

# **Local Blackout in Effect? Newspaper Coverage of Municipal Elections in Three Major Canadian Urban Areas and the Impact on Civic Literacy<sup>1</sup>**

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There has long been concern in Canada and other countries regarding declining levels of civic literacy, defined as the ability to understand political processes such as elections, community consultations, and associational meetings, as well as awareness of these processes and the capacity to act on this knowledge. This is said to be a key factor in explaining declining levels of civic participation, such as voting, especially in municipal elections where voter turnout in Canada is very low. Research has linked levels of civic literacy to media consumption. Communities with higher levels of newspaper readership tend to have higher levels of civic literacy (see for example Henry Milner, *Civic Literacy in Comparative Context* Montréal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2001). Therefore newspapers are an important research issue for those concerned with civic literacy, specifically their level of readership and the coverage of politics they provide. The argument presented in this paper is that before we can begin to speak about encouraging newspaper readership so as to boost civic literacy we have to verify that they constitute an information source that will assist those who wish to become informed about public life. Anecdotal evidence is that major newspapers pay little attention to local politics and municipal elections. This paper will seek to determine if this is true or not and if there is divergence between coverage of municipal elections in core cities within urban areas and their surrounding suburbs (which frequently have a greater aggregate population). To do this a content analysis is performed on major daily newspapers in the Greater Vancouver, Greater Calgary and Greater Toronto Areas for the thirty days prior to the most recent round of municipal elections, as well as election day itself in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario respectively.

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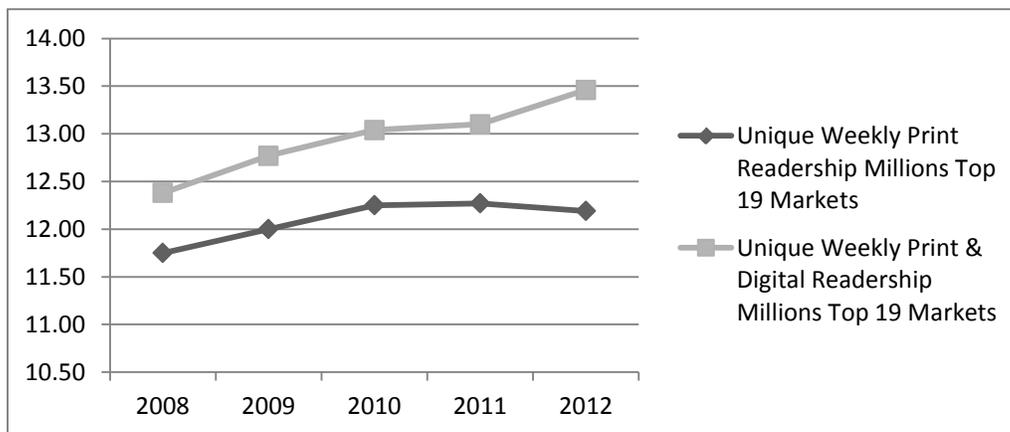
## Introduction

Canada has a crisis of political participation. Voter turnout is in long-term decline and is particularly low in local elections (Nakhaie 2006; Sancton 2012: 193; Tindal and Tindal 2009: 319-20). Comparative research has shown that countries, such as Canada, with low levels of civic literacy are particularly vulnerable to this problem and that a key element in promoting civic literacy is newspaper readership (Milner 2001). For the purposes of this paper, civic literacy is defined as the ability to understand political processes such as elections, community consultations, and associational meetings, as well as awareness of these processes and the capacity to act on this knowledge. ‘The expression “civic literacy” encapsulates the closely linked concepts of “civic engagement” (a key component of social capital for Putnam) and “literacy” or political knowledge’ (Milner 2001: 7-8). Although some question the continuing relevance of newspapers, they still represent our best source for news, both on their own and as providers of content for the internet (Goyette-Côté, Carbasse and George 2012). However, other researchers have called into question the newspaper readership, civic literacy, voter turnout causal claim (Pattie and Johnston 2003). In fact, at the same time voter turnout has been declining in Canada, overall newspaper readership has been increasing. Although print readership has been declining, when readership of newspaper websites is added in, Canadian newspaper readership has actually grown over recent years. See Figure 1 below. In 2012 roughly half of Canadian adults residing in markets served by a daily newspaper read one every day. This is approximately 10.6 million people. Overall, 80 percent of all Canadian adults read a daily paper at least once a week (Newspaper Audience Databank 2012). One reason why newspaper readership levels might not produce the positive benefits theorized is because they do not provide sufficient information for a resident to become literate in regard to civic matters. Therefore, it is important to verify that the newspapers on offer represent useful information

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sources. This is especially important in the arena of local politics and elections as students of municipal affairs suggest that Canada's mainstream news media struggles to provide coverage of local politics (Cutler and Matthews 2005: 363). This paper seeks to test this proposition. It also seeks to assess whether or not the truth of it depends on where one lives. Specifically, whether coverage of local politics varies by whether one lives in one of Canada's core urban areas or the surrounding suburbs. This question is particularly salient in that Canada is rapidly becoming a nation of suburbanites. Suburban municipalities are experiencing population growth rates almost double the national rate. Meanwhile core municipalities are growing much slower, 50% below the national rate. In the case of Canada's three largest urban areas (Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver) more than half of all residents now live outside of the core municipalities (Statistics Canada 2007). This paper is the first product of a research project aimed at better understanding the information regarding local politics and elections which is available to suburban residents and the potential for civic literacy to patch the gap in political participation which is notably pronounced in such communities.

Figure 1. Changes in Canadian Newspaper Readership: Print and Print plus Digital 2008 – 2012



(Source: Newspaper Audience Data Bank 2013)

While the results presented here are somewhat incomplete and should be considered preliminary at best, in general they confirm the conventional wisdom that coverage of local politics is not strong. The results also highlight how truly bad the coverage is when we speak about the suburban areas where more and more Canadians now live. It is as if a local blackout is in effect.

### The Study

It was decided to study three of Canada's largest urban areas: The Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Metro Vancouver and Calgary. The three were chosen as they are among the largest in the country and because they provide consistency in terms of language. As well, they provide three distinct local government forms and differences in terms of newspaper ownership. Finally, in Ontario, Alberta and BC local elections take place across each entire province simultaneously, allowing for comparison to be made as to the coverage provided to politics in each areas core city and its suburbs.

### *The three urban areas*

Statistics Canada uses the concept of a Census Metropolitan Area (CMAs) to define the urban geographic areas within which there is a dense enough concentration of residents (at least 100,000 of whom at least 50,000 live in an urban core) who share a common social and economic relationship significant enough to say that they represent a single urban area (Statistics Canada 2007: 23; Statistics Canada 2012: 90-101). CMAs are used in the newspaper industry to define the markets newspapers serve and within which they compete for readers (see for example Newspaper Audience Databank 2012). By using CMAs to identify the boundaries of each cities

greater urban area it was possible to have a standard and consistent mechanism for deciding which municipalities ought to be considered as a suburb for each of the three cities. In that the newspapers themselves use their audited readership levels across each of their CMA to attract advertisers, using CMAs in this study also provides a defense to the charge that there is little coverage of suburban politics because the newspapers are not seeking readers there.

The three CMAs used in this study are each located in different provinces, meaning they are subject to different local government legislation and election rules (which are the constitutional purview of the provinces) and also present different political structures. The Toronto CMA has the most complex structure in that its core municipality has a different organizational structure, a traditional single tier municipality, with wards (each electing two councilors) and a mayor elected at large. Meanwhile its suburban municipal neighbors are organized into regions with voters selecting exclusively local councilors for their wards, as well as regional councilors who sit at both the municipal and regional level and mayors (who also sit on the regional council). The Regional Chair is selected by the Regional Council. The Calgary CMA is composed of single tier municipalities. Calgary itself has traditional wards and a mayor elected at large. Meanwhile the entire Vancouver CMA is encompassed by the Metro Vancouver Regional government, which is a delegated body with councilors chosen by votes in the council of the constituent municipalities. As with mayors, councilors are elected at large and unlike the other two urban areas, BC local election laws permit party campaigning (Sancton 2012). As Table 1 below shows, the proportion of total CMA population that resides in the core municipalities and outlying suburbs also varies greatly between the three CMAs.

All things being equal one would assume coverage of local politics would reflect the share of population within the CMA that each municipality represents. For example, in the

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Vancouver CMA the core municipality represents less than thirty percent of the total population and the largest suburb (Surrey) is not much smaller than Vancouver itself. In truth, however, it is somewhat unrealistic to assume coverage will be so rationally distributed as other factors are also involved, such as history and centralization of efforts on the location that is likely to interest the most readers, even if this is no longer a majority (i.e. the core city). Similar forces are also likely at play in terms of the balance of coverage devoted to mayoral and council elections and coverage of local politics between elections (Cutler and Matthews 2005: 363).

Table 1 Characteristics of Calgary, Toronto and Vancouver CMA, 2006 Census

CMA	Structure	Number of Municipalities	Total Population*	Core City Population	Suburban Population	Percent Suburban
Calgary	Unitary in Core and Suburbs	8	1,079,310	988,812	90,498	8.4
Toronto	Core City Unitary, Two Tier Structure in Suburbs	23 (22 Suburban Municipalities Grouped into 6 Regions)	5,113,139	2,503,281	2,609,838	51.0
Vancouver	Two Tier Structure Covers Entire CMA	21	2,116,581	578,041	1,538,540	72.7

(Statistics Canada 2006 Census, \*Not Including Residents of Unincorporated Areas and Indian Reserves)

### *The newspapers*

The three CMAs present very different competition dynamics in terms of their newspapers. The Toronto CMA is Canada's most competitive English-language market and one of the most competitive in North America, served by the flagship papers from three major media conglomerates, Torstar (*The Toronto Star*), Post Media (*National Post*), and Quebecor's English language Sun chain (*The Toronto Sun*), as well as the independent *Globe and Mail*. These major dailies also compete with free throwaway commuter summary papers published by Torstar and

Quebecor which are distributed throughout the transit network. Meanwhile in Vancouver there is a corporate monopoly with both *The Vancouver Sun* and the *Province* being owned by Post Media via its wholly-owned Pacific Press subsidiary. Calgary's CMA is served by two rival chains Post Media (*The Calgary Herald*) and Quebecor (*The Calgary Sun*). If our colleagues in Economics are to be believed, competition should produce better products. Therefore, it is fair to assume going in that coverage of local events would be poorest in the Vancouver CMA and better in the two competitive markets. However, it also needs to be noted that different papers have different objectives and audiences. As will be seen in Table 2, some of the papers clearly identify themselves as having a civic mandate within their local communities, while others claim to have other aims, such as a national role.

As noted above, this paper represents something of an interim report and is somewhat incomplete. One reason for this is because it proved impossible to use the same search strategy for the Quebecor papers and the other properties. This will be discussed further below. However, it should be noted that this report does not contain any data from *The Toronto Sun* or *The Calgary Sun*. This is somewhat problematic as it was hypothesized that these tabloid format publications would pay the greatest attention to local news as compared to their broadsheet competitors with grander aspirations. Table 2 provides a summary of the key characteristics of the six newspapers for which data is reported in this paper.

*Searching strategy and limits*

Each of the newspapers was searched for thirty days prior to the most recent provincial municipal election date and election-day itself (meaning a possible 31 days). However, not all of the papers publish seven days a week. Therefore, there are not necessarily 31 issues and the actual number varies even then for the six day a week papers. This is because the dates for the elections in combination whether the paper does not publish on Sunday or Saturday influences the number of papers published during the thirty one day period. The electronic data base used to access the archives for each paper was Factiva. When the methodology for this study was developed last year, a sufficient range of back issues was available for the Quebecor papers. However, at some point these were removed from the database. As the Quebecor papers do not appear to be archived in any other rival database, these are being searched manually from microfilm. Unfortunately, it proved impossible to complete this task in time so as to include data from the Quebecor newspapers in this essay. Once the data is collected it will be added to a revised version. Each paper was searched individually for each day of the 31 day period using a search string that included the phrase:

*((elect\* or vote\*) and ((the first municipality listed by Statistics Canada in the CMA) or (the second municipality) or (the n<sup>th</sup> municipality))*

If the CMA had regional structures the names of the regional governments were also included in the search string. A list of the municipalities contained in each CMA and their populations is included as an appendix at the end of this paper.

Next, the articles were read and a determination was made as to whether the article was relevant or not. For example the search strategy delivered a number of articles regarding corporate takeovers and shareholder elections, as well as voting for awards in the Canadian

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Football League. All articles, whether judged relevant or not, were retained in a separate file folder for each day for each paper.

Table 2 Characteristics of the Newspapers

City	Paper	Print Readers in CMA Unique Per Week*	Digital Readers in CMA*	Description of Self#
Calgary				
	Herald	454,200	212,000	" <i>The Calgary Herald</i> engages readers through our award winning content with the accuracy and integrity Calgarians have come to count on."
Toronto				
	Globe & Mail	838,100	687,600	"Canada's National Newspaper. In print for 167 years, <i>The Globe</i> delivers lively and authoritative coverage of national, international, business, technology, arts, entertainment and lifestyle news. An essential read for Canadians who want in-depth reporting on the issues, facts and opinions that affect our domestic landscape and the world at large."
	National Post	518,400	376,400	" <i>The National Post</i> features coverage from across the country and around the world, delivered with a distinctly Canadian voice. But it's more than just news: it's an eclectic package that combines award-winning reporting with hard-hitting analysis to take you deep inside the stories that count."
	Star	1,916,200	911,900	" <i>The Toronto Star</i> has the largest circulation and is the most read daily newspaper in Canada. It is published seven days a week in the Greater Toronto Area by Torstar Corporation. <i>The Star</i> has a long history of credible journalism. Our brand strength is deeply rooted in the rich history of Toronto. For over a century, the Star has helped shape this city by supporting charities, championing social causes, and encouraging government responsibility and reform."
Vancouver				
	Province	843,500	237,900	"With a storied past and an engaging presence, <i>The Province</i> is a bold, edgy and irreverent force that helps shape B.C.'s future. For more than a century, we have laughed, cried and cheered with you while chronicling B.C.'s triumphs and tragedies. Honed by editorial quality, integrity and fairness, <i>The Province</i> today reaches close to one million print and online readers every week."
	Sun	739,300	283,500	"Since our first edition rolled off the presses on Feb. 12, 1912, <i>The Sun</i> 's award-winning writers, cartoonists and photographers have chronicled not only the history of Vancouver and B.C., but the rapidly changing world around us... We have, as is our journalistic obligation, comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable. We have informed and entertained, and celebrated all that is unique about us, all the while providing generations of readers with a daily snapshot of local politics and global news, arts and sports, business and opinion... We are, proudly, Vancouver."

(\*Newspaper Audience Databank (2012); #Taken from the media kit and "About Us" page on each paper's website)

The following details were entered into a spreadsheet for the 755 articles judged salient:

- Date
- Author(s) Last Name

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- Author(s) First Name
- Newspaper
- Page
- Article Title
- Municipalities Covered
- Type of Article (News, Opinion, Editorial, Letter, Other).

A second reading of the articles is presently underway to provide a more in-depth content analysis of the material so as to identify differences in “themes” and “issues”.

### Initial Results and Analysis

Table 3 provides a summary of the initial results. As can be seen most of the initial suspicions noted above seem to be confirmed. There is a significant imbalance in coverage of core municipalities as opposed to their suburban neighbors. However, the degree of the imbalance also varies with the degree to which population within a CMA is suburbanized. For example, the *Calgary Herald* had the lowest coverage of suburban politics (only 1.8 percent of all content mention suburban municipalities) but the Calgary CMA is also the most centralized with over 90 percent of residents in Calgary proper. With an almost 50/50 split in the Toronto CMA, *The Toronto Star*, provided coverage in which roughly 25 percent of stories referenced a suburban municipality. Meanwhile in the Vancouver CMA with a two-thirds suburban population, *The Province's* coverage approached a fifty/fifty split.

However, other factors also seem to be playing a role. Not surprisingly, the corporate monopoly in Vancouver produced the lowest volume of coverage for local elections. Although

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owned by the same media conglomerate, Post Media, *The Province* only produced about one quarter of the coverage of *The Calgary Herald*. Meanwhile *The Vancouver Sun* produced about one third *The Herald's* local election coverage. This is in spite of the fact that the Vancouver market is significantly larger. Nevertheless, to describe the coverage in the Post Media's Vancouver duo as "worst," might also be unfair. It must be remembered that the municipalities in the Vancouver CMA mostly use "at large" systems to elect councilors rather than wards. As well, in all but the smallest municipalities, competition is organized via parties. Therefore, the sort of "ward by ward" candidate profiles and reporting of independent candidate positions which would drive up story numbers in other CMAs are not needed. The paper's self-professed mandate also seems to play a role. Those papers which claim a significant civic role in local affairs generally produced a greater volume of coverage compared to their competitors. Finally, and again in mitigation, it must be remembered that newspapers are for-profit enterprises and there is a possibility that they are only providing what their readers want. They might not want to know about local issues. As one observer of local government noted: "The general interest in the workings of local government, beyond concerns about property-tax increases and scandals is quite limited" (Siegel 2009: 36). The author has plans to delve further into how editorial decisions are made as to which aspects of local politics deserve coverage. Successfully tackling this topic will require interview research with reporters and editors beyond the scope of the present report. Therefore, having noted these coincidental facts, the topic will be set aside to focus on the type of coverage that suburban politics received.

Table 3 Stories by Paper: Total, Core Municipality and Suburbs

City & Election Date	Paper	Days Per Week Publish	Total Stories	Stories Reference Core Municipality Only	Stories Reference Suburbs	Percent Suburbs
Calgary (2010/10/18)						
	Herald	7	229	225	4	1.8
Toronto (2010/10/25)						
	Globe & Mail	6	150	134	16	10.7
	National Post	6	57	50	7	12.3
	Star	7	188	134	46	24.5
Vancouver (2011/11/19)						
	Province	6	55	27	23	41.8
	Sun	6	76	48	28	36.8

In terms of coverage of core municipalities, the majority of coverage focused on mayoral races.

As low as the numbers are for suburban coverage, the reality is actually a bit worse. As Table 4 shows, much of this coverage was not with a unique focus on suburban jurisdictions but as part of stories that looked at issues which spanned the entire CMA. When focus did turn to a specific municipality it was often in the form of coverage of mayoral races and some sort of error or personal impropriety. A notable exception here was *The Calgary Herald* which did profile stories on each ward, its key issues and council candidates as well as a small series of articles which provided similar coverage for the cities larger suburbs.

Table 4 Stories by Paper: Total, Core Municipality and Suburbs

City	Paper	Stories Mentioning Suburbs	Stories Mentioning More than One Suburb	Stories Mentioning Core Municipality As well as Suburb	Stories Mayoral Contest(s) in Suburb(s)
Calgary					
	Herald	4	1	1	
Toronto					
	Globe & Mail	16	5	5	11
	National Post	7	2	2	2
	Star	46	13	20	17
Vancouver					
	Province	23	8	13	2
	Sun	28	17	15	5

### Conclusions and Further Research

If a reader is looking for information on the mayoralty race in a core municipality, Canada's major daily newspapers seem to do a fair job of reporting on these electoral contests. However, this judgment is based solely on volume of coverage not a careful analysis of the issues and theme contained in them. This deeper analysis will have to wait for a future essay. On balance, a suburban voter looking to the major dailies (widely seen as our best available news sources) for information on local politics would face a virtual local blackout. Consequently, this report seems to confirm the conventional wisdom regarding coverage of local politics and elections in Canada's major daily newspapers. However, this conclusion needs to be tempered by reminding the reader that two newspapers which were expected to be strong sources of local news, *The Toronto Sun* and *The Calgary Sun* were not included in this report as their content was removed from the Factiva database prior to completion of the research supporting this report. As the author could not find an electronic archive containing these two Quebecor titles, a manual search employing the reading of microfilm copies of the papers is now under way. Furthermore, while

there was some speculation as to why the results are as they appear involving structural factors of the various political systems, the degree to which populations are concentrated in a CMA's core municipality or defused through its suburbs and the competitiveness of the local media market, confirming such arguments will require interview based research involving journalists and editors, as well as other stakeholders in the newspaper industry which has not been presented in this essay.

If the results of this interim report are subsequently confirmed and it is shown that Canada's major daily newspapers (seen as our best news sources) are not great sources of news for local politics and elections and are particularly weak at covering the suburbs, then there is a serious problem that must be confronted by the scholars who see civic literacy as a key factor in shaping political participation. If our best news sources are not providing the information that citizens need regarding local elections and government, where can they and where do they get this information from? Are weekly free papers (often distributed to suburban homes as an enticement to residents to read the stacks of flyers packed with them), the non-official language media, radio, TV and web sources filling the gap? If not how can this gap be filled? Finally, even if the information regarding local politics and elections is found to be available from other media sources, or can be made available, we have to ask if residents want to pay attention. Answering this final question will require behavioral research into why citizens have or do not have any interest in local politics and election.

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Appendix: The Calgary, Toronto and Vancouver Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs)

Calgary CMA	
City	Pop #
Calgary	988,812
Airdrie	28,927
Beiseker	804
Chestermere	9,923
Cochrane	13,760
Crossfield	2,668
Irricana	1,243
Rocky View	33,173
Tsuu T'ina Nation	Not Provided
<b>Total CMA</b>	<b>1,079,310</b>
<b>Total Non Calgary as %</b>	<b>90,948</b>
<b>Total Non Calgary as %</b>	<b>8.38</b>

Toronto CMA	
City	Pop #
Toronto	2,503,281
<b>Halton Region</b>	
Halton Hills	55,289
Milton	53,939
Oakville	165,613
<b>Simcoe County</b>	
Bradford West	
Gwillimbury	24,039
New Tecumseth	27,701
<b>Dufferin County</b>	
Mono	7,071
Orangeville	26,925
<b>Peele Region</b>	
Brampton	433,806
Caledon	57,050
Mississauga	668,549
<b>York Region</b>	
Aurora	47,629
East Gwillimbury	21,069
Georgina	42,346
King	19,487
Markham	261,573
Newmarket	74,295

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Richmond Hill	162,704
Vaughan	238,866
Whitchurch- Stouffville	24,390
Durham County	
Ajax	90,167
Pickering	87,838
Uxbridge	19,169
Chippewas of Georgina Island (First Nation Not Included)	353
Total CMA	5,113,149
Non Toronto	2,609,868
Non Toronto as %	51.04

## Vancouver CMA

City	Pop
Vancouver	578,041
Anmore	1,785
Belcarra	676
Bowen Island	3,362
Burnaby	202,799
Coquitlam	114,565
Delta	96,723
Langley City	23,606
Langley DM	93,726
Lions Bay	1,328
Maple Ridge	68,949
New Westminister	58,549
North Vancouver City	45,165
North Vancouver DM	82,562
Pitt Meadows	15,623
Port Coquitlam	52,687
Port Moody	27,512
Richmond	174,461
Surrey	394,976
West Vancouver	42,131
White Rock	18,755
Greater Van (uninc.)	11,050
Indian Reserves	7,550

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Total Vancouver CMA	2,116,581
Non-City of Vancouver	1,538,540
Non City % of Pop	72.69

(Source: Statistics Canada 2006 Census).