



## 5. News Editors

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& Thierry Giasson*

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# 5

## News Editors

*Colette Brin and Ryan MacDonald*

In national news media, senior editors supervise and coordinate the election-related work of journalists on the ground and in the newsroom. They determine the attribution of resources and priority topics before and during the campaign. The drive for independence from partisan strategies and the desire to provide relevant content for the audience, in a highly competitive environment and with dwindling resources, lead them to adopt a more proactive role. Their position requires them not only to respond rapidly but also to adopt a broader perspective on the news of the day in order to focus attention on major issues beyond campaign controversies and mishaps.

Les responsables de la couverture électorale dans les médias nationaux supervisent et coordonnent le travail des journalistes sur le terrain et dans la salle de rédaction. Ils décident de l'attribution des ressources et des sujets prioritaires avant et pendant la campagne. La volonté d'indépendance à l'égard des stratégies partisans et le souci de servir l'intérêt public, dans un contexte de forte concurrence et d'effectifs réduits, les amènent à adopter un rôle plus proactif. Leur fonction exige une grande réactivité, mais impose aussi de prendre du recul face à l'actualité, pour ramener l'attention sur les enjeux du scrutin au-delà des incidents de parcours.

**UNDERSTANDING THE WORK** of a news editor requires thinking beyond old notions of how newsrooms operate and the definitions of traditional roles in election campaign coverage. In its most conventional sense, the title of news editor encompasses a variety of roles and tasks, from assigning stories to editing copy to deciding how each news item will be “played” in the final output at the end of the day – newscast or newspaper, website or app. In the digital age, the editor’s job is changing to reflect a general pressure on newsrooms to innovate and adapt to the changing media environment.

At a time of declining advertising revenues and reduced staff levels, especially for newspapers, media companies are faced with a series of labour-intensive challenges. They include the continuous news cycle and immediacy of social media;<sup>1</sup> the reorganization of newsrooms around multimedia production; a growing need to connect and collaborate with audiences; and a diversity of competitors, including magazines and other specialized or niche media, as well as American companies with a Canadian presence, such as *Huffington Post* and the *New York Times*. Alternative or partisan news sites, from *Rebel News* to the *National Observer*, play a marginal role in the Canadian media ecosystem.<sup>2</sup> In early 2019, the government under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced a subsidy program for Canadian journalism, providing \$600 million over five years to qualifying organizations through a labour tax credit, a non-profit component, and a tax credit for subscriptions to online news services. The program was not yet in place when the election was called, but it raised questions about newsroom independence. Would this promise “buy” favourable coverage for the outgoing Liberal government? In Quebec, where the provincial government provided discretionary support for newspapers in 2017, there was ample criticism of the incumbent party in the coverage of the 2018 campaign; however, the provincial Liberals were not returned to office.

As editorial structures shrink and become more strategic, many newspapers are vying to become subscriber businesses rather than focusing solely on obtaining revenue through advertising. To stake

out this ground and to convince readers to pay for online news content, they strive to offer value-added content – exclusive stories as well as unique insights into and perspectives on issues that matter to Canadians. In this context, editors are often tasked with many considerations and decisions that fall outside the field of journalism: audience, metrics, revenue, and marketing among them.<sup>3</sup> Editors often play several roles, including developing products and acting as project managers.<sup>4</sup> They might make a new kind of judgment call: namely, determining what information is worth purchasing.

Whereas editors were once generalists for the most part, there is now a strategic move to put them into topic areas such as health and economics where they can showcase their expertise. This is not entirely new, but it has taken on added relevance in an age of disinformation. In an election, the overseeing editor can be a specialist, with experience in and knowledge of politics, but can also draw on the experience of other specialists in the newsroom. A news editor might be responsible for making many important decisions for the product, be it digital, print, television, or radio, but a specialist editor who has experience and expertise in a particular area will bring that specific knowledge set to a topic. This form of specialization might compensate in part for the decline in beat reporting because of diminishing newsroom resources. However, research suggests that media rely more and more on external expertise from sources and contributors, such as on-air analysts and op-ed writers, than on substantive expertise within the newsroom.<sup>5</sup> Social media also offer a cheap and continuous source of political news.

Preparation for a federal election begins at least a year in advance in a newsroom, with budgets allocated for travel, polling, freelance contributions, and so on. The actual planning of election stories and content starts six months prior to voting day with initial “showcase” assignments. For the *Globe and Mail*, these are intensive and exhaustive profiles of the federal leaders at five thousand words or more. Senior editors from news bureaus across the country along with business and feature sections are involved in these discussions.

The timing for delivery and publication of these stories will be determined later as well as editing and photography – access to leaders being a key consideration.

As the election call approaches, cross-functional team meetings are held in which the opportunity to grow readership through engagement (i.e., interaction with online content) and the potential for new subscribers are discussed. The meetings include revenue, marketing, and subscription acquisition managers with editorial providing the lion's share of input and the other departments reacting to and adapting plans.

During national election campaigns, news media play an assertive, proactive role in “pushing” stories and setting the news agenda, while also dealing with parties' communication strategies, which include data harvesting and social media in addition to the threat of online disinformation.<sup>6</sup> In this context, editors face a significant challenge: they must work to define their organization's vision, strategy, and road map for the campaign. Then they must make it happen – and be willing to throw out all those plans as the campaign develops and changes.

The media are campaigning, in a sense, to establish or maintain their own credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of their audiences and the public. Indeed, academics and political analysts regularly criticize the media's biases, blind spots, and framing of issues such as gender and race during election campaigns.<sup>7</sup> As well, the media are taken to task for treating election campaigns like sports events – a horse race or boxing match for leaders' debates – rather than as an opportunity for substantive discussion of Canadians' concerns and priorities.

During an election campaign, some might expect the media to limit their role to that of stenographer or neutral observer, leaving the campaign to the parties and politicians. But news editors appear to be more and more comfortable embracing an active watchdog function – which includes independent investigation, fact-checking, and critical analysis – even during this period when the stakes are high.<sup>8</sup>

## Duties in an Election Campaign

Our primary focus in this chapter is on national news media organizations such as broadcasters CBC/Radio-Canada, CTV, TVA, and Global; newspapers *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Toronto Star*, and *La Presse*; and national news agency Canadian Press.<sup>9</sup> Although local newsrooms do provide coverage of local issues, designated ridings, and leaders when they are in town, they typically have fewer resources to cover the campaign as a whole in a systematic fashion, and their resources are dwindling more rapidly.<sup>10</sup>

The largest national newsrooms usually appoint a senior editor as the “election overseer,” whose responsibilities include not only advance planning for the campaign but also coordination between reporters and editors working full time on the campaign and those on other beats, such as business, energy, environment, and so on, who might contribute specialized perspectives. Generally, an overseeing editor will be a senior manager in the organization – someone who can work with editors in all departments to assign tasks if necessary and always to be nimble to what arises during the campaign.

The establishment of fixed-date elections in Canada over a decade ago has provided news editors with more time to plan their campaign strategies. Key topics and potential swing and bellwether ridings are identified; regular contributors and analysts are booked; and features for weekend editions, fact-checking units, live coverage of debates, and of course the election night itself are put together.<sup>11</sup> This is naturally more precarious in a minority government when there is uncertainty about the election date. Editors also coordinate investigative and other in-depth stories that can be released before and during the campaign. However, during the five weeks or so between the issuing of the writ and election day, many editorial decisions have to be made on the fly, for unexpected events within or outside the political bubble can intervene in the campaign agenda.

Covering simultaneously the electoral campaigns of numerous political parties is a delicate and deliberate balancing act. The

importance of each political party and its leader in the overall coverage is determined by a combination of factors. Beyond the news organization's commitment to fairness, this assessment encompasses each party's perceived strength throughout the country, measured by seats in Parliament at dissolution and potential gains in the election as indicated by voting intentions and seat projections provided by polls and aggregators. Editors are attentive to shifts in public opinion as the campaign progresses, especially after the leaders' debates and in the last few days before the vote. French-language media, whose audiences are concentrated in Quebec, cover the Bloc Québécois as intensively as the Liberal and Conservative Parties.

Some editors decide not to send reporters on the leaders' tours, which are expensive. In 2019, the price was \$11,500 for a seat on the Conservative plane, \$27,000 for the Liberal plane, and \$55,000 for the NDP plane. Following the tours provides, in their view, a low-quality form of journalism and little added value for their audiences. For some organizations, getting on the ground allows for stories to be defined by citizens in different parts of the country, to get a more authentic sense of voters' concerns, as opposed to allowing politicians to frame issues in daily news briefings.

Despite some distrust of public opinion polls within newsrooms, the data and analysis provided by a pollster or aggregator are often too tempting to pass up as sources of news independent of partisan strategies, especially in a context of limited staffing. For budgetary reasons, many organizations enter into cooperative agreements with a polling company, such as *Globe and Mail*–CTV–Nanos or TVA–Léger. Newspaper editors must also decide which party to endorse at the end of the campaign – or whether to publish an endorsement. Editorial endorsements are generally the purview of senior management and considered an opportunity to show leadership as well as to understand what audiences believe is important. However, they are polarizing and can backfire. Alternatively, an editorial board can engage in a series of critiques or assessments of

political positions and platforms and offer judgments without endorsing a particular leader or party.

In retrospect, there are missed opportunities in every campaign. At the *Globe and Mail*, one of them was not identifying the resurgence of the Bloc Québécois earlier in the 2019 campaign. However, in an election that turned out to reveal regional divisions in Canada, there was a substantive discussion about Alberta in the *Globe and Mail* and other media outlets.

If media focus only on the ridings that can lead to victory, then they are buying into the strategy of the politicians. Bringing to the fore issues not addressed by the parties and leaders themselves is possibly the most important contribution of media coverage during an election. A significant part of the editor's job is to ensure that the media lead the coverage and do not simply follow the priorities of parties. Editors strive to establish a constructive agenda around policy issues outside those that politicians want to discuss. In some cases, such as third-party registration and campaign funding, journalists questioned whether existing legislation is sufficient.

The threat of disinformation is a growing concern in election campaigns, largely because of the political climate in the United States and the role of social media, especially Facebook, and Google in disseminating news. Several news organizations assign reporters to verify politicians' statements and to debunk hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and other types of false content circulating online. At mid-campaign, it appeared that the volume of so-called fake news was relatively low in Canada.<sup>12</sup>

In the final weeks of the campaign, the overseeing editor begins planning election night coverage by establishing an early schedule of stories and resources and then discusses the plan with other senior editors. The plan evolves over time with these conversations as stories and additional reporting and editing resources are added.

The overall challenge of an election for a news editor is one of organization. Reporters in the field require adequate support at

their home bases so that assumptions and policies can be tested and questioned with up-to-date, comprehensive, and accurate information. Committing other resources to things such as in-depth profiles of the leaders requires planning several months in advance to allow journalists to gain access as well as to dig deeply into the biographies of politicians, especially party leaders.

Elections also bring business opportunities, which necessitate cross-functional planning among teams – from editorial to marketing to revenue. On the product side, new distribution channels, such as pop-up newsletters, can be launched to allow greater exposure to content through the election period and help to drive engagement, a key metric for most media companies. In the digital economy and especially on social media, “engagement” includes any type of user interaction with content: clicks, likes, shares, comments, and time spent. For publications such as the *Globe and Mail*, which increasingly focuses on digital subscribers for revenue, free content can drive engagement, whereas paywalled content serves to retain and attract subscribers. Senior editors rely on instinct and intuition to make decisions on subscriber-only content; in other cases, the decisions are algorithmic. Exclusive stories naturally go behind the paywall; stories that encourage a broad debate on policy can be accessed for free.

## Overcoming Obstacles

A major challenge for news editors is to keep a broader view of the campaign as it evolves beyond the daily stories and incidents that often constitute distractions rather than useful information for voters. News editors have a responsibility to filter the noise and resist the urge simply to echo and amplify what other media might be reporting or whatever is drawing the most attention.

At the midway point of an election campaign – as the initial jolt of adrenalin begins to subside and the reality of the many weeks of coverage sets in – an existential angst begins to take hold in the news editor’s mind. Is our coverage fair? Is it important to

Canadians? Are we setting the agenda? Does our coverage matter? Do people care? Journalism can be a lonely pursuit, even more so for those tasked with making key decisions that can affect political campaigns. Whereas reporters are tasked with finding stories and reporting them, editors decide whether to publish them and when to do so. The decision to publish a contentious story requires discussion of a central question: is it relevant to the election and in the public interest? This discussion takes place within a mini-cabinet – the editor-in-chief, the deputy editor, the elections editor, and the Ottawa bureau chief. Other senior editors might be surveyed for their opinions and observations.

In the 2019 federal election, two examples of past actions by party leaders, and the implications for their leadership and character, are worth considering. Both, it could be argued, were hiding in plain sight for Canadian journalists. However, they also raise the question of the media's role in conducting and vetting opposition research on candidates.

The first case was Justin Trudeau's decision to wear brownface and blackface multiple times before becoming an MP and his admission during the campaign that they comprised racist acts. The story broke on social media the night of 18 September. *Time* magazine published it, and Trudeau quickly confirmed the story. For the *Globe and Mail*, there was no doubt that the decision of a federal leader to act in this manner was newsworthy – the discussions ranged from a front-page, above-the-fold story without a picture to showcasing the picture as main art. As the story quickly evolved, and it was revealed that Trudeau had worn makeup to change his skin colour three times (and could not recount how many more times), the decision was clear. All available pictures would be published, and the story would lead all platforms. The story and first photograph originated from the yearbook of a private school in Vancouver – something that Canadian media could have readily obtained had they been tipped off or curious enough to investigate Trudeau's time as a teacher. The incidents raised questions for many organizations about how much reporters really cared to dig into

his past. As eventually revealed, it was not a Canadian journalist who discovered the photograph but a member of the school community who released it to an American periodical.

The second case was less explosive but illustrates the kind of journalism that could have exposed the Trudeau brownface and blackface incidents and subsequent stories. Early on, while *Globe and Mail* journalists were researching an extensive profile of Conservative leader Andrew Scheer, it became clear that one of the few professional credentials that he highlighted was questionable. Two reporters took several weeks to research his past in an attempt to understand Scheer. He had spent almost his entire adult life in politics, and it was unclear what experience he had outside politics. Did Scheer really sell insurance in Saskatchewan – and, if he did, was he licensed? Ultimately, the answer was unclear, became less clear during the campaign, and eventually became a meme used against him. The question for *Globe and Mail* editors was whether or not, in a five-thousand-word profile, this bit of information should be pulled out as a stand-alone story. In an election defined by constant “drive-by assassinations,” the decision was to allow readers to absorb this detail within the context of the broader story. Other media picked up the story, however, and criticism of other aspects of Scheer’s political career brought forward by Liberals on social media, such as his prior statements on abortion and same-sex marriage, was widely covered as well.

However, questions remain about the Canadian journalism community’s insufficient research on Trudeau’s past and, more generally, the importance of investigating the details of the lives of party leaders and other candidates, whether incumbents or challengers. Did the media effectively play their watchdog role, “monitoring and holding the powerful accountable,” as opposed to the undiscerning aggressiveness of the attack dog and the unwavering loyalty of the lapdog?<sup>13</sup>

Suspensions of partisan bias in the media often arise from different points of the political spectrum – a fact sometimes cited by journalists as proof that their work is balanced. Canadian journalists hold

a strong professional commitment to impartiality and believe that they are insulated from political pressures, at least in international comparison.<sup>14</sup> A recent expert survey on the Canadian media system suggests that most organizations tend to lean right on economic issues, with more pluralism on social matters, specifically on religious diversity.<sup>15</sup>

The media's proactive role in elections raises the eternal debate of accountability and regulation, without limiting press freedom. The Canadian public broadcaster is independently monitored to ensure that its coverage is fair and accurate,<sup>16</sup> and the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission provides guidelines for election coverage based on the Broadcasting Act and other regulatory documents. Moreover, the National NewsMedia Council and Conseil de presse du Québec, as well as ombudspersons and public editors in certain organizations, receive and respond to complaints regarding ethics in journalism. However, as this chapter attests, national news editors continue to play a significant role in defining the campaign agenda, despite their newsrooms' limited resources and the fact that Canadians consume news increasingly, for free, on social media.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Hermida, "Twittering the News."
- <sup>2</sup> Taylor Owen et al., *Polarization and Its Discontents* found that consumption of partisan sources is low in Canada, even among heavy users of social media.
- <sup>3</sup> On metrics, see Blanchett Neheli, "News by Numbers."
- <sup>4</sup> Duffy, "Out of the Shadows"; Hollifield, "Newsroom Management."
- <sup>5</sup> Reich and Godler, "The Disruption of Journalistic Expertise."
- <sup>6</sup> Blumler and Esser, "Mediatization as a Combination of Push and Pull Forces"; Cushion and Jackson, "Introduction to Special Issue about Election Reporting."
- <sup>7</sup> "The Media and Canadian Elections."
- <sup>8</sup> On the watchdog function, see Nai, "Watchdog Press."
- <sup>9</sup> Timmons, "How the Canadian Press Is Using Bots to Build the Future of Election Coverage."

- <sup>10</sup> Lindgren, “What the Death of Local News Means for the Federal Election.”
- <sup>11</sup> On fact-checking units, see Graves, *Deciding What’s True*.
- <sup>12</sup> Flamini, “Canadian Fact-Checkers Are Pleasantly Surprised.”
- <sup>13</sup> Nai, “Watchdog Press.”
- <sup>14</sup> Rollwagen et al., “Just Who Do Canadian Journalists Think They Are?”
- <sup>15</sup> Thibault et al., “Assessing Politicization in Media Systems.”
- <sup>16</sup> The Centre d’études sur les médias has conducted this research for federal and provincial Quebec elections since 2006.

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