Ethnic Media Election Coverage
A Content Analysis Methodology

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RCIS Working Paper No. 2014/4
March 2014

RCIS RYERSON CENTRE
for Immigration and Settlement

RYERSON UNIVERSITY

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Series Editor: Harald Bauder

Abstract

Politicians' recent attentiveness to ethnic media coincides with the emergence of diverse societies where linguistic, cultural, and racial minority groups are an increasingly important demographic. Not much is known, however, about how ethnic media cover elections. This paper outlines a methodology for examining election coverage by ethnic newspapers, drawing upon best practices used to analyse election news content in mainstream media, the theoretical underpinnings of journalism practice, and the author's experience with coding ethnic news publications.

Introduction

Reporters who work for ethnic media have long complained about being ignored and treated as the second-class citizens of journalism by the political establishment. This appears to be changing. Following his 2009 inauguration, President Barak Obama's first interviews went to a Latino talk-show host in Los Angeles, *Black Enterprise* magazine, and the Washington bureau chief of Al Arabiya, a Dubai-based, Arab-language network (Matsagais, Katz, & Ball-Rokeach, 2011).

In Canada, meanwhile, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and other cabinet ministers have anointed ethnic news outlets "the new mainstream media" (Cheadle & Levitz, 2012). During the country's 2011 federal election, political parties put significant effort into wooing voters from so-called "ethnic" communities, a catch-all phrase that encompassed voters from immigrant, cultural, linguistic, religious, and racialized groups. The governing Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), under the direction of then-Immigration Minister Jason Kenney, courted the ethnic media with particular zeal. Before the election call and during the campaign itself, Harper and Kenney worked around the Ottawa press gallery by offering exclusive interviews and special briefings to journalists from media outlets serving ethnocultural minority groups (Meyer, 2010; Taber, 2011). A Conservative Party fundraising document obtained by the news media pinpointed 10 "very ethnic," potentially winnable ridings across the country and observed that ethnic voters "live where we need to win." It then outlined a strategy that encompassed "positively" branding the party through an advertising campaign aimed at the South Asian-, Mandarin-, and Cantonese-speaking communities in particular (Maclean's, 2011).

Politicians' growing interest in ethnic media coincides with the emergence of diverse societies where immigrants and linguistic, cultural, and racial minority groups are becoming powerful demographic forces with a marked interest in news that is reported in their mother tongue. During the 2012 U.S. presidential election, exit poll results showed that 48 percent of the Asian Americans surveyed relied upon ethnic media as their main news source (Agence-France Press, 2013). One-third of immigrant Hispanics in a recent poll said they consume news in Spanish only (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2013). In Canada, pollsters report that 52 percent of Chinese immigrants in the Toronto and

Vancouver areas say they do not read the English-language press and instead rely exclusively upon Chinese-language newspapers and magazines (Ipsos Reid, 2007). Members of Canada's rapidly growing South Asian community are also avid consumers of ethnic news. With an estimated 75 newspapers and 55 radio and television productions serving the Punjabi-speaking community in Brampton, Ontario, the city recently hired a Punjabi-speaking communications officer to monitor stories that appear in ethnic media (Bascaramurty, 2013) in and around the suburban centre just northwest of Toronto.

The majority of voters do not participate directly in election events or rallies and have come to rely upon journalists to provide stories about what is going on during campaigns. News reporting on election races by ethnic media is particularly important for people who struggle with English or feel more comfortable with news reported in their mother tongue. Consequently, "when politicians attempt to reach these electorates in their own cultural idioms, ethnic media become key vehicles" (Karim, 2002, p. 239).

Studies have shown that awareness of the issues as a result of following the news is associated with higher voter turnout during elections and, to the extent that ethnic media cover election issues, they "may be every bit as good at encouraging voter participation as mainstream news sources…" (Bevelander & Pendakur, 2009, p. 1421). The reality, however, is that not much is known about how ethnic media cover elections (Hale, Olsen, & Fowler, 2009; Mahler & Siemiatycki, 2011). Habermas' notion of the public sphere has been refined over the years to embrace the idea of multiple discourses taking place in distinct "sphericules" that overlap with the dominant public sphere. Ethnic media operate in these sphericules, producing "distinct civic discourses not often heard in hegemonic spaces like the mass media" (Karim, 2002, p. 231). In the context of election coverage, this raises a number of questions: Do the civic discourses in ethnocultural media include sufficient news and political reporting to fuel political engagement among the readers and viewers who rely upon them (Howe, 2007)? What are the main topics of election coverage and how does the list compare with the subjects of debate under way in the broader public sphere? Is there evidence of political bias in ethnic media campaign reporting?

To date, we have relatively few answers to such questions. Canadian scholars who studied the ethnic mediascape in British Columbia have suggested it would be "interesting to investigate ethnic media's 'behaviour' during election times to better understand the type of issues that get covered, as well as how politicians and policies are addressed in the ethnic media" (Ahadi & Murray, 2009, p. 605). More generally, Kymlicka (2008) has identified the need for a better understanding of institutional structures, including ethnocultural media, in ethnic and immigrant communities.

This paper outlines a methodology for examining election coverage by ethnic newspapers, drawing upon best practices used to analyse election news content in mainstream media, the theoretical underpinnings of journalism practice, and the author's experience with coding ethnic news publications. In a second phase of research (in progress), the methodology will be applied to investigate

reporting on Canada's 2011 national election by Punjabi, Korean, Russian, and Chinese-language newspapers in the Greater Toronto Area. The coding practices, variables, and rationale underpinning the methodology, however, could be applied to elections in a variety of jurisdictions.

Analyzing election campaign news coverage

Scholars have produced extensive literature on how the mainstream news media report on elections: media bias in coverage of U.S. presidential campaigns alone was the subject of at least 59 studies published prior to 2000 (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000). In Canada, the Media Observatory at the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada has produced weekly analyses of English-language newspaper coverage of Canadian federal elections since 2004, generating data on everything from the number of election-related news items to mentions of key topics and first mentions of parties or leaders (Soroka, 2011b).

The methodologies in these myriad studies range from hiring coders to manually gather and record data to the use of computer programs that can detect how frequently certain topics and words associated with bias appear in the coverage (Soroka, 2011a). In some cases, headlines alone are analyzed (Trimble & Sampert, 2004); in other cases, complete articles are examined (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Most studies focus on news coverage by a single news outlet or type of news media (television networks or newspapers, for example), but researchers have also undertaken meta-analyses that combine the results of multiple studies (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000).

The research questions vary. In some cases, the focus is on the extent to which coverage is preoccupied with who is winning or losing (the horse race) versus policies and issues (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005; Trimble & Sampert, 2004). Other investigations explore the amount of media attention devoted to campaign news overall, analyze coverage of specific topics (Rauhala, Albanese, Ferns, Law, Haniff, & Macdonald, 2012), assemble data on how often individual parties or leaders are mentioned (Soroka, Cutler, Stolle, & Fournier, 2011), and examine the prominence accorded to news coverage of different campaigns (Barber, 2008).

Scholarly analyses of election news coverage are also often undertaken to identify the existence of partisan media bias, which has been defined as the "systematic favouring of one party or ideology resulting from the intentional or unconscious biases of reporters, editors, or organizations" (Schiffer, 2006, p. 24). In many cases, the starting point for detecting bias is the belief that reporting should be balanced — that is, where parties or candidates are roughly equal, they should receive approximately the same amount of coverage (Jenkins, 1999). Various approaches to this include counting the number of times parties or candidates are mentioned, identifying how many stories, column inches, or paragraphs are published about the opposing sides, or adding up the number of broadcast sound bites or seconds of airtime they garner.

D'Alessio and Allen (2000) identified three types of bias: 1) gatekeeping bias, which is the preference of editors and reporters for stories about one party compared to others; 2) coverage bias, which compares the amount of coverage accorded each party or candidate; and 3) statement bias, which assesses the tone of coverage, i.e., whether the stories about parties or candidates are overall favourable or unfavourable. Stories with equal numbers of positive statements or no clearly biased statements are regarded as neutral. Stories dominated by positive or negative statements about one side would be considered overtly biased.

Studies of media bias in election coverage often involve trying to untangle whether the bias is intentional or not, whether it reflects factors on the ground such as a masterful campaign by one side, or whether it is the result of journalism routines, constraints, and norms. Schiffer (2006), for instance, points out that journalists' routine reliance upon official sources means that they chiefly interact with incumbents, who tend to have more money, staff, and experience in dealing with the media, a considerable advantage when it comes to using the news media to get their messages out. In Canada, scholars have observed that, historically, the proportion of coverage a party receives is about the same as the proportion of the vote they attracted in the last election — a convention that yet again is advantageous to incumbents and problematic for smaller or new parties (Jenkins, 1999). The amount of news coverage also tends to reflect candidates' standing in the polls (Schiffer, 2006).

Research on election coverage by ethnic media is much more limited. One U.S. study concluded that local and network Spanish-language television stations paid more attention to Latino issues and interests during the 2004 elections, but overall devoted substantially less time to election-related news than English-language outlets. Both English- and Spanish-language stations tended to focus more on campaign strategy and horse race stories than on issues. Stories for the study were analyzed in terms of length, topic, number and length of sound bites from each candidate, whether stories discussed Latino interests, type of electoral race (presidential, senate, state assembly, etc.), and story frame. In the latter case, coders chose from a list of frames that included whether the story focused on an issue, the horse race, campaign strategy, or personal characteristics of a candidate (Hale, Olsen, & Fowler, 2009).

An examination of British Columbia's Korean-language press during Canada's 2008 general election identified a significant amount of campaign coverage that focused on economic issues and practical stories, such as how to vote. Mainstream English-language newspapers, by comparison, devoted more copy to the horse race and its potential outcome. The Korean publications displayed no overall leanings toward a political party and, apart from lavishing significant attention on the lone candidate of Korean origin, tended to focus on non-ethnic candidates (Yu & Ahadi, 2010). Researchers arrived at these conclusions by collecting data on which issues and concerns were addressed in the English- and Korean-language newspapers. Coders also recorded whether stories were produced by staff writers or a wire service, identified the item form

(hard news, editorial, interviews, letters, columns, cartoons, etc.), and collected information on where the story appeared in the newspaper and the tone of reporting on parties and party leaders (Yu & Ahadi, 2010).

The limited amount of research on election coverage in ethnic media, at a time when these news organizations are increasingly of interest to politicians and their campaign managers, points to a major gap in the scholarly literature. Language barriers and the limited availability of online and archived ethnic media content present challenges for many scholars interested in undertaking this type of research. Strategies for addressing these obstacles, along with suggestions related to data collection, will be discussed in the next section.

Proposed methodology

The methodology outlined here for amassing data on election content in ethnic newspapers can be applied to news coverage by a single publication, a number of different newspapers serving one ethnic community, or content in newspapers produced in different languages for different groups. The latter case, the most challenging because multiple languages are involved, is what will be undertaken in the next stage of this research.

The fundamentals

Selecting publications for study

A number of considerations must be taken into account when choosing which newspapers to analyze. A publication's circulation is one factor, though it is somewhat problematic in that publishers are often the only source of such information. There is, for instance, nothing to prevent them from inflating circulation numbers since few ethnic news operations have invested in the sorts of formal circulation audits that generate reliable third-party data (Matsaganis, Katz, & Ball-Rokeach, 2011).

The size of the publication's target audience, therefore, should also be taken into consideration since it is something of a barometer for potential circulation. When the Toronto area's 5.5 million residents were asked to identify their mother tongue in Canada's most recent census, for instance, residents identified more than 80 different languages. The newspapers that will be analyzed in the next phase of this research serve some of the Greater Toronto Area's largest ethnic communities. A total of 427,685 people listed a Chinese language (primarily Cantonese or Mandarin) as their mother tongue; 157,475 listed Punjabi; 78,105 identified Russian; and 51,395 listed Korean (Statistics Canada, 2012).

Finally, in addition to circulation numbers and the target audience size, consulting with ethnic community members is also a worthwhile investment of time to get a sense — admittedly anecdotal — of which publications are the most popular.

The availability of back issues

Having identified which publications are to be examined, scholars should not assume that back issues will be readily available. Among ethnic newspapers, there is a dearth of online, searchable databases, and archives are often inadequate or non-existent. Many newspapers keep only a few copies of their back issues and they are often reluctant to part with them. Public and university libraries may have back issues archived electronically, on microfiche, or in hard copy, but the holdings tend to be limited. While some of larger publications do have comprehensive websites, this is still relatively rare among smaller operations. To minimize complications, researchers should make arrangements to collect newspaper issues in advance of the research project.

Sample size

Deciding upon sampling methods and sample size is another important aspect of project preparation. Oversampling will not produce more accurate results and will waste scarce resources. The sample size, however, does need to be large enough to accurately represent the content for the full period under study. A comparison of various sampling techniques for mainstream newspapers concluded that a constructed week sample (Monday of the first week, Tuesday of the second week, etc.) avoids over-representation of any single day or issue, and produces more reliable results than random or consecutive day sampling (Riffe, Aust, & Lacy, 1993). It also suggested that data for one constructed week would produce a sample size that is representative of six months' worth of issues. Since election campaigns generally range in length from four to six weeks, one option is to analyze content for one constructed week (or a minimum of one day per week during the campaign).

Coder training and testing

Analyzing the content of newspapers published in languages other than English requires using bilingual coders. Where coding is being done in one language only, a minimum of two coders should be involved in the project and an intercoder reliability test should be conducted on a random sample representing approximately 10 percent of the anticipated total number of election items to be analyzed (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002). Intercoder reliability for variables can be measured using Cohen's Kappa, with the aid of PRAM (Program for Reliability Assessment with Multiple Coders) software. Cohen's Kappa is a relatively conservative index that measures the extent to which coders make identical coding decisions, and takes into account the agreement expected by chance. With two coders, intercoder reliability test results can be considered acceptable at or above .700 using Cohen's Kappa (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002).

Coding newspapers published in four different languages, as is envisioned for the next part of this project, means hiring coders fluent in Chinese, Punjabi, Korean, and Russian. Resource constraints mean just one student fluent in each language will be hired. To ensure consistency in decisions across all newspapers, coders will be trained using election-related stories and photographs from the

English-language *Toronto Star*, *National Post*, and *Globe and Mail* newspapers. Once random testing of the coders' results shows they are coding in a consistent manner, they will complete an intercoder reliability test. The test will statistically analyze the coding of all four coders for randomly selected federal election stories from the English-language dailies. The test items should represent approximately 10 percent of the total number of election items likely to be identified in this project (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002).

For more than two coders, values of between .400 and .750 may be taken to represent fair to good agreement beyond chance using Cohen's Kappa (Banerjee, Capozzoli, McSweeney, & Sinha, 1999; Landis & Koch, 1977; Fleiss, 1981). Achieving this result means coders' decisions for the respective ethnocultural newspapers should be consistent and accurate. Upon completing the test, coders should discuss discrepancies and resolve disagreements through discussion and refinements of the coding guide.

Identifying data to be collected

Basic data for each news item

Coders should begin by identifying news items that deal with the election and then assemble basic information about each item. Identifying the *item form*, for instance, will allow investigators to determine whether election coverage consisted mostly of photographs, straight-forward news accounts of events, opinion columns, or editorials. This type of data may figure into discussions of bias. Were columnists and editorials, for instance, all supportive of one party in particular?

Data on the *origin* of news items can be used to pinpoint how much election coverage was produced in-house or by freelancers, selected from the wire services by editors, or unknown and potentially "borrowed" without acknowledgement from other sources. The *location* of news items in a newspaper (i.e., page number) is important in terms of agenda setting theory. It posits that, although news organizations play a limited role in shaping readers' attitudes, they have a significant impact in terms of establishing what readers think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Editors who place a story on the front page of a newspaper, for instance, are signalling to readers that the story content is important. Finally, *translations of headlines* should be included in the data set because they can be used as examples to support arguments presented in subsequent analyses.

The questions researchers want to answer are important in terms of determining other types of data to be collected. The following section, therefore, identifies some research questions about election coverage by ethnic newspapers and suggests examples of data that may be of use in trying to answer the questions.

How much election coverage did each newspaper publish?

Gathering data on the number of election-related stories and photos in addition to the total for all news items in each newspaper issue makes it possible to compare the amount of election content in different newspapers and, from there, explore the extent to which publications play a role in fostering political awareness and engagement. The resulting data can also be used as a starting point for investigating factors that might influence how much election news makes it into print. These factors might include the size of the publication, and whether the presence of in-group candidates (members of the newspaper's target audience) played a role in boosting the amount of coverage.

How much political advertising appeared in each newspaper?

The amount of advertising purchased by each party is potentially useful in discussions of bias in a newspaper's coverage. Where there is a significant amount of advertising associated with a particular local race or national campaign, it may also help identify the most competitive races or where party campaign directors believe they can pick up support. The key information required for exploring these sorts of issues includes the number of political advertisements, the size of each advertisement (full page, half page, etc.), and identification of the party that purchased each advertisement. Data should also be assembled on whether the advertisement was for the national leader/the national campaign or whether it trumpeted the virtues of a local candidate. In the latter case, the name of the electoral district targeted in the advertisement will help identify hotly contested races.

What was the main topic of each story?

Coder training is particularly important in this instance because evaluating the main theme of stories requires making a judgement call. Before coding can start, a list of election themes must be identified and tested. Practice coding of English-language election stories is a starting point, but samples of news coverage from ethnic newspapers should also be examined to pinpoint election topics of unique interest to readers of those publications. Stories on the mechanics of how to vote, for instance, are more likely to appear in ethnic newspapers that serve large numbers of newly minted citizens. Once the categories have been established, coders must be able to identify a main theme for each story. Where there is no clear theme because multiple topics are referenced, the first topic mentioned should be entered into the database. Armed with data on the key topics, researchers will be in a position to compare changes in topics over the course of a campaign (the focus might change week by week). Where methodologically appropriate, data on the main issues covered by ethnic media can be compared with the results of other studies examining the main topics reported on by mainstream news media. Researchers will then be able to analyze news agenda differences.

Does coverage concentrate on who is winning or losing or on issues?

Scholars have long been interested in whether election news coverage focuses on stories about the horse race and campaign strategy rather than substantive issues that explore policy differences and provide information that electors need to cast an informed ballot (Trimble & Sampert, 2004). Asking coders to categorize stories as either horse race narratives or issue stories allows researchers to explore this matter in ethnic media.

Which electoral districts attracted coverage during the election campaign and who were the candidates in these ridings?

Adding the names of specific ridings referred to in news articles, photographs, and advertisements to the database will make it easier to pinpoint the geographic focus of news coverage. News items can be coded as having "no specific riding referenced" in cases where they focused on the national campaign or a party leader's activities outside of the newspaper's coverage area. Data on whether candidates were members of the newspaper's target audience (to the extent that their background can be identified by name or photo or other publicly available information) is also useful in that it can be used to explore the extent to which newspapers focus their coverage on races involving members of their own community versus the election in general.

Was there evidence of bias in the news coverage?

Data on a number of variables can be collected to explore this issue as well as possible explanations for any discernable bias. A preponderance of statements favouring one side over the other is a clear indicator of bias. There are, however, other ways to probe this issue. Capturing data on which party and party leader was mentioned first in each story, for instance, can be useful because first mentions "are a simple and reliable means of tracking the relative prominence of parties in campaign media coverage" (Soroka, Cutler, Stolle, et al., 2011, p. 71). First mentions are also an indication of who is setting the agenda and framing the issue (Andrew, Maioni, & Soroka, 2006; Kitzinger, 2007; Trimble & Sampert, 2004). The party, the party leader, or candidate mentioned first in a story, for instance, tends to be the source that identifies the topic and the key issues related to it, leaving the competition to react in later paragraphs. In addition to signalling which party may have the most effective media strategy, first mentions "provide valuable information about the relative salience of parties and party leaders during the campaign; they are indicative of the way in which the campaign is being framed, and point to which party or leader is effectively driving coverage" (Andrew, Young, & Soroka, 2008, p. 80).

The number of news items (stories and photographs) that reference only one party is another useful indicator of bias, as is the number of times that party leaders, candidates, or other party representatives appear in photographs. Where bias is identified, the stage is set for a discussion of whether it is the result of journalistic partisanship or an advantage enjoyed by a candidate or party due to money, incumbency, front-runner status, or other factors. Data on the number of stories that clearly favour one side can also be analyzed in conjunction with

the number of advertisements purchased by the favoured party to see if the two might be related.

Conclusion

The paucity of studies exploring election coverage by ethnic media is a gap that needs to be addressed now that politicians have recognized these news organizations are important conduits to voters. We live in an era when it is "free media coverage that candidates rely on to energize, turn out, and provide information to the undecided voter" (Herr, 2002, p. 906). The methodology outlined in this paper is not comprehensive — other ideas about what data is worth collecting will most likely emerge during the study design process. The goal, however, is to lay the foundation for investigations of whether ethnic newspapers provide voters with the news they need to cast informed ballots, how the election debate in ethnic media compares with mainstream coverage, and the extent to which bias in favour of one party or another is evident in reporting on campaigns. Currently, there are few answers to these sorts of questions. It is time we started looking for answers.

Acknowledgements

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