rather than deep investigation. *When a politician makes a statement or takes action, reporters turn to adversaries to attack it. The critical element is supplied, not by a careful assessment of the claim or action, but by the insertion of a counter-claim*” (Patterson, 2000, p. 12). This is also known as the “pro et contra” format of news reporting (See Šori & Vanya, 2017).
- **Justification:** This mode of covering or representing conflict is similar to conflict as a sensational device (see above), yet understood and analysed for different effects. Ultimately, the coverage of political conflict in a largely non-substantive, uninformative, and adversarial manner indeed constitutes a form of sensationalism, although it may also constitute a form of decontextualisation at the same time. This is because this form of conflict is not only sensational and often amusing, but also takes the context and substance required to understand and evaluate political issues out of public debate and news coverage (thus rendering citizens’ exposure to politics less informed and contextualised). As such, I have included this along with the other forms of conflict so as to conceptually clarify the analysis of conflict in news media and infotainment, and to ensure that the coverage of conflict in its various forms can be attributed each to their proper functions within the news item. See Patterson (2000) for more information on this form of conflict coverage.

Strategic Game Framing:

- *17a: Does the news item present political coverage or other information through a “strategic game” frame in a way that decontextualizes the coverage of politics?*
 - Y/N
- *17b: If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after

- **Definition:** “news focused on (1) winning and losing as the central concern; (2) the language of wars, games and competition; (3) a story with performers, critics, and audience (voters); (4) centrality of performance, style, and perception of the candidate; (5) heavy weighing of polls and the candidates standing in them. (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 33)” (see Tue Petersen, 2014).
- **To code under this category, the strategic game framing must have some noticeable impact on the coverage of political information** (e.g. replacing substantive political information and coverage, and in so doing placing the competition and similar competitive/strategic aspects as the main anchors of interpretation for political events/discourses).
- **Justification:** Aalberg et al. (2011) argue that the strategic game frame (as defined above) has become dominant in much of the news, serving to replace substantive coverage of politics with a focus on strategy, competition, and personality traits. They hold that the use of this frame represents, in part, an aspect of personalisation, since it focuses on individual candidates and their competition strategies, what events means for them and their campaigns, etc., rather than focusing on broader, more substantive topics such as policy, ideology, party platforms, social implications, etc. This frame can thus be understood as a sensational device, a strategy for personalising the news, and a form of decontextualisation, all of which suggests a shift towards infotainment. Moreover, Tue Petersen (2014) argues that the strategic game frame is “inherently apolitical” (p. 907) based on its area of focus, while Valentino, Buhr, & Beckmann (2001) have also found that the strategic game frame results in lower levels of substantive information retention among viewers. I have therefore included it under “decontextualisation,” and any sensationalistic or personalistic aspects will be coded under those sections, with the strategic game frame more focused on the actual substance of political information/coverage.

Episodic Framing:

- *18a: Does the news item frame the story/information in an episodic manner?*
 - Y/N
- *18b: If yes, how so?*
 - Open question; recode into categories after
- **Definition:** Episodic framing, as opposed to thematic framing, indicates differences concerning the personal or societal focus of a journalistic depiction of a political issue (see Otto et al., 2017). Episodic framing is event-oriented, while thematic framing is more contextual, historical, and linked to broader discourses, themes, and social implications.
- “Here, the focus of a news item as related to the accentuation of episodes or themes is coded. Episodically focused news items present an issue by offering a specific example, case study, or event oriented report, e.g., covering unemployment by presenting a story on the plight of a particular unemployed person. Thematically focused news items place issues into a broader context, e.g., covering unemployment by reporting on the latest unemployment figures and offering commentary by economists or public officials on the impact of the economy on unemployment.” (Reinemann et al. 2012). Also see Gross, 2008.
- If issues/events are framed in isolation from broader historical, institutional, organisational, and other political contexts, or in isolation from their social implications, patterns, etc., then they may be understood as episodic, rather than thematic. This is

especially relevant in cases where an event/story is told by focusing on an individual and their specific place within the story, without considering the broader context (e.g. of the institution(s) within which they operate).

- **Justification:** Otto et al. (2017) and Reinemann et al. (2012) find that episodic framing is an important aspect of soft news and infotainment. Reinemann et al. (2012) understand one important aspect of ‘soft news’ as its reporting in an episodic, personalised way, with a personal, individual, or private, rather than societal focus. Episodic framing is thus, by its very nature, a component of decontextualisation (even if it implicates trends in personalisation as well).

Overall Decontextualisation & Pseudo-Events:

- 19: *Based on questions 12-18, what is the overall prevalence of “Decontextualisation & Pseudo-Events” as a form of infotainment in the news item?*
 - (little to none) 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 (highly prevalent)

‘Serious’/Informative News (e.g. the “Golden Age” Standard):

In addition to analysing each news item for the infotainment characteristics outlined above, I also code and analyse each news item simultaneously for evidence of a more informative or ‘serious’ news standard. While such a standard is defined in various ways throughout the literature, often depending on subjective conceptions of what ‘good’ news ought to be, I define ‘serious’/informative news here along the lines of what some scholars have called the “golden age” or “high modernist” period of journalism. Thus, taking insights from both the infotainment and broader news media literatures, I define and code ‘serious’/informative news characteristics as follows:

I. Presentation Style

‘Objective’ and analytical style:

- 20a: *Does the news item offer information in an ‘objective’, dispassionate, investigative, and/or analytical style?*
 - Y/N
- 20b: *If yes, how so?*
- **Definition:** As this style is merely an ideal-type conception, I use Brants & Neijens’s (1998) definition of what, generally, to expect on the more ‘informative’ side of the news-entertainment continuum.
 - Informative side of the continuum: "In general, the style would be serious, from a certain professional distance, and meant to inform with a tone of objectivity. In interviews, the politician is confronted with differences of opinion (Just et al., 1996)."
 - “Politicians would be discussed with respect to their expertise or political involvement, as policymakers or experts” (Brants & Neijens, 1998, p. 152-3).
- Moreover, I rely on elements of the quintessentially “golden age” standard of journalism and news product to define this style: the “golden age” or “high modernist” period of journalism is characterized by a “strong orientation toward an ethic of public service” (Krause, 2011, p. 96), the localised production of news, investigative journalism, a ‘serious,’ ‘objective,’ or analytical style, and a critical approach to or “professional

distrust of sources” (Schiller, 1979, p. 56), especially governmental, corporate, and PR sources.

- **Justification:** Brants & Neijens (1998), in an early classification and study of infotainment, offer a classification of the sort of style that is traditionally expected on the more ‘serious’ or informative side of the “entertainment-information continuum.” This style is a summary of the quintessentially “golden age” form of journalism (see also Krause, 2011; Schiller, 1979). I thus use it as a standard by which to analyse ‘serious’ or informational reporting styles. While some might object to an analysis that seeks out a “golden age” standard of news in an era wherein such standards are no longer firm or necessarily commonplace, I believe that it is an ideal counterpart to the analysis of infotainment as it may help to display the degree to which infotainment trends have or have not driven out other journalistic standards and norms within Canadian news coverage of politics.

Overall ‘Serious’/Informative Presentation Style:

- 21: Based on question 20, what is the overall prevalence of “‘Serious’/Informative Presentation Style” in the news item?
 - (little to none) 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 (highly prevalent)

II. Substance/Information Covered

Topic & Content:

- 22a: Does the news item discuss and present substantive information that is informative and socially/politically relevant?
 - Y/N
- 22b: If yes, how so?
- **Definition:** Informative side of continuum: "one could expect more direct and factual content aspects. Examples are stories about the fundamentals (ideology and electoral program) of the competing parties in an election and stories about policy, political issues, and party political disagreements. Politicians would be discussed with respect to their expertise or political involvement, as policymakers or experts" (Brants & Neijens, 1998, p. 152).
- Clear definitions of what constitutes “substantive information” in the news are generally missing from the literature, perhaps due to the inherent difficulty with defining such a concept in an ‘objective’ manner. For my purposes, *I understand substantive information to include concrete information on the details of policy options, the competing perspectives on concrete political issues, debates, policy options, party platforms or ideologies, etc., as well as contextualising information necessary to inform the audience of the details and complexities of socio-political life, issues, and events. This may also include credible discussions of potential problems, outcomes, or implications of policies and other political debates/issues/proposals (e.g. discussions from an expert, researcher, or professional in the field, when substantive and discussing details and concrete information (e.g. not strategic framing, for example) – and when such discussions are not mere speculation and opinion, but credible knowledge on a subject).*
- **Justification:** Brants & Neijens (1998) also offer a summary of what content features to expect in a more ‘serious’ or informative news coverage. The general content of such “golden age” news standards is also very similar to the definitions of other researchers,

such as Hallin & Mellado (2018) and Patterson (2000). From an historical perspective, we can also see that these general content expectations are widely recognised: By the post-war era journalism had reached its “golden age” or “high modern” period with a stark increase in regulations and “a strong orientation toward an ethic of public service” and impartiality (Krause, 2011, p. 96). Meanwhile, journalistic standards of objectivity also changed to become more investigative, critical, and contextualised, shaped by a mix of economic, professional, and socio-cultural developments to the journalistic field (Schiller, 1979; Schudson, 2015). This category and the others within “Substance and Information Covered” are thus based on this historical perspective and the quintessentially “golden age” standard. (Also see Zaller, 2003 and Barkho, 2016 for interesting discussions of what constitutes substantive, sufficient forms of information for the public-interest and a well-informed citizenry).

Conflict as a natural debate over competing options:

- 23a: *Does the news item cover political conflicts as debates over competing options/policies/worldviews/etc., rather than between politicians or competing parties in a personalised or competitive frame?*
 - Y/N
- 23b: *If yes, how so?*
- **Definition:** When conflicts are covered that are not personalised, sensationalised, nor focused on political campaigning or the political competition itself (e.g. substantive conflicts over policy options, platforms, reforms, ideas, and responses to crises or issues, etc.).
- **Justification:** While researchers approach the coverage of conflict differently (and often with little conceptual clarity), I have broken it down into various types. This particular category accounts for the coverage of substantive political conflicts/debates that are of social/political importance, and which constitute the basis of the democratic process. By contrast, conflicts that are personalised, focused solely on the political campaign/race, and not contextualised or substantive are coded as forms of infotainment (see above).

Watchdog Role (see Hallin & Mellado, 2018):

- 24a: *Does the news item cover information that is typical of the journalistic “watchdog role”?*
 - Y/N
- 24b: *If yes, how so?*
- **Definition:** According to Hallin & Mellado (2018), the journalistic Watchdog Role includes:
 - Questioning on the part of the journalist;
 - Questioning on the part of others;
 - Criticism on the part of journalists;
 - Criticism on the part of others (when substantive, not conflictual as a lack of investigative reporting – see above);
 - Charges of wrongdoing expressed by the journalist;
 - Charges of wrongdoing expressed by others (when substantive, not conflictual as a lack of investigative reporting – see above);
 - Reporting of external investigations
 - Reporting of conflict (see above)

Investigative reporting

- **Justification:** Hallin & Mellado (2018). This list of traditional watchdog functions for journalists helps encapsulate many of the quintessentially “golden age” journalistic norms. This journalistic role (along with the Civic Role below) is thus helpful for defining and coding what is a more ‘serious’ or informative news standard. Where aspects of Hallin & Mellado’s (2018) definition are unclear or potentially contradictory with other categories in the Coding Dictionary, they are clarified/specified in brackets (see above).

Civic Role (see Hallin & Mellado, 2018):

- 25a: Does the news item cover information that is typical of the journalistic “civic role”?
 - Y/N
- 25b: If yes, how so?
- **Definition:** Including citizen perspective (when substantive, rather than used for emotional appeals or personalisation – see above);
 - Reporting citizen demands;
 - Education on duties and rights;
 - Providing background and context;
 - Reporting on local impact (but still a social, not individual perspective)
- **Justification:** Hallin & Mellado (2018). This list of traditional civic functions for journalists helps encapsulate many of the quintessentially “golden age” journalistic norms. This journalistic role (along with the Watchdog Role above) is thus helpful for defining and coding what is a more ‘serious’ or informative news standard. Where aspects of Hallin & Mellado’s (2018) definition are unclear or potentially contradictory with other categories in the Coding Dictionary, they are clarified/specified in brackets (see above).

Overall ‘Serious’/Informative Substance/Information Covered:

- 26: Based on questions 28-31, what is the overall prevalence of “‘Serious’/Informative Substance/Information Covered” in the news item?
 - (little to none) 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 (highly prevalent)

Infotainment Scale

Based on a holistic qualitative reading and coding, each news item is scored on the 3-point Infotainment Scale below:

Infotainment Scale Categorisation:

- 27: Based on the overall coding of Questions 1-26 and a holistic qualitative reading of the news item, how does the news item rank on a 3-point Infotainment Scale?
 - 1 = predominantly informational, substantive, or ‘serious’ and analytical; there are little to no infotainment characteristics present.
 - 2 = some or a significant amount of infotainment characteristics. If a news item falls under this category, is it:

- **I/E:** generally informative; while infotainment characteristics are present, more ‘serious’ coverage and informative, substantive content are dominant.
Or
 - **I=E:** about equal in terms of infotainment characteristics and substantive, informational characteristics.
Or
 - **E/I:** generally entertaining; while ‘serious’ and informational content and style are present, infotainment characteristics are dominant.
- **3** = predominantly entertaining/infotainment; an almost complete lack of substantive, informative materials and of a ‘serious’/analytical/investigative style (i.e. an almost complete lack of the “golden age” journalistic ideal and standard).

APPENDIX 2: Data Collection Numbers

Table 6: Detailed Data Collection Numbers

	Total Items Collected from Factiva Database	Total 'Hard News' Items after Initial Manual Filtering	Number of Duplicate/Shared Publications	Final Numbers for Analysis (After final filtering, removing duplicates, and removing 'post-election results')
Globe & Mail	1028	298	0	234
Toronto Star	1447	651	0	396
National Post	634	177	0	163
Calgary Herald	552	152	92	48
Montreal Gazette	453	160	75	67
Vancouver Sun	513	182	104	62
Total Post Media	2152	671	271	339
Total	4627	1620	271	969

APPENDIX 3: Quantitative Results Table

Table 7: Quantitative Results – Infotainment Scale and Characteristics⁷

	Globe & Mail	Post Media	Toronto Star	All Together
Personalisation Scale				
1	60.70%	47.50%	54%	53.40%
2	5.10%	9.70%	8.60%	8.20%
3	11.10%	12.40%	13.60%	12.60%
4	12.40%	13.90%	10.40%	12.10%
5	10.70%	16.50%	13.40%	13.80%
Personalisation Sub-Categories				
Privatisation	13.20%	21.80%	21%	19.40%
Celebrification	10.30%	14.50%	13.90%	13.20%
Personalisation	37.50%	50.10%	45.50%	45.20%
Social Media	5.10%	7.10%	5.60%	6%
Sensationalisation Scale				
1	53.80%	39.50%	44.90%	45.20%
2	9.40%	13.90%	16.20%	13.70%
3	15%	16.80%	13.40%	15%
4	11.10%	15.30%	13.60%	13.60%
5	10.70%	14.50%	11.90%	12.50%
Sensationalisation Sub-Categories				
Narrative/Emotion	15%	29.80%	39.40%	30.10%
Sens. Scandal	19.70%	22.40%	17.70%	19.80%
Sens. Conflict	27.40%	41%	38.40%	36.60%
Exciting/Dramatic	9.80%	12.70%	7.80%	10%
Other Sens.	8.50%	2.90%	5.10%	5.20%
Decontextualisation Scale				
1	38%	28%	39.60%	35.20%
2	15.40%	5.60%	16.70%	12.50%
3	13.20%	14.50%	11.90%	13.10%
4	15.40%	23.60%	17.90%	19.30%
5	17.90%	28.30%	13.90%	19.90%

⁷ All Sub-Category characteristics express the percentage of cases in which the characteristic was present. These percentages do not reflect the intensity or quality of each characteristic within any given news item, which often vary considerably. These qualitative details are discussed in-depth in Chapter 4.

Decontextualisation Sub-Categories

NRF/Pseudo-Events	8.10%	9.40%	3.80%	6.80%
Candidate Challenge	4.70%	4.10%	4.30%	4.30%
Opinion/Speculation	22.60%	26%	24.50%	24.60%
Ambiguity	10.30%	27.40%	21.70%	20.90%
Pro et Contra	18.80%	8.30%	0.80%	7.70%
Strategic Game	30.80%	43.70%	35.10%	37%
Episodic Framing	47.70%	64%	34.10%	47.80%

Serious/Informative Scale

1	16.20%	22.10%	11.60%	16.40%
2	12%	20.40%	16.70%	16.80%
3	16.20%	22.10%	16.20%	18.30%
4	20.10%	21.80%	29%	24.40%
5	35.50%	13.60%	26.50%	24.10%

Serious/Informative Sub-Categories

Objective'/Investig./Analytical Style
Style Scale

1	5.60%	5.90%	6.10%	5.90%
2	4.70%	13.30%	9.10%	9.50%
3	15.40%	34.50%	24%	25.60%
4	21.40%	23.90%	30.80%	26.10%
5	53%	22.40%	30.10%	32.90%

Relevant Info	81.20%	67%	80.10%	75.70%
Conflict as Debate	47%	37.80%	49.70%	44.90%
Watchdog Role	47.90%	31.90%	49.20%	42.80%
Civic Role	57.30%	31.30%	64.90%	51.30%

Infotainment Scale

1	46.60%	28.60%	41.70%	38.30%
2(I/E)	10.30%	9.10%	11.60%	10.40%
2(I=E)	7.70%	10.30%	8.30%	8.90%
2(E/I)	9.80%	15%	14.40%	13.50%
3	25.60%	36.90%	24%	28.90%

APPENDIX 4: Comparative Examples of Scandal Coverage

To offer a clearer picture of how scandal is differentially covered in more or less sensational, 'on the surface' ways, consider the following two *National Post* articles, retrieved from the Dow Jones *Factiva* database. The first, written by Maura Forrest and published on 25 September, 2019, scored a '2(E/I)' on the Infotainment Scale, indicating a dominant overall presence of infotainment characteristics, and little in the way of substantive, informative information, style, or materials. Namely, we find a considerably strong intensity of sensational, on the surface discourse about this relatively minor scandal, which is also presented in a predominantly personalized manner, focusing strongly on Elizabeth May, her role in the scandal, and how she and her spokesperson defend themselves. While some very minor policy mentions are evident, there is no meaningful indication of any broader, socially/politically-relevant implications or lessons to be taken from this scandal.

Headline: Storm in a disposable cup; Green Party; No explanation why cup wrongly labelled reusable

Author: Maura Forrest

Publication: National Post

Word Count: 889 words

Publication Date: 25 September 2019

Page: A6

Green Party leader Elizabeth May was holding a disposable coffee cup in a photo on the party's web site that was later altered to show her holding a reusable cup with a metal straw, contrary to her party's earlier claims.

A party spokesperson previously told the *National Post* that May had been holding a reusable cup, and the image had been photo-shopped simply to include another reusable cup, one bearing the Green Party logo. At the time, the spokesperson said the party was unable to provide the *Post* with a copy of the original photo.

But the *Post* has obtained the original photo from internet archives, which shows May holding a single-use, disposable cup. The cup was biodegradable, however - it was produced by Eco-Products, a manufacturer of compostable dishes and containers.

In a statement, May said she was not aware the image had been altered, and she had nothing to hide. "I was completely shocked to find that the party had photo-shopped an image of me from last year's Sidney Street Market," she said.

"My personal daily practice is to avoid single use plastic items 100% of the time. I never drink from plastic water bottles. I always carry my own reusable coffee cup. I carry my own bamboo utensils. I walk the talk every day. I hope that despite this misstep by well-meaning party staff (who hoped to brand the image with our logo), people can believe that in the original photo there is nothing I would have hidden."

The party did not explain why it had previously claimed the original cup was reusable. A copy of the original photo was attached to May's statement.

Online archives suggest the photo was altered between June 27 and July 16, shortly after the party's web site was redesigned in May.

Last spring, a cropped version of the image appeared on the main page of the party's website, showing only May's face. After the website was redesigned, a larger version of the photo appeared on the home page, showing May holding the disposable cup. By mid-July, the photo had been altered to show a reusable cup bearing the Green Party logo, with a metal straw.

A version of the unedited photo has been distributed to media outlets, including iPolitics. It was cropped so as not to show the disposable cup.

Green Party spokesperson Rosie Emery previously told the Post the photo was altered simply to display the Green Party logo, and she didn't think it was meant to make a statement about May's environmental values. "She is a person ... who walks her talk in every way. She really does. That's one of the things I admire about her," Emery said.

The Green Party's platform, released last week, promises to ban the production of non-essential single-use plastics, including disposable straws, plates, cups, lids and cutlery, by January 2022.

Coffee cups manufactured by Eco-Products don't contain the petroleum-based plastic lining on ordinary single-use cups. Instead, the biodegradable cups are lined with polylactic acid, a bioplastic generally derived from corn starch or sugar cane. They are compostable in commercial composting facilities, but not in home compost bins.

The party has not said who was responsible for altering the image. Asked if the party has altered other images, Emery said, "I think photos are often touched up to make colour nicer and design nicer, but I'm not aware that anybody's photoshopping for particular statements or anything like that."

May is campaigning in Atlantic Canada this week, where she's hoping her party can make gains following provincial Green Party successes in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. At a campaign rally in Charlottetown Monday night, she described climate change as "the fight of our lives."

Polls suggest the Green Party and the NDP are fighting for third place in the Oct. 21 election. The Green Party currently holds two ridings on Vancouver Island, including May's, and the party is targeting several other seats in British Columbia, Ontario and the Maritimes.

Reproduced from: Forrest, M. (25 Sept., 2019). "Storm in a disposable cup; Green Party; No explanation why cup wrongly labelled reusable." *National Post*, A6.

In this next example, also from the *National Post* and written by both Maura Forrest and Stuart Thomson, published on 24 September, 2019, we find a much different perspective and framing of the scandal. Here, the focus is placed predominantly on the implications of such a scandal within an era of fake news and media/political manipulation. Experts on the phenomenon of fake news are quoted and a consideration of the implications for Canadians (voters) takes centre stage. While a few very minor areas place a more personalised focus on May, the overall focus is on the wrongdoing at hand, its context within broader policy frames and promises coming from the Green party, and the implications for Canadians. As such, this item scored a '1' on the Infotainment Scale, one of few such news items directly covering a scandal that was scored so low on the scale.

Headline: May gets caught (green)-handed; Metal Straw photoshopped into picture

Author: Maura Forrest And Stuart Thomson

Publication: National Post

Word Count: 888 words

Date: 24 September 2019

Page: A3

In an era of "fake news" controversies, photoshopping a reusable metal straw and a reusable cup into the hand of Green Party Leader Elizabeth May would not be the greatest idea.

But that's what the Green Party did, then prominently displayed it on the party website. Such fakery in the middle of an election raises issues of how such misinformation is used, say experts in the "fake news"

phenomenon.

"It would probably be good practice for official political parties to avoid photoshopping images," said Britt Paris, a researcher for the Data & Society Research Institute who focuses on visual propaganda and disinformation. "But it's almost a moot point when photoshopping can be performed by anyone and that manipulated image can then be shared or retweeted by an official political party, an operative ... or even just a celebrity."

The Green Party admitting using Photoshop to add a reusable cup and metal straw in the photo.

Spokeswoman Rosie Emery told the Post that May had been holding a reusable cup in the original photo, but that Photoshop was used to add in a different cup that displayed the Green Party logo. She was unable to provide the Post with a copy of the original photo.

A version of the original, unedited photo has been used by media outlets, including iPolitics. It is cropped in such a way that it doesn't show the cup May was holding, but it does show there was no metal straw in the original photo. Emery said she doesn't know why the straw was added, but she doesn't think it was to make a statement about May's environmental values.

"She is a person ... who walks her talk in every way. She really does. That's one of the things I admire about her," Emery said.

The Green Party's environmental platform, released last spring, doesn't explicitly mention plastics. But the party's Vision Green policy does say that Canada must ban single-use plastic items. In June, the Liberal government announced a plan to move toward a ban on some single-use plastics, such as straws, bags and cutlery, by 2021.

Emery said May was not involved in the decision to alter the image, which appears on the home page of the party's website. "All I know is that the original was photoshopped to put in a cup that had the Green Party logo," she said.

Asked if the party has altered other images, Emery said, "I think photos are often touched up to make colour nicer and design nicer, but I'm not aware that anybody's photoshopping for particular statements or anything like that." Emery said the photo was likely taken in Victoria this year.

Paris said these kind of images may be problematic, but they rarely have much influence on the way people think, especially in such a divisive political climate. People are used to seeing manipulated images of political figures, whether by bad actors or sympathetic ones, and it's the job of the press to confirm or debunk them.

"Those who heard that the Green Party manipulated an image in bad faith and already believed the Green Party was an evil organization would see that image as evidence. Those who support the Green Party would write it off as a harmless PR attempt," Paris said.

Gordon Pennycook, a professor of behavioural science at the University of Regina who's studied the "fake news" phenomenon, said it matters how the photo was used for it to be classified as deceptive.

"If it was a campaign photo posted on the party's Facebook page? I would call that deceptive. Such a picture is ostensibly a genuine reflection of an event, unlike a political advertisement, or at least people would take it to be so," said Pennycook.

"Of course, keeping in mind that the deception is silly and unimportant in this case. It perhaps says something about politics that the potential negative optics of using a plastic straw is viewed as worse than the potential negative optics of photoshopping a straw which, in my view, is plainly worse," said Pennycook.

Elizabeth Dubois, a professor at the University of Ottawa who studies digital media and media manipulation, said it's crucial that people are "paying very close attention to what is showing up on our screens," given how much misinformation now exists on the internet.

"When we see examples of content missing important information, or being photoshopped, that does need to be taken seriously," Dubois said, adding she wasn't too concerned about the Green Party's photoshop job since she believes that May "walks the walk" on climate issues.

Reproduced from: Forrest, M., & Thomson, S. (24 Sept., 2019). "In an era of "fake news" controversies, photoshopping a reusable metal straw and a reusable cup into the hand of Green Party Leader Elizabeth May would not be the greatest idea." *National Post*, A3.

APPENDIX 5: Infotainment Scale Comparative Examples

To help clarify more concretely some of the ways in which news items fall at various levels of the Infotainment Scale, I provide three examples of news items from the dataset, each corresponding to an Infotainment Scale score of ‘1’, ‘2’, and ‘3’, respectively. For each example, I offer a brief description of the dominant trends and characteristics which render the news item where it is on the Infotainment Scale.

1. **Example of a news item scoring a ‘1’ on the Infotainment Scale.** In this *Toronto Star* article written by Alex Ballingall and published on 15 September, 2019, we find a very close adherence to journalistic norms of ‘objectivity’ and an analytical style. The entirety of the article speaks almost exclusively of competing policy promises and pledges for greenhouse gas reductions and climate policy. Not only are the positions and promises of the competing parties discussed substantively and informatively in a comparative manner, but they are also accompanied by pieces of contextualising information, for example discussing Canada’s international commitments, the broader domestic political landscape on the issue, as well as an historical perspective on various relevant policy and political developments. We also find little to no evidence of personalisation or sensationalisation, and a strong degree of substantive contextualisation. It is for these reasons that this news item scored a ‘1’ on the Infotainment Scale.

Headline: Greens the only party pledging to increase the carbon price

Author: Alex Ballingall

Publication: The Toronto Star

Word Count: 743 words

Date: 15 September 2019

Page: N/A

OTTAWA—The Greens are the only major political party that vows to increase the federal carbon price after 2022, as the NDP now says it has “no plans” to hike the levy on fuel if it holds power after the Oct. 21 election.

One day after telling the Star it would adjust the carbon price as needed to achieve the deeper emissions reductions it is promising during the campaign, the NDP clarified Sunday that any adjustments would only affect the portion of the pricing system that applies to heavy polluters — not the charge that applies to gasoline and other fuels burned in the economy at large.

“We will review and adjust the industrial carbon price as needed, but we have no plans to increase the carbon price for consumers,” NDP spokesperson Mélanie Richer said Sunday.

“We’re focused on making sure that big polluters are paying for pollution,” she said.

The federal carbon price has become a hot-rod for political contention as the parties vying for votes during the current election campaign try to convince Canadians they have the right mix of policies to combat climate change and soothe concerns about the cost of living.

Earlier this summer, Liberal environment minister Catherine McKenna ruled out any further increase to the federal carbon price, after the Parliamentary Budget Officer reported it would need to increase to \$102 per tonne if Canada relied solely on this policy to hit its 2030 target for greenhouse gas reduction.

McKenna later backtracked, saying the price level could increase after that year and will be subject to consultations.

The price kicked in at \$20 per tonne this year, and is set to climb to \$50 per tonne in 2022. It also includes tax rebates the government says exceed how much 80 per cent of recipients pay for the carbon

price each year.

The Conservatives, however, have rejected the policy as a tax-grab in disguise, with party leader Andrew Scheer joining a coalition of premiers in arguing the federal price will hurt the economy and eliminate jobs by making consumer goods and business operations more expensive. Scheer has vowed to scrap the carbon price in favour of a system to force polluters to spend unspecified amounts of their own money to develop their greener technology.

Meanwhile, the Greens and NDP both support carbon pricing, but also pledge to make changes to the Liberal government's pricing system if they hold power in the next parliament.

The current federal price has two components: a levy on fuels like gasoline and diesel, and a pricing system for heavy polluters that forces them to pay only for the portion of their greenhouse gas emissions that exceeds industry-specific thresholds.

The NDP now says it has no intention to increase the fuel levy beyond \$50 in 2022, but will increase the portion of emissions that heavy polluters need to pay for.

The Greens promise to go further. When introducing her party's climate plan last spring, Green Leader Elizabeth May said her party would continue increasing the federal carbon price \$10 per year after 2022.

In an email Sunday, Green spokesperson Rosie Emery said the party would also ditch the pricing system for heavy polluters in favour of a "fee and dividend" model that would see all polluters pay the same price for the entirety of their emissions. Revenues would be divided equally among all Canadians and sent as a payout directly to every individual.

Canada is currently on track to fall short of its pledge under the Paris Agreement to cut emissions to 30 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030. The Liberals insist future policies and technological improvements will ensure Canada hits this target, while the Conservatives say their plan to ditch the carbon price in favour of other measures will give Canada its "best chance" of meeting it.

The Greens want Canada to double its target to 60 per cent below 2005 levels, while the NDP says their \$15 billion climate plan would set Canada on course to exceed its Paris target and reduce emissions to 38 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030.

Reproduced from: Ballingall, A. (15 Sept., 2019). "Greens the only party pledging to increase the carbon price." *The Toronto Star*, n.p.

2. **Example of a news item scoring a '2' on the Infotainment Scale.** In this *Globe & Mail* article written by Marieke Walsh and Bill Curry and published on 29 September, 2019, we find a news item that still contains considerable substantive, informative materials and a fairly strong overall 'serious'/informative style and content. However, we also find some more problematic elements than in the example above. For example, the narrative framing in both the headline and introduction evoke a certain sensational character to the spending policy announcements, pinning spending pledges for a learn-to-camp program and initiatives to combat gun violence arbitrarily against one another. In doing so, this article presents the announcement as almost shocking or irrational, when in reality both are relatively isolated pledges addressing two relatively isolated issues. The article offers an arguably comprehensive overview of the pledges and some of the ways in which they will help Canadians, including a number of specific figures and policy details. However, in the middle of the article we find a demonstration of 'political conflict' which appears to fit clearly into the 'pro et contra' adversarial format, with a fierce attack by Conservative candidate, Pierre Poilievre, on Trudeau in a rather negative-personalised manner. This is then immediately countered by a statement by Toronto Mayor John Tory which praises the spending

announcement on gun crime, although without really speaking to it in any detail – rather outlining a number of other initiatives he would like to see. The effect of this presentation of political conflict is to decontextualise the coverage and, as Patterson (2000) explains, supply a critical element “*not by a careful assessment of the claim or action, but by the insertion of a counter-claim*” (p. 12). The article then finishes off with some statistics on gun crime and an indication of the growing concerns over gun crime rates. As such, the actual spending policy announcement is not directly discussed in a comprehensive or analytical way, but chalked up to something of a sensational, decontextualised conflict between Liberals and Conservatives. It is for these reasons that this news item scores a ‘2(I=E)’ on the Infotainment Scale, as it provides a considerable quotient of substantive and informative material, but still incorporates some more problematic and sensationalistic infotainment characteristics which serve to decontextualise parts of the story. While this news item is not necessary representative of some of the more common ways in which personalised and sensational characteristics are accompanied by more substantive and informative materials (as outlined qualitatively and in-depth in Ch. 4), it nevertheless offers a fairly clear example of how different framing styles and discursive strategies can render a news items more ‘infotaining’ and less contextualised or informative of concrete issues, policy proposals, etc. in a relatively mundane manner.

Headline: Liberals pledging more new money to camping than combatting gun crimes; Liberal platform commits \$525-million more over four years for a proposed learn-to-camp program and an extra \$400-million over four years for initiatives aimed at reducing gun violence

Author: Marieke Walsh and Bill Curry

Publication: The Globe and Mail

Word Count: 739 words

Date: 29 September 2019

Page: N/A

A re-elected Liberal government would spend more new money on a camping program for children than on new programs to combat gun crimes in Canada, according to the party’s election platform.

In the platform, released on Sunday, the Liberals say they would spend \$525-million more over four years for a proposed learn-to-camp program and an extra \$400-million over four years for initiatives aimed at reducing gun violence.

The distinction is bringing fresh charges from the Conservatives that the Liberals’ priorities are “backward,” but gun-control advocates say the investment in a buyback program for military-style assault rifles shows “serious political will.”

The expanded learn-to-camp program, unveiled last week, would ensure that all children learn camping skills by Grade 8 and would also cover accommodation costs and up to \$2,000 in travel expenses for low-income Canadians who want to camp. The total cost for the program was released on Sunday.

The new cash-for-gun program would allow for a \$200-million buyback next year for all legally purchased assault rifles. Another \$50-million a year would be available for municipalities to fight gang-related violence and to help municipalities meet the needs of at-risk communities.

The Liberal Party says the difference in spending skews the other way if you add up the current spending and the new spending on the two areas. According to the party, the total spending commitment on guns and gangs is \$823-million and the total spending commitment for learn-to-camp is \$547.4-million.

“We recognize that there’s always more to do and we will keep doing it,” Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau said when asked about the difference in cash for the new camping programs compared with new anti-gun

initiatives.

“We are making choices that both protect the environment and make our communities safer. And again it’s a direct contrast with Conservatives who want to weaken gun control and will do nothing to protect our environment,” Mr. Trudeau said.

Conservative candidate Pierre Poilievre said the differences in planned spending shows the Liberals have the wrong priorities.

“It illustrates how ridiculous a leader he is,” Mr. Poilievre told reporters at an Ottawa news conference, where he provided his party’s reaction to the Liberal platform.

In a statement, Toronto Mayor John Tory called the new spending directed at municipalities a “step forward” and he urged all parties to make similar commitments.

“I believe these investments, coupled with tougher gun and bail laws, support for our police and increased efforts to combat gun trafficking across the border, will help address the rise in gun violence we are seeing across Canada,” Mr. Tory said.

A growing chorus of mayors have raised concerns about gun violence in Canada’s major cities. Vancouver Mayor Kennedy Stewart this month joined the call for municipalities to be granted the power to impose handgun bans after police raised concerns about gun crime in the city. In one 15-hour window this month, there were three shootings that sent four people to hospitals.

The Liberals say they would give municipalities this power, but it’s not clear how it would work with provinces that are opposed to the handgun ban.

Meanwhile, the number of gun homicides across Canada continues to climb: By the end of 2018, they hit 249 (up 60 per cent since 2014). Shootings in Toronto notched a record high of 428.

As of Sept. 22, in Canada’s most populous city, there were 325 shootings this year with 484 victims.

The specific funding for an assault rifles buyback program was applauded by Heidi Rathjen, who runs Poly Remembers, a gun-control advocacy group created in remembrance of the 1989 École Polytechnique massacre in Montreal.

“This represents a substantial investment in public safety,” she said in an e-mail.

Reproduced from: Walsh, M., & Curry, B. (29 Sept., 2019). “Liberals pledging more new money to camping than combatting gun crimes; Liberal platform commits \$525-million more over four years for a proposed learn-to-camp program and an extra \$400-million over four years for initiatives aimed at reducing gun violence.” *The Globe & Mail*, n.p.

- 3. Example of a news item scoring a ‘3’ on the Infotainment Scale.** In this relatively short article from the *Vancouver Sun* written by Stephanie Taylor and published on 30 September, 2019, we find a number of considerable issues, with strong evidence of various infotainment characteristics and little evidence of any meaningful, substantive, and informative engagement with the subject matter of the story. The article starts off with a speculative frame, questioning what effects “western alienation” may have on the electoral outcome. A brief overview of this form of alienation is provided, largely by listing a number of critiques that (Western) Conservatives have of Trudeau and his energy and climate policies. The article progresses to offer a human-interest example by giving a human face to the phenomenon of western alienation, quoting a fed-up grain

farmer who feels victimised for her views, and not responded to by Trudeau. While a few narrow policy frames/issues are evoked, they are done so in passing and with no deeper discussion or explanation. After offering this rather personalistic and perhaps even sensational picture of western alienation, the story switches immediately to an evaluation of how energy and climate policy, within the context of a rather partisan ‘western alienation,’ may affect the outcome of the election, focusing especially on the relative difficulties of winning seats in strategic regions. It is on this strategic (game framed) note that the article finishes. Accordingly, we may posit that there are a number of issues with this article, for example in its episodic framing of western alienation that doesn’t take into account any historical perspectives or precedent situations and influences, nor any modern-day trends or patterns to help explain its rise in more detail and insight. The largely partisan feud over energy and climate policies is generalised uncritically to the ‘west’ and passed over with no indication of any substantive issues, perspectives, etc. to inform it or the reader. Indeed, the article is more so a speculation over election results and battles for seats in contested regions that tend towards one side or the other in this largely unspecified and unillustrated debate. In effect, we have a news item that evokes a potentially serious underlying issue in Canada – one which is arguably having very important and serious effects on the political landscape and discourse to this day – yet fails to go into any depth in discussing and presenting it. The narrative rests on the surface and remains both personalised and sensational, with an overall lack of context, substance, and informative materials. Moreover, all of this is placed within a broader meta-narrative of campaign strategy and battle – a quintessentially strategic game frame. Considered as a whole, this article is very likely to engage heuristic and affect-based decision-making and identification, without engaging its readers in any more of a critical evaluation or understanding of the issues or perspectives at hand. It provides a dramatic and gripping narrative of conflict, an approachable and relatable human experience, and a strategic war-like narrative to conclude, all of which are undoubtedly entertaining and sensational, at least in a latent sense. It is for these reasons and others that this news item scores a ‘3’ on the Infotainment Scale, indicating that infotainment characteristics are dominant and that there is little to no evidence of a more ‘serious’/informative news standard.

Headline: Western anger will spill at ballot box: experts; 'Alienation'

Author: Stephanie Taylor

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Page: NP4

A rising tide of western alienation may rally Conservative voters in Alberta, Saskatchewan and parts of British Columbia, but political watchers say they don't expect it to make a big splash in the election elsewhere in the country.

Alberta Premier Jason Kenney and Saskatchewan's Scott Moe have been steadfast and vocal critics of Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau over his government's energy policies - from the carbon tax to a federal law that overhauls how major energy projects are assessed.

They've made pipelines, and the seemingly endless struggle to build them, the focal point in their fight.

The anger in the region has led to rallies, convoys, anti-Liberal billboards, a pro-oil and gas clothing line and some talk of separation.

"I've honestly never felt so ... not even under-appreciated, just like completely ignored," says Sarah Leguee, a grain farmer in southeastern Saskatchewan. "It seems like any time we, you know, say something, we just get labelled as racists, as bigots.

"I've just never been so frustrated with the government in my entire life."

Like many in the West's rural areas, Leguee makes no secret in her social media posts that she's not a fan of Trudeau. Her points of frustration include a trade dispute with China over canola, tariffs India placed on peas and lentils and changes to small-business taxes affecting farmers that were made two years ago. Consultations on those changes were done during harvest.

"Alienation is a feeling," says Jared Wesley, a politics professor at the University of Alberta. "The rest of Canada risks inflaming the situation if they don't take Alberta's concerns seriously."

But addressing the West's issues with pipelines and equalization could put party leaders at odds with voters in other seat-rich parts of Canada, he warns.

Shachi Kurl, executive director of the Angus Reid Institute, says intense frustration in the West will galvanize people to cast ballots for the Conservatives and Andrew Scheer. But given that Conservative support is already concentrated in the West, it will create what she calls an inefficiency of votes. Many seats will be won by huge margins.

"You will have Conservative strategists going, 'Gosh, we wish we had those votes in Ontario,'" she says. "Or we wish we really could have picked up those votes in Atlantic Canada or in Quebec or in British Columbia."

In the 2015 election, the Liberals saw breakthroughs in Edmonton and Calgary, but polling suggests they could lose those this time around, Kurl says.

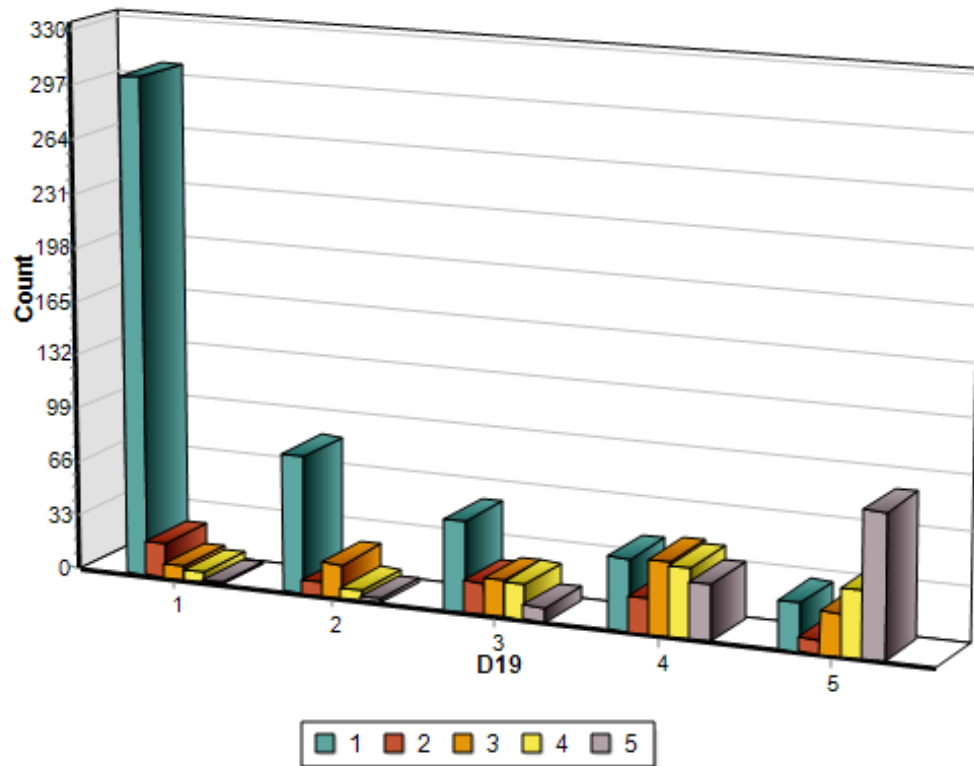
Loleen Berdahl, head of political studies at the University of Saskatchewan, says the NDP also won seats in Saskatchewan during the last election, which the Conservatives may pick up this time.

"What Scheer needs to do electorally is hang on to his western Canadian seats and then pick up seats outside the region."

Reproduced from: Taylor, S. (30 Sept., 2019). "Western anger will spill at ballot box: experts; 'Alienation.'" *Vancouver Sun*, NP4.

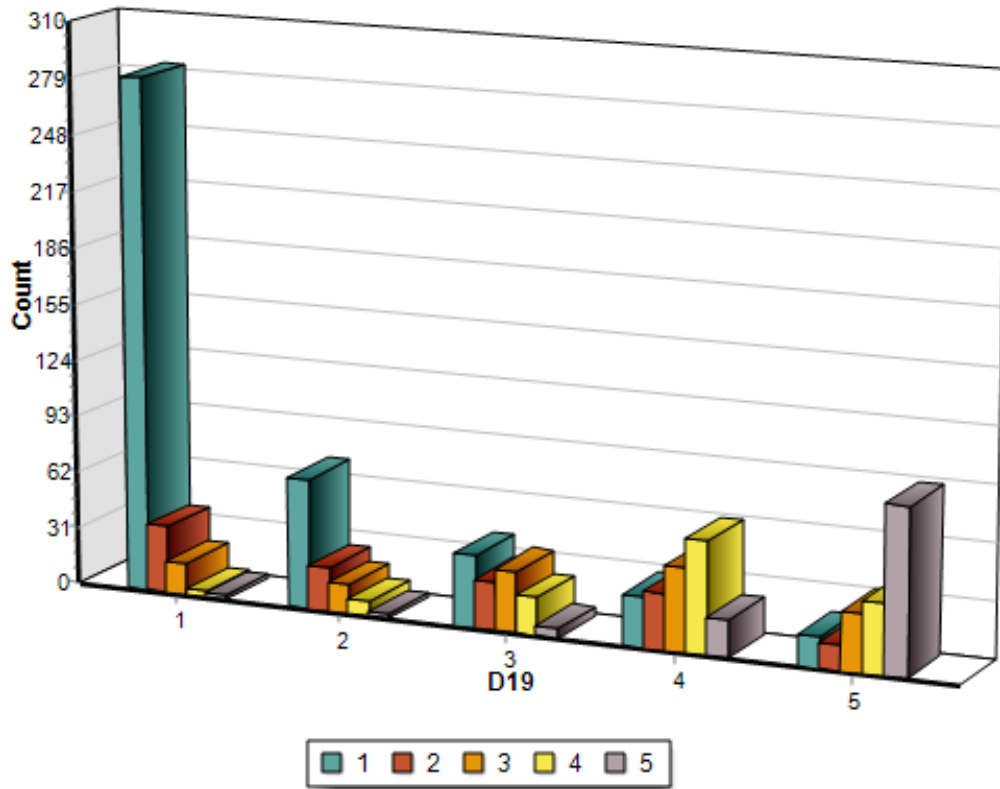
APPENDIX 6: Cross-Tabs of Decontextualisation Scale with Personalisation & Sensationalisation Scales

Chart 3: Cross-Tab of Decontextualisation & Personalisation Scales⁸



⁸ Personalisation Scale scores are shown here by the coloured bars, while Decontextualisation Scale scores are shown on the y-axis, labelled 'D19' in accordance with its place in the Coding Dictionary.

Chart 4: Cross-Tab of Decontextualisation & Sensationalisation Scales⁹



⁹ Sensationalisation Scale scores are shown here by the coloured bars, while Decontextualisation Scale scores are shown on the y-axis, labelled 'D19' in accordance with its place in the Coding Dictionary.

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