STEPHEN HARPER’S VICTORY:
The Prime Minister had reason to celebrate. Journalists covering his campaign did not.

by Chris Cobb
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A succession of minority governments in Ottawa, the focus on the U.S. primaries and then the subsequent presidential election south of the border forced media outlets into a default position of election-readiness. Presumably, this state of mind should have encouraged reflection about improved coverage.

In past editions of Media, we have run stories about angst-ridden editors and reporters decrying the horse race coverage while acknowledging listeners, viewers and readers are ill-served by this first-past-the-post coverage. So what changed? Not much, argues Simon Doyle.

The sharp decline of the global economy and its effect on Canada caught the parties and journalists by surprise. Media outlets seemed unable to adapt their coverage to reflect this reality. Doyle writes:

“News audiences weren’t told about their voting options—they were told what the polls were saying about their options. Voters weren’t told about which policies were intelligent public policy—they were told which policies would sell or never sell...Voters weren’t told about the leaders running for office and what they believed in—they were told which leaders were seen as strong or perceived as weak.”

Chris Cobb echoes this view, observing, somewhat incredulously: “Why so much of our news media’s coverage of Election 2008 took this poll-crazed direction is difficult to fathom, but by focusing on the polls rather than what might be driving them we lost the plot.”

That plot should have been about real policies in addition to the economy, such as: Afghanistan, and whether the 2011 deadline for withdrawal is realistic; the environment, and how to square the environmental imperative to stem the emission of greenhouse gases with the economic imperative for companies, especially in the Oil Sands, to remain competitive; the importance of government, and the role it should play to enhance food safety in the wake of the listeriosis outbreak that has, as of the printing of this edition, claimed 20 lives.

It would seem that elections have become bad occasions for politicians to address these hard questions. However, there’s no reason why media outlets should refrain from pressing them and turning those well-reasoned responses, inadequate responses, or non-responses into stories that dominate the front pages, and lead newscasts. There were...
exceptions, to be sure. There always are. But policy-driven stories were in the minority. Instead, we were treated to a parade of gaffes: Agriculture minister Gerry Ritz’s tasteless joke during the listeriosis outbreak; a Conservative Party political aid’s insensitive comments about native people; the pooping puffin; and, the topper, the full airing of former Liberal leader, Stéphane Dion’s attempt to answer a convoluted question.

In her piece about the fascino that involved the encounter between Dion and CTV news anchor, Steve Murphy, Elizabeth McMillan delves into the controversy, the debate around the appropriateness of the question, the ethical considerations of breaking a promise to withhold airing of the leader’s retakes; and the way the issue was reported.

In a moment of reflection, Murphy concedes: “I can see it from both sides, that is the reason I was and am conflicted. I think there is a reason to do it and a case that could be made for not doing it.”

With Stephen J.A. Ward’s column, we shift to the American contest and the historic election of Barack Obama. Some 44 years after civil rights workers fought for the right to vote and paid the price with their lives, he is poised to become the 44th president of the United States. Even against this monumental backdrop, the coverage (especially major broadcasters such as CNN) was dominated by personalities such as John McCain’s Republican vice-presidential running mate, Sarah Palin, and her inability to grasp key concepts during interviews, or whether whites would ever vote for a biracial man.

Ward writes: “How is it possible that that public discourse, in one of the most advanced countries in the world, can be so, well, dumb, intolerant and ideological?”

Next, we turn to one of the key reasons that drew us into this business: the ability to tell good, and sometimes great, stories. The journalists who tell us how they got their stories take us behind the scenes. In his series, The Joy of Parking, CBC Radio reporter, Jack Julian, explains how he obtained the parking ticket database maintained by the Halifax Regional Municipality. The records include the time and date of the ticket, a location, car makes and models, an offence code, plus fine and court information. All the tickets were from 2003 to June of this year.

One of the more intriguing tales in Jack’s series concerned the dilemma the municipality faces attempting to pursue offenders who live outside Halifax. “With no address to mail a court summons, he writes, “the tickets sit in legal limbo. It gives drivers with out-of-province plates nearly diplomatic-style parking immunity.”

Jeffrey Simpson, another reporter from Halifax who works for The Chronicle Herald, received news that reporters welcome: that an institution has decided to take action in the wake of a story that they’ve published or aired. In this case, it involves restaurant inspections.

In 2006, he wrote a series about the secretive world of food-safety inspections. Simpson exposed deficiencies in the system, including shoddy record keeping and few penalties for places flouting the rules. He wrote about his behind-the-scenes struggles to obtain material for the series in the Winter 2007 edition of Media, as well as the positive reaction the stories garnered.

Now, the province has decided to publish information about the restaurants they frequent by posting online “a database that provides people with access to the food-safety inspections of all restaurants, supermarkets and other types of eateries.” Simpson writes that although these new measures fall short of requiring restaurants to post inspection reports in their businesses, they constitute a step in the right direction.

Presumably, this state of mind should have encouraged reflection about improved coverage.

“A department official told me the food-safety division had wanted a new computer system for years but never had the money to make that happen—until my series of stories was published.”

Then, there are accounts of Canadian Association of Journalists award-winners. Though the awards were handed out last May, the descriptions of how the journalists obtained their stories are timeless, and provide a constant source of inspiration to working journalists and journalism students.

The Globe and Mail’s, Greg McArthur, explains how he and Garry Dimmock from the Ottawa Citizen told the fascinating story that has all the suspense of a classic thriller.

“Under the Witness Protection Program Act, it is illegal for us to disclose the identity of the murderer, or the circumstances behind his horrific slaying,” writes McArthur. “All we are legally allowed to say is that the murder took place somewhere in Canada over the past eight years, and that we wanted to write about the man who committed it.”

McArthur’s and Dimmock won the newspaper category and the overall award for best investigative story.

You can read the rest of the write-ups from award-winners by visiting Media’s Web page at: http://www.caj.ca/mediamag/past-issues.html and then selecting the “Summer 2008 Awards” link.

And, finally, a word about Media’s facelift. Media’s image has been updated and improved, thanks to the great work of Rafia Mahli, whose full-time job is laying out the Ottawa-based Hill Times and Embassy newweeklies.

Rafia explains that she “stuck to a really clean interior. There were too many fussy details in the old Media that I think made it look less impressive from a design standpoint.” Agreed!

We hope you continue to enjoy the content—and the new look. As usual, you’re encouraged to share your thoughts about the articles, or issues you believe merit our attention. You can reach me at: david.mckie@cbc.ca.
This is about a sentence.
It can be short. See—four words.
Or it can be a long convoluted one that really doesn’t tell readers very much of anything as it meanders along until it eventually runs out of steam at, oh, 40, 50 or 100 words—yes, some people write such lengthy sentences—and does nothing to advance the story or enlighten readers other than to take up way too much space because the writer is mesmerized by the words. That’s 69 words.

That’s long. See—two words.

In the spring 2008 issue of Media Magazine, I talked about tight writing. This time, I want to talk about sentence length—a single element of tight writing.

Sentences should be shorter rather than longer. Clarity is the overriding goal. They should be conversational. They should generally follow a simple structure of subject, verb, object. Every word should have a function. And writers should get in the habit of rereading and rewriting.

When I have nothing better to do between sips of coffee, I count words. If I’m reading a story and find myself struggling to get through sentences, I count—or leave the story.

Invariably, I find that some writers love stringing words…lots of words…together in one sentence. They have an aversion to periods. And invariably, I also find they love brackets and dashes. Sometimes writers will combine all of these tools to construct unwieldy sentences of more than 100 words, clobbering the reader with a whole bunch of ideas in a single sentence.

Try reading this one aloud without stopping to catch your breath:

Claiming the company had grown to the extent that the balance of competitive forces in program buying in Canada is out of whack and needs rejigging, the company is using what began as a simple call for new Ottawa broadcasting licence applications to leverage its pitch for regional Ontario distribution of its local Hamilton affiliate, bumping its penetration to 92% of the province versus its current 61%, and building an Ontario presence strong enough to absorb the costs of buying national rights for foreign programming.

Eighty-five words. The story—a classic from my file of looong sentences—also contains sentences of 80 words, 73, and one exceeding 100 words. Because of such lengthy sentences, the story is difficult to understand.

I’m reminded of an anecdote about a crusty old editor who was turned off by the lengthy flowery prose of his newspaper’s interns. He called one of them to his desk, typed out a few lines of…., and said: “Here, these are periods. Use ’em. And when you run out, I’ve got more!”

Writers would be wise to take heed and to adopt the period as one of their best friends.

Broadcast writers well know the pitfalls of a long sentence. They also know the benefits of reading their words aloud. They don’t want an on-air announcer to stumble over the words or to gasp for air part-way through a sentence.

Print people should know that readers don’t want to be put through such aggrava-

**For every word writers add to a sentence, they increase the workload for readers.**
Ralph Williams considers it a sport with a “social twist to it” to break the law and hunt for trees, such as firs, cedars, spruce and yews and many more giants of the forest that lurk in the Vancouver area watersheds. Williams, who is afraid that these trees that are as old as 1,000 years are being ignored and may fall victim to the chainsaws of loggers—and he has reason to fear the worst—climbs fences and illegally enters restricted areas to compile an inventory of these trees.

Both sentences—41 and 48 words, respectively—are jam-packed with lots of detail, redundant words and too many prepositions. The story is better told in a more conversational way with shorter, clearer sentences. Here’s how the writer wrote it. Note the variety of sentence lengths and the easy pace of the story:

Ralph Williams breaks the law to hunt trees. Big trees. Firs, cedars, spruce and yews and many more giants that lurk in the Vancouver area watersheds. Williams is afraid these trees are being ignored and may fall to the chainsaws of loggers. So he climbs fences and illegally enters restricted areas to compile an inventory of 1,000-year-old trees. “It’s a sport, in a way, with a social twist to it.”

Here are the sentence lengths: Eight. Two. Fifteen. Sixteen. Sixteen. Twelve. This doesn’t mean that a string of short sentences is the answer to all your problems. You don’t want to overdo it. See Dick. See Jane. See Dick run. Too stilted.

Clear, simple writing with a sense of rhythm is about varying the length of sentences and being more aware that the longer they are, the harder they are to understand. It doesn’t mean the writer couldn’t have a longer sentence in the passage above, but he has succeeded in developing a conversational style.

I’m hoping you’ll see and hear it as good writing at work. The writer embraces the concept of one idea per sentence, making sure never to give readers too much to digest in one gulp. Just “snapshots,” allowing readers to create visual images of the action one shot at a time. Writers perform a service when they slow down the story so readers can “see” it better. But, hey, let’s not be obsessive about the one-idea-per-sentence thing. The key word is “variety” in sentence lengths.

I like the advice of a writing coach who says if you give readers a long sentence, treat them to a short one. Sentence length is about creating a natural flow to a story. Here are a few examples to show how sentence length has a direct impact on story rhythm. The first is a story about a woman’s love for a thoroughbred jump horse that dies of cancer:

She buried Drifter at home and got a bronze plaque for him. It reads, “Ninety or nothing.” Drifter wouldn’t have it any other way. He’d go like 90. Or he wouldn’t go at all. He was kind of a bonehead, she admitted, but he was one of a kind.

And this one about a woman who had been shot:

The first bullet shattered the bones of her forearm and tore

Writers perform a service when they slow down the story so readers can “see” it better.

Some tips to tighter sentences:

- Re-read your story, focusing on making sentences shorter.
- Look for clutter. Remove redundant or unnecessary words that add nothing to understanding the sentence or the story. (Examples: end result; completely destroyed; total number; serious threat.)
- Read your story aloud to see if you stumble over words or phrases. If so, rephrase.
- On deadline, keep those periods handy as a quick-fix for long sentences.
- Remember: If you give readers a long sentence, treat them to a short one.
- Reduce attribution. If you know something to be true, no need to attribute. If it’s clear to readers who you are quoting (because of an earlier reference), no need for attribution.
- Use active verbs. (See the example beginning at the bottom of page eight of the woman shot.)
- Choose short, simple words instead of long, difficult words.
- Avoid little qualifiers (very, extremely, quite, rather). From Strunk and White: “These are the leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words.” Wow … heavy stuff!
- Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite is to a journalist what location, location, location is to a real estate agent.
- Beware of dashes and brackets. If they make sentences too long, consider a separate sentence.
- Read The Elements of Style (Strunk and White), On Writing Well (Zins-ser), or any other favourite book on writing just to remind you of the pitfalls and to encourage you to strive for better writing.
through the muscles. Its force spun her around like a music-box ballerina. The second one hit her in the back like a sledgehammer, knocking her to the ground. More bullets hit her, so many and so quickly she couldn’t count them. The doctors found five.

And finally, a story about a man shot and killed by police investigating a domestic dispute:

Smith was well known on the street. They knew him by the spinning tires of his truck. They knew him by the rage on his face. They knew him by the family fights echoing from the troubled home.

These snippets show the hard work writers put into constructing their sentences one by one. Clear. Strong verbs. Active voice. Rhythm. Conversational rather than formal. Specific rather than vague. Rewriting to get it just right.

Sometimes, however, writers can be overwhelmed by the magnitude of a story and its many complex facets. The result can be too many long sentences strung together.

Israeli and Palestinian officials edged toward a security deal in the Gaza Strip and Egyptian mediators coerced Palestinian militants toward a ceasefire agreement as one of the most violent weeks in the conflict ended in a flurry of peacekeeping efforts. After Israeli Major-General Amos Gilad met Palestinian security chief Mohammed Dahlan on Saturday, their subordinates met into the early hours of this morning to work out details of a plan under which Israel gradually would withdraw from Bethlehem and parts of the Gaza Strip, putting security back in the hands of Palestinians after months of Israeli occupation, the Israeli Defence Ministry said. "I'm taking this as a serious proposal from the United States," said Ghassan Khatib, a Palestinian cabinet minister, referring to the Gaza security plan pushed by the United States in its attempts to have the so-called road map to peace implemented.

This is too much information squeezed into three sentences that are 40, 62 and 41 words long. Writers who adopt the general concept of one idea per sentence give readers a fighting chance at understanding the information, especially in such complex stories as the one above.

Re-read the passage above and mentally insert periods to slow down the amount of information readers receive in every sentence. William Zinsser, in On Writing Well, offers this advice. Often, he says, the problem can be solved by simply getting rid of it. Look at the troublesome sentence or part of a sentence and ask, “Do I need it at all?”

Probably you don’t, says Zinsser. “It was trying to do an unnecessary job all along—that’s why it was giving you so much grief. Remove it and watch the afflicted sentence spring to life and breathe normally. It’s the quickest possible cure and very often the best.”

The last word goes to Zinsser: “Writers must constantly ask: ‘What am I trying to say?’ Surprisingly often they don’t know. Then they must look at what they have written and ask: ‘Have I said it? Is it clear to someone encountering the subject for the first time?’ If it’s not, some fuzz has worked its way into the machinery. “...Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it’s because it is hard. It’s one of the hardest things people do.”

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The good news is that the Web keeps changing and Web tools keep improving. The bad news is that it can be hard to keep up to date with all the improvements—even with your favourite and well-used sites like Google, the New York Times and BBC. So here is a quick-hit list of some of the tweaks and tune-ups you may have missed.

Google Improvements

Google News (news.google.com) remains the best news search site. Now Google News has offered a new feature, listed on the left-hand column of its news page. When you put in a name such as “Colin Powell” or “Sarah Palin” and click the Quotes link, you receive a selection of recent news quotes from that person. This is a faster way of getting the quotes you need without having to go through all the articles. Another useful improvement is the Google News Timeline available at news.google.com/archivesearch.

Click on the Archive News Search button in Google news and then, when you enter your keywords, select “Timeline.” This will give you results along with a sliding timeline: you can select a year or month to narrow your news archive search to a particular time period: year, month and specific date. The best search engine on the Web is also trying to take over the browser market. Let’s hope most of you have already abandoned Internet Explorer for the much more flexible and user-friendly Firefox (Go to www.journalismnet.com/tips to read about why Firefox is a better browser for journalists.). Now you might want to check out Google Chrome. (www.google.com/chrome)

As Google says, “Like the classic Google homepage, Google Chrome is clean and fast. It gets out of your way and gets you where you want to go.” Not as sophisticated as Firefox—at least not yet—Chrome is still sparkling. You can search from the address bar. Plus, when you just start typing a Web address, you will get suggestions for both searches and Web pages. There are thumbnails of your top sites, and you can access your favourite pages instantly from any new tab. Want to bookmark a Web page? Just click the star icon at the left edge of the address bar and you’re done.

Some Google tools are still in the testing stage but you can try them out at Google Experiments at www.google.com/experimental. Why settle for results in Google the way everyone else gets them? Here you can pick and sign up for one of several “Alternative views” of your Google results—a timeline, a map, or in context of other information such as key dates, locations and measurements. Finally, why settle for a Google search page when you can personalize your own page with news headlines choose, weather, maps, even games. Think how often you go to Google. Why not have your news and vital information handy as well? You can personalize your Google page at www.google.com/ig.

News Sites

The two top news media sites on the Web—the New York Times and the BBC—are always adding new features or improving their fare.

Check out the New York Times Topics at topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/index.html for an alphabetical listing of thousands of news topics. It has news, reference and archival information, photos, graphics, audio and video files dating back to 1981.

The Times also has a popular news blog called the The New York Times Lede at thelede.blogs.nytimes.com. It now has new relevance with the current economic crisis—plenty of background and links to breaking stories, even from rival news sources.

Similarly, the BBC offers its own Topics page at BBC In depth at news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/default.stm. Dozens of BBC news dossiers from 1998 to the present. An excellent way to get background, leads and timelines on major stories. The Beeb also provides a selection of the latest top video and audio stories plus background dossiers and links to its major programs at BBC Video and Audio at news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/video_and_audio/default.stm. And if you are really pressed for time, there is even a single click for a one-minute world news summary.

As always, this article and other columns are available online with links to all the sites mentioned on the JournalismNet Tips page at www.journalismnet.com/tips

Web sites mentioned in this article:

- news.google.com
- google.com/experimental
- google.com/chrome
- journalismnet.com/tips
- thelede.blogs.nytimes.com
- news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/default.stm
It was a campaign all about the economy, the pundits said. Choose your leader now, Canada. Then, in the final push before the Thanksgiving weekend, CTV aired a video of Stéphane Dion struggling to understand a question about the economy. Funny thing was we never heard his answer (See Elizabeth McMillan’s article on page 14). Instead, the networks treated us to a little candid camera showing him re-start an interview three times. Sure, it was embarrassing for Dion, but damn, it was good TV.

The 2008 federal election campaign—at least the first half of it—saw some of the weirdest campaign coverage yet. The media put on its show, but it’s not clear who was watching, other than ourselves. Audiences are never as steeped in the news as journalists, a point they easily forget. The result is campaign coverage focused more on the horse race and the quality of the campaigns than policies. A lot of the coverage in 2008 was so post-modern, self-reflexive and specialized that newspaper readers and television viewers weren’t treated as voters.

They were treated as initiated spectators of an obscure and complex sport. News audiences weren’t told about their voting options—they were told what the polls were saying about their options. Voters weren’t told about which policies were intelligent public policy—they were told which policies would sell or never sell, which were marketed effectively or poorly. Voters weren’t told about the leaders running for office and what they believed in—they were told which leaders were seen as strong or perceived as weak. At the start of the campaign, voters heard less about the leaders and party policies than about the campaign “gaffes” (pooping puffins) of staffers and candidates, some of them resurfacing after several years (plagiarized speeches). It was all a lot of pre-game analysis.

The day the story broke about former agriculture minister Gerry Ritz’s offensive death by a thousand “cold cuts” remark, I flipped between CBC Newsworld and CTV NewsNet to see if there were other issues making news. The networks played the same Ritz footage repeatedly, showing him trying to get away from a bold CP reporter at the airport. Party leaders that day were asked to respond to Ritz’s leaked comments (which originated from a government conference call in August). They weren’t asked so much about the Liberal Party’s $70-billion infrastructure plan announced that day—and this at a time when cities are broke and critical infrastructure is going to seed.

Come to think of it, there was another big story turning over the newreels that day. Former transport minister Lawrence Cannon’s assistant, Darlene Lannigan, told aboriginal protesters that she didn’t mind them protest-
Feature: Election 2008

It would be nice if most voters were as interested in federal politics as political reporters.

and stump speeches were staged and in the presence of Conservative supporters (i.e. not open to the public); the leader did not do scrums (the RCMP on one occasion was instructed to clear reporters from an area because they were asking questions at a photo-op); and candidates and “human props” present at announcements were scuttled away by party operatives before the media could talk to them.

Gaffes are one thing. But citizens care little about cheap gaffes and excessive horse-race analysis. The news in campaign 2008 was predictably dominated by mistakes, polls, and front-runner discussion.

A friend recently told me that his father—let’s say a typical retired voter—learned more about party policy from the English-language televised leaders’ debate than he did from news reports throughout the campaign. This observation reminded me of a clever editorial cartoon in The Globe and Mail on Sept. 23. It depicted a pack of tenacious reporters chasing “gaffes” around a dog-racing track. In the bleachers was a single spectator—who was asleep.

Polling

While interesting, it’s difficult to know how much public service the national public opinion polls served. In campaign 2008, each news outlet, like in previous elections, relied on its own polling firm and its exclusive numbers to try and tell voters who was ahead and who was behind. The Globe went so far as to track party support in 45 swing ridings in Quebec, Ontario and B.C. In fact, this may be more useful to voters than national polls. Polling numbers don’t really serve any practical purpose for those who intend to vote strategically unless the polls provide levels of support in specific electoral districts.

Polls trying to determine the “winner” of a leaders’ debate similarly relfocussed discussion on the front-runners. And this, after the leaders had just finished discussing policy for two hours. Readers didn’t waste any time taking the Globe to task over its leaders’ debate story. On Oct. 4, one letter-writer wondered whether Green Party Leader Elizabeth May’s exclusion from the newspaper’s front-page story on the debates meant that her participation was “merely decorative” and “a conspiracy of silence.” Another letter-writer contrasted the newspaper’s coverage of Julie Couillard with that of May. “I guess this tells us just what a girl has to do to get the Globe’s attention,” wrote Victoria Foote in Toronto.

Some of it was good

The coverage in 2008 wasn’t all bad. Some newspapers provided in-depth coverage. And it was good to see the economy, and how the leaders would approach it, emerge as a central campaign issue following the debates. That drew the media away from the “Google gaffe campaign” toward a serious discussion on government fiscal policy. Some even said it was like watching two campaigns: one before the debates, and one after. But CTV’s release of the Dion tape ended all of that serious discussion about the economy and reminded us what election campaigns are really about: entertainment.

Campaign gaffes, six-year-old pot-smoking videos, or analysis of daily, rolling public opinion polls, don’t do voters much of a service when they could be learning about their national leaders, their platforms, and their political views. It would be nice if most voters were as interested in federal politics as political reporters.

Imagine that they’re so well-informed about policy that the horse race just becomes the added fun part. But that isn’t the case, and if voters can’t rely on the news for solid information about policy and their leaders, how are they supposed to learn anything? Read the party platforms? Not only does Joe the voter have to register, get the necessary papers, ensure he has photo I.D., and then take time out of his day to find a polling station and mark an X on a ballot, he also has to read three or four policy platforms. Democracy is looking less appealing to many, especially those who’d rather be playing their XBoxes.
The Conservatives called the 2008 federal election because they thought they could win a majority.

Voters didn’t want an election and the Conservatives, who had promised not to have one, so soon, had no issues they were interested in debating. They cruised through most of the soulless campaign with the single, ultimately successful, strategy of undermining Stéphane Dion, who was unable to muster an effective counter attack.

When the prospect of their expected majority began to evaporate, they were forced into releasing a hastily cobbled together platform in the last week of the campaign. (Remember the Layton zinger during the leaders’ debate: “Where’s your platform? Under your sweater?”). There were issues at the start of the campaign, of course, but the Conservatives—and Liberals—chose not to seriously debate one of the most important of them: Afghanistan.

We are a nation at war, losing soldiers, ruining the lives of many others and spending billions of dollars on the military and its mission on the other side of the world. The Conservatives had boxed the anemic Liberals in a political corner on the Afghanistan issue leaving the Dion campaign with little room to maneuver. That being said, there were hard questions that needed to be asked about the Afghanistan mission, including Canada’s realistic ability to meet its 2011 exit deadline. News media chose not to force the issue.

Faced with a limp, issueless campaign, save for Dion’s muddled but at least principled Green Shift plan, media managers decided to fill the policy vacuum with horse-race polls and horse-race pollsters.

Polling mania was everywhere, everyday. CBC, which swore off polls during the last federal election (though that didn’t stop its reporting on other people’s surveys), came back into the game full force.

In coverage of modern election campaigns, it’s unrealistic for news media not to poll or report on polls. But media polls are typically done on the cheap, or for free, in exchange for the profile it brings the pollsters. The samples are usually too small to accurately measure regional trends and too superficial to accurately reflect important nuances in the national picture.

Reliable, accurate polling is time consuming, detailed and expensive. Political parties do it and use the results to guide their campaigns, but news media polls are entertainment by comparison and rather than playing on the front page with screaming definitive headlines would often be more appropriately positioned alongside the horoscopes, crosswords and Sudoku puzzles.

We get what we pay for, but neglect to tell our readers, listeners and viewers about the data’s possible shortcomings. Instead, we dutifully chant the ‘considered accurate…plus or minus’ mantra that few people understand, but makes the vendor feel somehow cleansed.

Why so much of our news media’s coverage of Election 2008 took this poll-crazed direction is difficult to fathom, but by focusing on the polls rather than what might be driving them we lost the plot.

Polls have traditionally been used sparingly and as a guide to how well the policies being debated by the politicians are being received by voters. The pattern of extensive coverage and analysis of the issues and platforms, followed by a check-in once a week with the pollsters is reasonable. What’s unreasonable, at best, is when the polls become the main story throughout the entire campaign.

Perhaps we got sucked into the Harper groove they had no credible answers. For their part, news managers, bloggers and their pundit pals were too preoccupied with polls to go hunting for answers voters deserved—the few voters actually paying attention, that is.

You can speculate how media polls affect voters and voting patterns. Do they create apathy? Do they encourage people to vote strategically? Can they pervert the course of a campaign? Many a thesis has been written on the subject. We’re still short of answers.

What we do know is that Election 2008 had the lowest voter turnout since Confederation. News media can’t take all the blame, but neither are we blameless.

More sobering is the thought that election coverage, and the time, energy, money and space devoted to it, failed to engage so many Canadians, or move them to get involved in the democratic process. That’s a failure of both mission and business.
What Was the Question?

When a local CTV host asked former Liberal leader Stéphane Dion a question about the economy during the election campaign, the encounter made news.

Elizabeth McMillan

If you were prime minister now, what would you have done about the economy that Prime Minister Stephen Harper has not done? This was the question that Steve Murphy, CTV news anchor, posed to former Liberal leader Stéphane Dion in Halifax on Oct. 10, four days before the federal election. Dion became confused. He asked Murphy to restart the interview. They did, three times.

What was to be a quick live-to-tape interview has sparked an ethical discussion about how journalists should, and do, handle retakes. “It was my view then and now that there is no way that the interview, in any form, could be presented accurately and fairly without indicating that there had been restarts,” Murphy said, three weeks after the broadcast.

Susan Newhook, who teaches television at the University of King’s College in Halifax, interviewed Murphy, CTV Atlantic news director Jay Witherbee, and CTV news president, Robert Hurst, for an article for j-source.ca. She says the trend in television news to pretend segments are live is a problem.

Murphy did not act like there was a problem during the interview, said Newhook. She points out that CTV made a commitment to the Liberals when senior producer, Peter Mallette, told them not to worry. Murphy said he was, and remains, conflicted about the decision to air the entire clip.

Despite his defense of the decision to run the entire interview, Murphy says, upon reflection: “I can see it from both sides. That is the reason I was and am conflicted. I think there is a reason to do it and a case that could be made for not doing it.”

Journalists, bloggers and the public have commented both on the quality of Murphy’s question and CTV’s decision to air the full interview. Much of the debate focused on Murphy’s use of verbs—shifting from “would have done” to “now.” Dion told Murphy he misunderstood the question and asked when he would have become prime minister in the hypothetical scenario, “today? Or since a week, or since three weeks?” Or, “back two-years-and-a-half ago?”

For this part, Murphy’s only clarification was, “if you were prime minister during this time already.”

Viewers filed 12 complaints to the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council. “We are taking a lot of heat,” Hurst said while speaking to a roomful of journalism students and professors at the University of King’s College on Oct. 28 in Halifax.

Hurst said after the interview aired, Dion’s aides refused to talk to him when Dion filmed another pre-election interview at CTV in Toronto. “I don’t know whether you’re blaming me, or blaming CTV, but you better get over it. Life is short,” Hurst said, referring to the Liberal party’s reaction to the clip.

How It All Started

The incident occurred on Oct. 10. Dion was in Halifax campaigning. He sat down with Murphy. Both had places to be at 5 p.m. Dion needed to catch a flight and Murphy was filming a live newsbreak.

“I granted him one re-start because I thought that he was in distress. I was not certain if the cause was that he didn’t understand the question or he didn’t have an answer,” Murphy recalled. “I’ve given that a lot of thought, in retrospect. Should I have not agreed to a re-start? I suppose I could’ve said no, actually Mr. Dion, I can’t re-start the interview, and then the debate would’ve been why I didn’t allow him to re-start when clearly he was in distress. I had a sense even then that whatever happened was likely not going to
be something that I was looking forward to.”

In the two hours after the interview, debate ensued at the CTV studio in Halifax. Murphy discussed the re-starts with Atlantic news director Jay Witherbee and senior producer Peter Mallette. They contacted Hurst at the network’s headquarters in Toronto.

“There are systems and processes to make difficult ethical decisions and that is the process we followed,” Murphy said. The issue was whether Dion’s inability to understand or answer the question was newsworthy and whether this merited breaking a verbal commitment to the Liberals.

Murphy went to air at 6 p.m. for the nightly newscast. The two-and-a-half-minute clip aired at 6:40 with a brief preamble, which Murphy said he helped write during commercial breaks.

He told viewers, “Initially we indicated that it would not be” broadcast, but, “we owe it to you to show everything that happened.”

Murphy wrote the question after hearing Dion’s speech to the Chamber of Commerce earlier that day.

After the item ran, Stephen Harper, who up until that point had been avoiding media interviews, attempted to gain political advantage by airing the entire encounter for reporters, and then pointing out that the incident helped prove that Dion is incapable of managing the economy.

Dion addressed CTV’s decision at a campaign stop in Brantford, Ontario, on Oct. 11. He told reporters that he didn’t understand what Murphy’s meant and could not hear the question properly.

“I asked for clarification. It was legitimate.”

“I think it was entirely fair to ask what he would have done,” Murphy said, arguing that “[Dion] said Prime Minister Harper had done nothing about the economic crisis which, I thought, begged the question, what would you have done? There is no other way to ask that question but in the past tense.”

**Getting Reaction**

When Robert Hurst spoke to students at King’s College, he played the Murphy/Dion interview, followed by a clip of Dion dismissing a CTV reporter on election night. Hurst asked students for their comments on the interview, but did not respond to questions about the quality of the question.

“That was a poorly structured question...What the devil were you trying to ask?” queried one third-year student.

“If I ever asked that question in an interview for class, I would get marked down so much for it,” added classmate, Lesley Pike.

Hurst called for a show of hands. First to find out if French was anyone’s first language; and second, to see who misunderstood the question.

“How many people here, and English is your mother tongue, generally understood the question that was being asked,” he asked. Only a handful of people indicated they understood.

During an interview following his presentation to the class, Hurst characterized Murphy’s question as speculative. “Stéphane Dion could have answered the question, Steve, that’s a hypothetical question. If I were prime minister, I wasn’t prime minister. Politicians answer that way all the time.”

“It’s not up to us to give excuses to the viewers about what we’ve captured.”

Hurst made the decision to air the clip because he felt Dion’s actions and his response were “extraordinarily unusual.”

“A political leader who does not understand a question that most English [language] Canadians absolutely understand? And doesn’t understand a second time and a third time and is helped with the answer and a fourth time? In terms of what his problem was, that’s newsworthy,” Hurst said.

Hurst said he told his reporters to be aggressive during the campaign.

“We put it out there. Let the public decide if it’s an issue.”

What both Hurst and Murphy said was most exceptional, was that Liberal aide Sarah Bain interrupted the interview to clarify the question for Dion.

Murphy called the interview “a situation totally without any precedent whatsoever.” Most of his interviews are live or live-to-tape, but re-takes may be done for technical or physical reasons, for instance, if someone coughed.

“Within recent memory...fewer than one per cent of interviews would ever have a re-take,” Murphy said. “We don’t do it.”

**The Policy**

The CTV news policy handbook states that interviews must be “spontaneous and unrehearsed...’re-asks’ must be done in the presence of the interview subject or a delegate.”

“Not everyone has a copy of the newswroom’s handbook,” said Newhook and added that Dion was making an honest effort to answer the question. “The unfortunate part of it is that, had it been live, Dion would have winged it.”

Jeff Sallot read Newhook’s j-source.ca piece with interest. The former Globe and Mail parliamentary bureau reporter found the clip newsworthy, but for different reasons than Hurst did.

“It was revealing of Dion in the sense that he’s a meticulous individual and wants precision and obviously was looking for some kind of precision in the question that was posed to him.”

Sallot, who teaches journalism at Carleton University in Ottawa, said CTV rushed the decision to air the clip and could have waited to air it the following day or as a sidebar story.

He thought CTV could have re-framed the interview by acknowledging problems with the question and explaining the terms of the commitment to Dion.

“CTV ended up coming off for the worse,” he said, as Murphy’s introduction left viewers with the impression that CTV was breaking a commitment by airing the full interview.

Murphy disagrees. Although he was largely the subject of criticism, he said CTV did not break a promise when they aired the clip.

Whatever Mallette told Dion’s aides, “was said in extraordinary haste without any discussion or debate,” he argues. “What I can say with complete certainty is that at no time was anything that went on in the room off the record. In fact, there was never any understanding that we were going to pretend somehow that what had happened had not happened.”

He added that the Liberal’s insistence that the re-starts not be made public affected his view of the interview.

“When you are prevailed upon by political interests not to broadcast or not to report, that almost changes the context of the situation, simply through the intervention. There was no promise made. There was no contract,” Murphy said.

Hurst also compared CTV’s decision to air the Dion clip to the decision to report on Conservative communications director Ryan Sparrow, who said a dead soldier’s father criticized the Afghanistan mission because he was Liberal, and to do a story on federal agriculture minister, Gerry Ritz, who joked about the summer’s listeriosis outbreak in a taped conversation with staffers.

“How many people have been killed by Stéphane Dion’s inability to speak English?” asked King’s student Peter Cudmore in response.

In the future, Hurst said CTV’s policy on re-takes will remain the same.

“If the same thing happened again with Stephen Harper, Jack Layton, Gilles Duceppe, we’d do the exact same thing.”
Greg McArthur explains how he and Gary Dimmock obtained the story of the informant who got away with murder.

Greg McArthur

Imagine you were asked to write a profile of a murderer, except no one knew anything about him. No one knew where he went to high school. No one could name any of his family members. Everything he had ever told anyone about his life appeared to be a lie.

That’s what happened to us. The lack of answers tipped us off to a dark secret that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police wanted desperately to keep from the public. Interestingly, there was no actual tip. Instead, the “lack of answers” provided the tip. The fact that no one knew anything about him was the tip.

Under the Witness Protection Program Act, it is illegal for us to disclose the identity of the murderer or the circumstances behind his horrific slaying. All we are legally allowed to say is that the murder took place somewhere in Canada over the past eight years, and that we wanted to write about the man who committed it.

But after months of knocking on doors and phoning his ex-colleagues, neighbours and friends, we were still empty handed; everyone had a different story about where he grew up or where his parents were. Nothing checked out. About the only thing we knew for sure was his birthday. Chasing his story was like chasing a phantom, but we were undeterred. His empty past was too intriguing to let go.

We finally got a big break when a source gave us the murderer’s résumé. Almost all the information on the document was bogus: companies that didn’t exist; an address for a residence that was, in actual fact, a parking lot. The phone numbers on the résumé were out of service, and when we checked British Columbia’s registry of corporations, we learned that one of the construction firms he said he worked for had never been registered.

Buried in all the lies, however, was a legitimate link to his past—the name of a Victoria, B.C., pub where the murderer claimed he used to work as an assistant manager.

The pub had since closed, but we tracked down its former owner. When the owner was shown a picture of the murderer, he said he knew the man under a different name—Richard Young, a fast-talking con man who hadn’t been spotted in Victoria for years.

We finally had his real name. The floodgates opened. The name was key, because it provided us with a slew of resources—newspaper archives, high school year books and Canada411.ca—to help us figure out who Richard Young really was. I flew to Victoria, while Gary worked the phone from the Ottawa Citizen newsroom. We tracked down Young’s family and old associates, who, at first were somewhat reluctant, but eventually pulled back the curtain on Young—or, as his brother calls him, “the biggest liar in the world.”

But we still didn’t know how Young became a murderer. We knew his beginning—lying and cheating his way through life in Victoria—and we knew his end—killing someone under a new identity—but the transition was still a mystery.

It wasn’t until I got back to Ottawa that our eyes were opened. Using an Internet database, we found a British Columbia Supreme Court decision that showed exactly who was responsible for turning Richard Young into the man he is today—the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

The decision showed that Young had been a secret agent for the Mounties and had been admitted to their witness protection program. Ever so slowly, we started to piece together a complex fraud that had been perpetrated on Canada’s national police force. It turned out Young had tricked the Mounties into paying him hundreds of thousands of dollars for manufactured evidence, only to be rewarded with his new life.

When he used that new life to kill someone, the Mounties pushed their secret even further under the rug—deciding not to disclose to anyone, not even the victim’s family, about their history with this murderer.

We conducted more than 30 interviews, cultivated key sources, and reviewed more than 1,000 pages of court transcripts to draft the 5,000-word narrative.

The story should have ended with our discovery, but in a classic example of bureaucratic self preservation, the RCMP and the Justice Department decided it was more important to fight the truth than own up to their mistake. When word trickled back to the Mounties that we had figured out who this murderer really was, government lawyers quietly obtained a court order that barred publication of our findings. This order was obtained behind closed doors and our lawyers were only notified of its issuance after it had been signed by a judge. The
powerful forces who wanted this to stay a secret were now playing hardball.

The telling of the story was complicated further when I was hired by The Globe and Mail. Fortunately, the editors-in-chief of the Citizen and the Globe put their corporate and competitive interests aside and teamed up to fight the publication ban. A rare deal was hatched between Globe editor Edward Greenspon and Citizen editor Scott Anderson: They agreed that, if the judge ruled in favour of the press, both publications would run the same story on the same day—and the public interest would be served.

Citizen lawyer Rick Deardon and Globe lawyer Peter Jacobsen grilled two senior Mounties during an in-camera examination and used the evidence to convince a judge that the publication ban was unconstitutional and should be partially lifted. The public would be allowed to know at least part of the story but the judge’s decision, as well as the transcripts of the Mountie examinations, were ordered sealed.

When the stories finally ran in both newspapers on March 23, 2007—more than two years after we first started asking questions about the murderer—reactions were swift. The House of Commons public safety committee voted unanimously to review the witness protection program and the Mounties launched an internal investigation. The RCMP continues to deflect questions about the case, arguing in its final internal report that there was “nothing” that could have alerted them to the eventual murder that took place.

The story would not have been possible if we had not lobbied for more and more time during those first few months, and our editors were kind enough, and had enough confidence in us, to provide it. Given the murderer’s vacant history, it was pretty obvious to both of us that something was fishy, and we knew that if we pushed hard enough we would figure it out.

It is also a great example of trusting your gut. If an aspect of a story just doesn’t make sense—like a murderer without a past—then there probably is something more to it. When you stumble across a situation like that, jump on it.
Thomas Moore and I had been driving back and forth on the backwoods road in Mississippi for almost two hours. It was only 9:35 am, but our skin was steaming, our van’s air conditioner, broken.

It was a Sunday, July 9, 2006. And we’d just been approached by a local woman in a rusting car billowing blue smoke from its exhaust.

“You boys need some help?” she asked in a white, southern twang. “We’re looking for a place to fish,” replied Thomas, pokerfaced in his own deep Mississippi drawl.

I tried to block the woman’s view of the two video cameras rolling eerily without operators in the back of our rental van with Louisiana plates.

The woman in the chuffing rust bucket had seen us doggedly driving past her house, and in that sweet southern way, she wanted to be helpful, but at the same time, find out who the strangers were.

Though she was unaware, her house happened to be closest, on that quiet country road, to our real target: an old steepled, brick building with tended lawn and a dilapidated sign that, if it had all its yellowed letters intact, was supposed to read, “Bunkley Baptist Church.”

The woman eventually nodded, and moved on, but by the way she held her head and the angle of her brow, I knew she remained suspicious. Rightly so.

Minutes later, we’d confront the aging Baptist deacon of that oddly charming church. A white man with a terrible secret. A horrifying tale of terror that had begun for Thomas Moore more than 41 years before, in the town of Meadville, only a few miles from where we were sweating buckets, and trembling.

The idea

More than twenty-four months before that sweltering day, deep in the frigid bowels of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s temperature controlled archival vaults, I would first learn of the story that led me to Thomas Moore, and then, to the deacon’s secret and beyond.

I’d been researching a film that I had agreed to shoot and direct for the CBC in Mississippi in July of 2004. The idea was to retrace and re-contextualize the steps of yet another CBC crew that shot an unrelated documentary in 1964 Mississippi. Their 16 mm black-and-white film was called, Summer in Mississippi. Beautifully written, narrated and filmed by part of the crack team behind the now legendary CBC program, This Hour Has Seven Days, Summer in Mississippi recounts the days and months following the disappearance and subsequent murder of three civil rights workers. Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney had been killed by a particularly violent branch of the Ku Klux Klan, known as the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

Eventually the case of the three missing activists would become known by its FBI codename of “Mississippi Burning” or MIBURN for short. The victims’ last names, Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney are known to practically every American. Books, movies, and high school curricula have memorialized their deaths into the star-spangled fabric of American history. As part of the modern-day CBC crew, the idea was that we’d return to Mississippi almost 40 years later to take the temperature of the people and places that haunted the killings of these three civil rights workers. But, as I’d soon discover, their brutal story was not unique at the time.

As I watched Summer in Mississippi, sequences flew by of the hundreds of frantic searchers from the U.S. National Guard, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and local authorities who’d been ordered to scour the entire state and surroundings for the missing civil rights workers, beating bushes, flying helicopters, dragging swamps and rivers. The whole country was on edge. Would their bodies be found?

Then, a curious silence descends in the 1964 documentary when cigar-smoking white men in shirt-sleeves fish decomposing body parts out of the Mississippi River with sticks and bare hands. We see ribs and a femur, knotted loops of wire or twine, and a transparent, body-size bag being emptied out of the fetid water. The lazy, ever-present Southern droning of katydids is silenced by the penetrating voice of the late, great CBC narrator John Drainie: “It was the wrong
body. The discovery of a Negro male was noted and forgotten. The search was not for him. The search was for two white boys and their Negro friend."

I stopped the film and wrote down five words and a question, “wrong body”, “Negro male”, “forgotten”, and then simply, “who?”

Henry Hezekiah Dee

Fox and Leiterman’s film led me to his shocking story. The body was that of Henry Hezekiah Dee. And the remains of Henry’s friend, Charles Moore, had been found the day before.

And so my mission began.

When Henry Hezekiah Dee and Charles Moore disappeared on May 2, 1964, no national guardsmen were summoned. No extra detachments of FBI agents were sent. The newspapers ignored the deaths. And their deaths would not immediately be inscribed into the American historical lexicon. Yet they’d been killed by the same Klan group as Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney, two months earlier, and in a far more brutal fashion. In fact, it could be said that the killing of Moore and Dee represented the first bloody salvo the Klan fired that spring, in anticipation of the coming war on the civil rights workers of so-called ‘Freedom Summer’ just weeks later. Why was there a massive outcry for Dee and Moore? For two of the MIBURN victims, were white northerners from wealthy families. A possible answer: Dee and Moore were poor, and black.

**DIGGING FOR THE STORY**

During filming, Thomas Moore and I located and confronted several aging Klansmen, including James Ford Seale and one of his six identified partners in the crime, Charles Marcus Edwards. Soon after our sweaty confrontation with him at Bunkley Baptist Church in July 2006, the deacon confessed his role to U.S. Attorney Dunn Lampton. Lampton called a grand jury, an indictment was handed up, and Seale was arrested. Edwards was granted immunity for his testimony.

At the trial, the same admitted Klansman, Charles Marcus Edwards, asked the Moore and Dee families for forgiveness for his role in the murders, standing up in front of a packed and stunned courtroom to do so while the jury recessed. After much internal debate, both families forgave Edwards in front of my camera, beginning an astonishing life-changing process of peace and reconciliation rarely seen in the American south.

Roughly thirty-six months from my discovery of the story, 71-year-old Klansman James Ford Seale was convicted in a Mississippi federal courthouse on two counts of kidnapping where the victims were not released alive, and one charge of conspiracy. Two months after that, in August 2007, Seale received three life sentences and was sent to the federal penitentiary at Terre Haute, Indiana. I completed the feature length version of *Mississippi Cold Case* by the following December.

Evidence and information I gathered was actively used by the prosecution at the Seale trial. Photos, clippings, documents, and witnesses I had found—all passed on by Thomas Moore—played a major role in their case. Actual clips of *Mississippi Cold Case* were played for the jury on one nerve-racking day.

In the wake of Seale’s indictment in January 2007, the U.S. Justice Department announced probes into more than 70 new civil rights era cases. Their announcement cited the Dee/Moore case. In addition, the Justice Department and others continue to mobilize the Dee/Moore case in its push for the establishment of a Cold Case Bill to help fund the re-investigation of civil rights era hate crimes.

The process of making *Mississippi Cold Case* solved this intractable civil rights era hate crime and helped pave the way for others to be re-examined in its wake.

Working with Thomas Moore, I discovered new documents in archives spread across the United States, found retired FBI
agents with important information, and of course, revealed James Ford Seale himself who had been reported as dead until we easily found him shortly after arriving in Mississippi for our first shoot in early July 2005. Our constant presence on the scene and interactions with American authorities forced the case forward. And most importantly, Thomas Moore and the Dee family were finally able to find out the truth.

CHALLENGES MAKING THE FILM

It was an uphill, and at times rocky battle at the CBC attempting to make the film. From convincing anybody that it was a good idea, to the CBC lock-out early in production, to executives who didn’t get it, to fundraising across many shows unaccustomed to a more ‘entrepreneurial’ approach to production, it was an all-consuming endeavor that at times felt more difficult than getting the Dee/Moore case through the American justice system. It was an iconic American story with myself and the CBC’s 1964 doc as the Canadian hook. A Canadian looking for certified white terrorists in the U.S.A. while the so-called “war on terror” played out around the world. It was a documentary about Thomas Moore, a man born on the fourth of July, who served tours in Vietnam and elsewhere, who had never solved his guilt and the conviction that he’d not done enough to bring his brother’s killers to justice. Now, if people would just agree to fund it.

From June 2004 to about April 2005, I had to piggyback the Dee/Moore story on to other budgets. It was a circuitous and frustrating period during which I was also frantically looking for Thomas Moore. The main problem was that rather than tell the Thomas Moore story, the CBC wanted me to cover the upcoming ‘Mississippi Burning’ trial of Edgar Ray Killen. PBS Frontline, New York Times TV, and Channel 4 were just a few of the outside venues who said “no” to funding or even a co-production during this period. Later, after the first shoots, Sundance Fund, ThinkFilm, ABC, and POV would also say “no.” For them it was a long shot. For me, it was a certainty.

Mississippi Cold Case first got its official legs as a 15-minute item for CBC Sunday via Maria Mironowicz’s Archival Repurposing unit. Patsy Pehleman of Sunday and a hold-out-the-hat conglomerate of other CBC contributors (Slawko Klymnkiew, Radio-Canada, Newsworld etc.) added to a shoe-string budget pot that grew modestly in fits and starts in relation to the story’s successes and increasing international coverage. The process ended with an 85-minute feature film funded in part by CBC’s old International Sales department and the balance by the CBC Documentary Unit. It took me months to convince people that this was a story that had to be done. Eventually, Mironowicz saw the light, and she helped me to raise funds. I was also helped along the way by Jerry McIntosh, then of the documentary unit, Johanna Samuel, then of international sales, and finally Michael Claydon of the documentary unit. Despite all the difficulties, the film could not have been made at any other broadcaster than the CBC.

The film has won several major awards to date: five Yorkton Golden Sheafs including Best of Festival and Best Social Political, a Best Director Gemini, the IRE’s Top Medal, a Cine Golden Eagle, the CBC’s Wilderness Award, a CAJ Award, and a Bronze Plaque from the Columbus festival.

Mississippi Cold Case was an intensely personal journey of truth, reconciliation, and redemption that created justice in a void. It changed my life and all those associated with it forever.

Evidence and information I gathered was actively used by the prosecution at the Seale trial.

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Evidence and information I gathered was actively used by the prosecution at the Seale trial.
Nova Scotians are finally able to make better-informed decisions about where they eat before sitting down at the table.

The province recently launched a new online database that provides people with access to the food-safety inspections of all restaurants, supermarkets and other types of eateries.

The changes came two years after I kicked off a series of investigative stories that delved into the secretive world of food-safety inspections and exposed deficiencies with the system, including shoddy record keeping and few penalties for places flouting the rules. (Please see Winter 2007 edition of Media magazine for Jeffrey's write-up on how he got the story.)

Other parts of Canada (such as Toronto) and the United States have posted their restaurant inspections online or in the eateries themselves for years. But in Nova Scotia the data was largely concealed.

Government officials saw no need to provide better access to the information and even cited concerns about hurting businesses by releasing the inspection documents. “I’m convinced that certainly as a province we have the safest food in the country,” the minister responsible for food safety told me at the time.

So if diners in Nova Scotia were curious about a restaurant’s food-safety record, they could contact the Department of Agriculture, which would over the course of several days mail them edited copies of only the most recent inspection report.

That means the public could continue to eat unknowingly at a place with a history of health hazards.

Jeffrey Simpson

Keeping a lid on it

N.S. makes it hard to find out what could be wrong with where you eat

Dining out? Click here first

Keeping Them Honest

Jeffrey Simpson’s reporting helped force Nova Scotia’s agriculture department to post its restaurant inspections online.
For more than three restaurants, or to go back further than the most recent report for an eatery, the department directed people to the costly and time-consuming Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

Nova Scotia’s Department of Agriculture wanted to charge me hefty fees, sometimes hundreds or thousands of dollars, to release more information about food-safety records in response to several requests for information filed over several months.

The province’s penchant for secrecy earned it the Canadian Association of Journalists’ Code of Silence Award in 2003 after imposing the highest fees in the country for freedom-of-information queries, which resulted in fewer requests.

The initial series of eight articles ran in four-segments. Rodents, cross-contamination, storing food in a washroom and inadequate refrigeration were just some of the health risks inspectors had uncovered.

But no restaurants were fined or closed. And inspectors didn’t appear to always follow up on visits where they noted infractions.

Upon publication, the series prompted a huge public outcry. It provided readers with information that was relevant and important—and largely unattainable.

People weren’t prepared to put blind faith in their government; they wanted to verify for themselves they were being kept safe.

In the following months, I continued to report on the matter. I uncovered more records that indicated dozens of diners had reported being ill after eating out. I learned the auditor general had directed the department five years earlier to adopt stronger enforcement tools, keep better records and look into ways to make inspections public. A department insider shed more light on the lack of resources and leadership preventing inspectors from doing their jobs properly.

The restaurant industry spoke out against providing the public with a better look at what was happening behind their kitchen doors. The head of the Restaurant Association of Nova Scotia told me at the time that improving access to the inspection reports wasn’t needed.

“If people want to post them in the window, that’s fine,” he said. “That’s more of a knee-jerk reaction. I don’t think that’s necessary.”

But attitudes began to shift within government. “I believe in the system we have, but we do recognize there’s some areas we should explore further, and that should lead to improvements,” the minister responsible for food safety said after many of the stories were published. “We do recognize that we can further improve all aspects.”

Sure enough, a few months later as part of the next provincial budget, his department announced it would spend $225,000 to create a new database for its food-safety records and spend $130,000 to hire two new food-safety inspectors. With this new electronic system, the province would eventually have the ability to provide the public with online access to the records, although no such commitment was made.

A department official told me the food-safety division had wanted a new computer system for years but never had the money to make that happen—until my series of stories was published.

A department official told me the food-safety division had wanted a new computer system for years but never had the money to make that happen—until my series of stories was published.

It took me several frustrating months of wrangling with the government to get my hands on the inspection reports. The province refused to provide the information in an electronic form despite storing much of it in a database. I repeatedly modified my requests and they repeatedly asked for further clarification, delaying the release of information.

In the end, I settled for paper copies of the food-safety inspection records for restaurants in the Halifax Regional Municipality for 2005, paying $435.44 (which was refunded after I appealed to the review officer for the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. She agreed the fees weren’t warranted for information gathered on behalf of the public).

But making sense of the documents was another job in itself. Many of the reports were incomprehensible. They were sparsely worded and there was no indication of the severity of the infractions. The provincial manager of food safety was even unable to decipher some of them.

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Then, early in 2008, the province announced that it would put the database online. The launch was delayed by several months, but finally happened in October—although the measures stop short of requiring restaurants to post inspection reports in their businesses.

Even the restaurant industry changed its tune and supported the new system, although some members maintained the changes were media-driven and insisted there would be little public interest.

On the day the new system was made available to the public, I contacted the manager of the only restaurant the province had closed recently due to safety concerns over her water supply. She denied the violation was serious.

“I really don’t want this in the paper,” she said, declining to provide her name. “It’s nobody’s business but mine.” Not anymore.

To view the inspection reports online, please visit: www.gov.ns.ca/agri/foodsafety/ reports/Request.aspx.
MEANING IN A CRISIS SOUTH OF THE BORDER

The subprime mortgage fiasco is not only about American foolishness and greed. It is a Canadian story, too.

Kelly Toughill

Journalists struggling to make sense of the economic meltdown should study the work of their colleagues south of the border.

This isn’t something I ever thought I would advise. To indulge in broad generalizations, Canada tends to be more thoughtful and policy-oriented than the U.S., where smart comedians like Jon Stewart have more credibility than the shallow news professionals they love to mock.

Still, you take your lessons where you can. Anyone struggling to cover the economic crisis with any depth should be following NPR’s Planet Money series and the work of Jesse Eisenberg in Condé Nast’s new magazine, Portfolio.

Canadian reporters with a securities course on their résumé had a distinct advantage in the quest to create meaning out of chaos this fall, but even they lost their way sometimes. And many were thrown into the story with no background at all.

Credit default swaps, the subprime market was driven by a huge new pool of money from the booming economies of India, China and Brazil. The global pool of investment doubled in four years to $70 trillion, and there simply weren’t enough places to invest.

There are two versions of the show on the net. The hour-long program can be heard at www.thisamericanlife.org. It even has a full transcript you can download. A 12-minute version broadcast on NPR’s All Things Considered can be heard at www.npr.org. The show was broadcast in May, when the Dow was still climbing, yet it clearly showed the looming danger to the stock market and the economy.

The subprime crisis has made Wall Street sage Warren Buffett look good—again.

Subprime meant that banks gave loans to people with no income, no down payment, and bad credit. In other words, banks passed out money to people they didn’t actually expect to pay them back.

“I wouldn’t have loaned me the money,” Nathan told journalist Alex Blumberg. “And nobody that I know would have loaned me the money. I know guys who are criminals who wouldn’t have loaned me that—and they break your knee caps.”

So the big unanswered question became, “Why? Why would any financial institution lend out money it didn’t expect to get back?” That’s where the NPR series goes beyond the work of other journalists. Not only were banks ducking the risk of bad loans through complicated unregulated transactions called credit default swaps, the subprime market

In 2002, Buffett warned that “derivatives are financial weapons of mass destruction.”

The quote has been trotted out a lot, usually to show that Buffett was the lone seer able to discern trouble on the horizon. The banking crisis and stock market crash has been treated as an unpredictable event. Regulators were shocked, as were bank executives and almost all the reporters who followed the drama.

Except a few.

Jesse Eisenberg’s editors rightly crowed in the November 2008 issue of Portfolio that...
their readers were well warned about the looming crisis. Eisenger wrote way back in May 2007 that "derivatives could turn from vaccine to contagion."

Eisenger’s latest contribution in the November issue is to trace the roots of the crisis to a conservative banker at J.P. Morgan who took credit default swaps wholesale with a $9-billion deal in 1998. Credit default swaps are at the heart of the economic crisis. Few reporters have tried to explain the instruments in detail to readers, settling instead for the broad-brush description that the swaps are a form of insurance against bad loans.

But the swaps are much more than that; Eisinger explains in vivid prose how the unregulated swaps spread the risk of bad loans like a virus through virtually every part of the North American banking system.

One financial journalist I know believes reporters remain ignorant about the swaps because there is no one they can ask to explain. She believes that many of the bankers who signed the billion-dollar deals didn’t understand themselves how swaps worked.

The subprime mortgage story is no longer a story about American foolishness and greed. It is now a story about the global economy, about the collapse of Iceland, the potential nationalization of banks in Britain, of commodity markets tanking in the gloom. It is a Canadian story, too.

Most reporters on the business beat in Canada are struggling just to keep up with events, struggling to chart the roller coaster of the stock market, to figure out bailouts for Bay Street and what the confusion means to the price of milk and bread.

Editors might be forgiven for giving up on the crystal ball, particularly since the talking heads they usually ask to read the future have been so spectacularly wrong for the last year or so.

The lesson of Eisenger’s work in Portfolio and NPR’s work on “The Global Pool of Money” is twofold. First, don’t give up on searching for the deeper meaning even, when all is confusion. The second is that journalists must sometimes pull back from the experts and the pundits and rely on their own analysis to figure out what’s going on. A little unbiased intelligence, armed with a few good questions, still goes a long, long way.

Alanna Mitchell has won the 2008 Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy for her project entitled The Possible School.

Mitchell explores how schools can become more effective if they implement research on teaching techniques, human behavior and how the brain works. Mitchell will explore possible educational policies that allow all children access to excellent education, regardless of wealth or status.

She is the author of Seasick a book on the health of the global ocean, to be published internationally in 2008 and 2009, for which she received a Canada Council grant, and Dancing at the Dead Sea: Tracking the World’s Environmental Hotspots, published internationally in 2004 and 2005. The latter was named one of the five best non-fiction books in Canada in 2004 by Quill & Quire, the publishing industry’s trade magazine. It has enjoyed international critical acclaim.

As part of the terms of the Fellowship, Steed will receive a stipend of $75,000 plus an expense budget of up to $25,000.

The Fellowship, sponsored by the Atkinson Charitable Foundation, the Toronto Star and the Honderich Family, is open to all senior Canadian print and broadcast journalists.

IMPORTANT CHANGE: Please note the simplified two-step application process for 2009.

1. To be considered, all that is required is a THREE PAGE maximum LETTER of INTENT, along with your curriculum vitae, that summarizes your topic, its importance, brief outline of proposed articles, and treatment/approach to be received by Monday, January 12, 2009

2. The Fellowship Committee will choose three to five Finalists who will be invited to submit a full application and proposal for consideration for the 2009 Fellowship award. Each finalist will receive an honorarium for submitting a proposal.

Send 4 copies of your Letter of Intent and CV to:

Elizabeth Chan
Coordinator, Atkinson Fellowship Committee
The Atkinson Charitable Foundation
1 Yonge Street, Suite 1508
Toronto, ON M5E 1E5

416 869 4034 telephone
416 865 3619 fax
echan@atkinsonfoundation.ca
A remarkable series of articles in The Globe and Mail drew readers into the gritty, minimum-wage world of Toronto’s working poor.

Reporter Jan Wong went undercover for a month in 2006 to work as a maid for a cleaning service, a job that opened doors to the homes of the service’s clients—and to details of their personal lives.

But this access, gained using her real name but without revealing she was working as a journalist, has sparked a lawsuit that threatens to strengthen Canada’s privacy laws and create new risks for those who impersonate others in pursuit of a story.

A Toronto couple and their young son are suing Wong, The Globe and the maid service for $50,000 in damages over an article in which Wong described cleaning their “monster home.” Among other details, she recounted how she “recoiled” at the sight of a filthy child’s bathroom and resented having to iron oversized clothes. The number of “useless” pillows on a bed was cited as evidence of “21st-century conspicuous consumption.”

The homeowners were not identified by name. But their suburb was, and the lawsuit claims “various persons known to them” recognized the family from Wong’s description of the home and belongings. As a result, family members claim they suffered “significant embarrassment and mental distress” as well as harm to their dignity and “personal and home security.”

A claim against the media for compensation for embarrassment, mental distress and loss of dignity is usually rolled out as a libel suit. But the family is not suing for defamation. Instead, the action alleges Wong and the newspaper damaged their reputation through “deceit” and “invasion of property.”

This summer The Globe asked a judge of Ontario’s Superior Court of Justice to dismiss the action. The claims were being used to “dress up” what was essentially a defamation action, argued Globe lawyer Peter Jacobson. Since the family had missed the three-month deadline for filing a libel suit, the claim should be dismissed, he said.

But the family’s lawyer, Sam Hill, asserted his clients suffered distress and damage from Wong’s intrusion into their lives, and not solely from the ensuing publicity.

In ruling on the motion in September, Justice David Aston said it is not easy to dismiss an action before trial. “If the claim as pleaded has some chance of success, it must be permitted to proceed.” But Canada’s courts, he noted, “have been reluctant to recognize” a distinct right to privacy under the common law—the body of law that flows from judges’ rulings.

So have lawmakers. As of 2005, four provinces—British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Newfoundland and Labrador —had laws on the books to protect citizens against unwarranted invasion of personal privacy. The strongest prohibitions exist in Quebec, where the province’s Civil Code and Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms shield the private lives of individuals.

These laws protect against eavesdropping, the publicizing of diaries and other personal papers without consent, and the unauthorized use of someone’s name or image to promote a product. As a rule, a journalist’s legitimate use of someone’s name or image to promote a product. As a rule, a journalist’s legitimate use of someone’s name or image to promote a product. As a rule, a journalist’s legitimate use of someone’s name or image to promote a product.

The courts are increasingly putting journalists’ motives, actions and methods under the microscope. The new libel defence of responsible journalism—which protects important news reports that were properly investigated, even if some facts turn out to be false—is an example of how the law is increasingly concerned with how journalists do their jobs.

No matter who wins this battle, don’t expect the courts to recognize an unlimited right for journalists to probe the private lives of individuals—particularly people who are not newsmakers or otherwise in the public eye. A line will be drawn.

Where privacy rights and freedom of the press meet head-on.

Dean Jobb

Dean Jobb, an assistant professor of journalism at the University of King’s College in Halifax, is author of Media Law for Canadian Journalists (www.j-source.ca) and edits the law section of J-Source (www.j-source.ca).

The Charter Collision Course

Where privacy rights and freedom of the press meet head-on.

Fine Print

Winter 2009

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The Liberal Party’s Collapse in Numbers

It is easy to forget that the devil truly is in the details.

Fred Vallance-Jones

So, here’s a question: Did the Conservatives win the 2008 federal election, or did the Liberals lose? Of course, it would be perfectly right to say “all of the above.” But as some commentators have noted, the story of the 2008 vote is really more about a Liberal collapse than any huge surge of enthusiasm for the Conservatives under Stephen Harper.

To see just how bad it really was for the Liberals under Stéphane Dion you have to get past the popular vote figures that are most often used to explain the result.

And that’s where a little computer-assisted reporting using a spreadsheet program helps us dig deeper into the numbers.

Let’s start by looking at that popular vote tally. It shows the Conservative percentage inching up by a little more than a percentage point to nearly 38 per cent (as I write this, I am using preliminary numbers for 2008, so some of the numbers may change slightly), and the Liberals slipping by four percentage points to about 26 per cent.

That’s the number you will have heard repeated time after time, and at first blush it appears to tell the tale. But a deeper look at the numbers using our spreadsheet shows that the Liberal collapse was much, much deeper than the percentage point tally would suggest (to download the spreadsheet go to www.carcanada.ca, click on Media Magazine Columns, and then pick the column for Fall 2008).

The first problem with this often-quoted number is that we are dealing with percentage points change, not percentage change. To anyone except the most math-adept among us, that makes the drop appear smaller than it really is.

While the Liberal loss was four percentage points, the proportion of voters putting an X beside their Liberal candidate’s name was actually down about 13 per cent.

That’s already whopper of a drop, but Liberal party strategists have to be alarmed by the change in the raw numbers of Canadians voting for the party.

While the Conservatives largely held their own, slipping only slightly, about one-in-five Liberal voters vanished between the 2006 and 2008 elections. In fact, when you net out the gains and losses of the other parties, those disappearing Liberal votes account for most of the drop in voter turnout between the two elections. This leads to the reasonable conclusion that a lot of Liberals judged Dion’s performance lacking, and stayed home, precipitating the result we saw on election night.

The Conservatives, meantime, made some well-placed gains, allowing them to capitalize on the Liberal collapse.

The Conservatives picked up 21 ridings from the Liberals. In most of them, Liberal support plummeted while Conservative support rose modestly (see the second spreadsheet, which you can also download), allowing that party’s candidates to overcome what had sometimes been significant electoral disadvantages on their way to victory.

These weren’t huge victories, for the most part, but were the electoral equivalent of a low-scoring hockey game. Two points into the win column.

In Kitchener-Waterloo, for example, the Liberals lost more than 9,000 votes, while the Conservatives added about 3,000, allowing them to eke out a squeaker victory.

In 12 of the 21 seats the Conservatives gained from the Liberals, the Liberals lost more than twice as many votes as the Conservatives gained.

As predicted, the rise of the Greens also probably helped the Tories in these ridings. As you can see from the first of our two spreadsheets, the Greens were the only mainstream party to actually get more votes from Canadians, going from about 664,000 in 2006 to about 941,000 in 2008. In eight of the 21 seats that the Conservatives picked up from the Liberals, the Green vote exceeded the Conservative margin of victory.

All of this leads to some inescapable conclusions.

First, the Liberals suffered a collapse of historic proportions in the election of 2008, while the Conservatives made modest gains in crucial ridings. Much of the increase in the percentage of popular support for the Conservatives was clearly the result of Liberal voters staying home, driving down the total vote.

Second, we have to be ever vigilant about numbers. In the haze of an election night, and simple numbers such as the percentage of the popular vote, it is easy to forget that the devil truly is in the details. The details often tell a much better story.

Third, the next election could hold some surprises. If the Liberals under new leader Michael Ignatieff can recapture some of those voters who just stayed home, it could prove an interesting night indeed.

The lesson learned is that taking a close look at those numbers using a spreadsheet can provide insights to write stories that give the reader new value and new insight into who won, and who lost.

And now, for a shameless plug. Those of you looking for a Canadian guide to computer-assisted reporting should check out Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Comprehensive Primer, from Oxford University Press.

In the interests of full disclosure, I am one of the authors, along with David McKie of CBC’s investigative unit (who of course, is the editor of Media). Until now there hasn’t been a book on CAR written from a Canadian perspective, besides the limited amount of material in Digging Deeper: A Canadian Reporter’s Research Guide (more disclosure, McKie and I are co-authors of that one, too). Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Comprehensive Primer covers everything from advanced Internet research to mapping and social network analysis, with a healthy dose of spreadsheets and databases in between. Check it out. We think it will be a valuable addition to your bookshelf, and an excellent reference.
The joy of parking

Halifax CBC radio reporter Jack Julian explains how he was able to put computer skills to use in his series on parking tickets.

Jack Julian

My series ‘The Joy of Parking’ examines parking tickets in the Halifax Regional Municipality. It was my attempt to replicate the excellent computer-assisted reporting work by the Ottawa Citizen in its series ‘The Hornet’s Sting,’ produced by Glen McGregor.

With such a detailed and successful model to work from, how could I go astray?

Securing the data

My goal was to troll for stories in the parking ticket database maintained by the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM). Each parking ticket issued in Halifax generates a single electronic record. These records include the time and date of the ticket, location, car make and model, an offence code, plus fine and court information. The database contains a wealth of potential news. Municipal officials in Halifax had never received a data request like mine. I drew up an informal query to see if the database would be released under ‘routine disclosure’. The city’s legal department said this was a job for a freedom-of-information request, which would clarify privacy exclusions and the fee structure.

The initial fee estimate was potentially prohibitive: $830 dollars for an estimated 28 hours of database extraction time to capture all tickets from 2003 to June 2008. Eventually we agreed to extract the data year-by-year, starting with 2008. Following up on these out-of-province tickets, I found that the computer enforcement system reaches a dead end. With no address to mail a court summons, the tickets sit in legal limbo. It gives drivers with out-of-province plates nearly diplomatic-style parking immunity. It’s particularly galling to some of our listeners that the greatest number of unenforceable tickets are issued to Ontario vehicles, many of them driven by university students. I left notes on every ‘foreign’ plated car I could find in the university neighbourhoods.

Training

I’ve received basic CAR training through the CBC, but my greatest successes (and experience) involved Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. This huge database forced me into the trickier world of Microsoft Access. Thankfully, I received my data just days before I attended the 2008 CAR Boot Camp at the University of King’s College. There, I joined reporters from Atlantic Canada and beyond as we spent six days learning the basics of both Access and Excel. The instructors David McKie (CBC News I-Unit) and Fred Valance-Jones (University of King’s College) provided real-life data sets for us to manipulate and comb for stories. Freeing me up for a week to attend this course was a heavy investment for my radio newsroom, which only contains five reporters. However, my program manager, Janet Irwin, hoped it would all pay off with a trifold serial in the fall.

Data fun

The database, when I received it, was messy. Parking enforcement officers enter ticket information on little hand-held computers, so those tickets show some standardization. But a huge portion of tickets are hand-written by private commissionaires, and then keyed in by municipal clerks. Those tickets are often nonsensical.

I spent an inordinate length of time writing queries in Microsoft Access to clean things up. I often ping-ponged smaller data sets between Excel and Access, depending on what I was able to do with my emerging skill-sets. In the end, Fred Valance-Jones of King’s College helped with some of the more advanced data scrubbing, including work that allowed me to do my ‘hot parking meter’ stories.

It’s exciting to dream big CAR dreams, but the reality of the data cuts everything down to size. I’d hoped to reproduce an Ottawa Citizen story on the most-zealous parking officer in town. But municipal officials deemed that officer names or even unique badge numbers were privacy issues. I’d also hoped to track license plate numbers, so I could tally the most egregious parking offenders. But license plates were also deemed potentially identifying, and were stripped from the database.

Story lines

My stories rolled out the week of October 20th on CBC Radio One, CBC Television and cbc.ca. You can see the Web versions of some of the stories at www.cbc.ca/ns/features/the-joy-of-parking. Two stories generated the greatest public response:

1) Free Parking: It was curious to see how far people drive to park illegally on Halifax streets. Parking tickets issued on Hawaii and Alaska plates are a curiosity. But the volume of out-of-province tickets was interesting: More than 30-thousand issued in a year, with fines totaling more than 800-thousand dollars. Following up on these out-of-province tickets, I found that the computer enforcement system reaches a dead end. With no address to mail a court summons, the tickets sit in legal limbo. It gives drivers with out-of-province plates nearly diplomatic-style parking immunity. It’s particularly galling to some of our listeners that the greatest number of unenforceable tickets are issued to Ontario vehicles, many of them driven by university students. I left notes on every ‘foreign’ plated car I could find in the university neighbourhoods. The Georgia-plated driver I found generated a slew of outraged comments on the Web.

2) Hottest Meter: I wound up working with a subset of data on this story, $4 thousand parking meter tickets from the most recent 11 months. It’s an odd number, but the biggest data set I could fit in good old Excel 2003 version (the 2007 version handles tables with up to one million records), which is still my tool of choice. It turns out Halifax has a most-ticketed meter. (If you’re ever visiting downtown Halifax, stay away from Meter 8-A on Blowers Street, which was one of only four meters that broke the 100-ticket mark. You’ll recognize it by the snappy red top, signifying a 30-minute time limit, a fact that stumped most of the drivers I spoke to). The parking meter data allowed me to make my first forays into the world of mapping. (You can see the results on the Web site.) The Ottawa Citizen again was my inspiration here. I’d hoped to map continued on page 29
Having recently moved to the United States, I was asked what it was like to be in the middle of an American presidential election.

My first response was: absorbing and exciting. I have always been attracted to the hurly-burly of elections and the candidates with their strategies and gaffes.

My second response was: it was profoundly troublesome. Watching the news media cover this pivotal U.S. election was enough to make any reasonable citizen question where democracy is headed. Not to put too fine a point on it: much of the news coverage was an insult to one’s intelligence and a disservice to democracy.

My disenchantment is not the fact that some (or a lot) of the new coverage was inadequate. That was to be expected. It is a more vexing fact. These inadequacies are the same inadequacies that we have seen year after year; election after election. As Yogi Berra opined, “It’s déjà vu all over again.” I am plagued by this thought: Why is journalism ethics—through criticism, analysis, and teaching—apparently so ineffectual in improving journalism?

Here is a list of some inadequacies committed by media and politicians: treating the campaign as just a horse race; recycling rumor or personal facts; reducing issues to a polarity between extremes and rival slogans. Convention slogans ranged from “My Country First,” or “Change You Can Believe in.” The discussion of how to ‘fix’ health care is expressed in one phrase: “Health care is a right, not a privilege.” The international complexities of the dispute in Georgia are reduced to standing up for an ally. The Iraq war is turned into a ‘victory.’ The mind boggles.

When Sarah Palin, Republican vice-presidential candidate, did her first sit-down interview, how were her comments treated by the U.S. network? They hired a “body language” expert to analyze how Palin sat in her chair and how she used her hands. When the network did consider what she said, they sought the views of a Democrat governor and a Republican governor. Guess what? The Democratic concluded she bombed; the Republican loved her performance. This format is not only predictable, it is polarizing and unenlightening.

In this campaign, millions of dollars were spent on psychological techniques that pushed emotional buttons and avoided engaging the brain. Candidates told tear-jerking tales of how they met a poor farmer in Iowa, Joe the Plumber, or a mother whose son was killed in Iraq. During their first televised debate, McCain and Obama showed the audience that they were wearing bracelets in memory of meetings with “ordinary” people. I have compassion for those who have suffered great loss. I have no patience for those who turn painful experiences into a sentimental “life story” for political gain.

Then there was the mind-numbing talk of
media coverage of elections which included the standard complaints against campaign reporting, noted above. The item even had the proverbial professor saying—once again—that such coverage wasn’t great for democracy. So the question is: what effect does criticism have, even if criticism has expanded on-line?

The reasons for these patterns in democracy are complex. There are no simple answers. It has to do with the way that democracy and its public sphere operate—the conditions under which individuals act and interact. The behavior of media, advertisers, journalists, and campaign managers reflects how the political system works, who the main players are, and how economic and political forces reinforce certain types of behavior.

Moreover, the public is also on the hook. Let’s stop citing pieties about the need for serious journalism and ask some tough questions. Are rumors reported because we, the public, openly or secretly, enjoy such content? How large is the public’s appetite for in-depth discussions of economic or foreign policy? How can news organizations enlarge their offerings of serious journalism if audiences would rather watch reality TV, or are quick to get bored? Maybe we are so comfortable and busy with our private lives that we prefer to leave politics to other people—the journalists, politicians and lobby groups—and then blame them for failing us.

Democratic press theory assumes that the public sphere, with a responsible news media, helps citizens govern themselves in a rational manner. Is that ideal discredited? Maybe our expectations for a modern public sphere are too high. But how far are you willing to ratchet down those expectations? I don’t expect discussions in news media to be a logician’s model of rationality and objectivity. But there has to be some degree of rationality and objectivity at the heart of our news media system. Democracy is a messy process, but it may not survive a large-scale debasing of the means of public communication.

Talk of ethics is important but it is not enough, if we wish to address these deep problems of democracy. Change will require action through the engagement of relatively large portions of the population, citizens and journalists. People can make a difference, but we must want to make a difference. M

continued from page 27

all types of parking tickets by location across the city. But Halifax’s parking ticket data was just too messy to paint an accurate picture.

Instead, I concentrated on parking-meter violations, because meter numbers are nice and clean, and HRM had a computerized map layer that allowed us to place the meters on a street grid.

Again, the mapping component far exceeded my technical abilities. I’m indebted to Daniel Rainham of Dalhousie University for his help linking my ticket database with the location data, and for generating the ‘temperature map’ of ticket density.

The next generation of handheld ticket computers in Halifax will likely generate latitude and longitude information with every ticket. That will be a bonanza for future mappers.

3) Other stories: Not all my parking stories were strictly computer-assisted reporting. But getting to know the parking powers in Halifax gave me plenty of leads. And having the numbers to back up the stories strengthened my reporting throughout.

**TRY IT YOURSELF**

Wherever you live in Canada, parking tickets are bound to be a hot-button issue for your readers, viewers and listeners. If your province has a computerized court records system, then parking tickets will probably become electronic records at some point. Approach your local municipality for a copy of the database. E-mail them links to previous stories to let them know where you might be heading. The example from the Citizen certainly greased the wheels for my request.

I was gratified with the consistent, generous help I received from Halifax Regional Municipality officials while working on these stories. I’m not sure how grateful my contacts were when I publicized an $800,000 loophole in their ticket collection system. However, a municipal official told me that media attention on parking tickets is a money-maker for the city. He said most parking ticket stories are followed by a spike in payments from guilty offenders. It’s a trend I hope to double-check when I receive a fresh set of Halifax parking-ticket data next year. M

When Sarah Palin, Republican vice-presidential candidate, did her first sit-down interview, the U.S. network hired a “body language” expert to analyze how Palin sat in her chair and how she used her hands. INFphoto.com/Michael Swarbrick. 

leadership. Candidates indicated how tough they will be with Iran or Russia. Wasn’t it this macho, narrow patriotism that characterized the disastrous presidency of George Bush? Candidates feel compelled to declare, repeatedly, that the USA is the best country in the world and they really love it. Why can’t we just assume that anyone running for president loves their country?

How is it possible that that public discourse, in one of the most advanced countries in the world, can be so, well, dumb, intolerant and ideological? What does that tell you about the democratic public sphere and the future of the United States?

One solution, you might think, is more monitoring of media. But consider this: About a third of the way into the campaign, I watched the Sunday political shows on U.S. television. I tuned into CNN’s Reliable Sources, hosted by media critic Howard Kurtz. The show invited journalists to analyze the week’s coverage of the presidential campaign. The group complained about a focus on rumors, and how the Republican campaign got the

How about getting to know the parking powers in Halifax? The example from the Citizen certainly greased my wheels. I was gratified with the consistent, generous help I received from Halifax Regional Municipality officials while working on these stories. I’m not sure how grateful my contacts were when I publicized an $800,000 loophole in their ticket collection system. However, a municipal official told me that media attention on parking tickets is a money-maker for the city. He said most parking ticket stories are followed by a spike in payments from guilty offenders. It’s a trend I hope to double-check when I receive a fresh set of Halifax parking-ticket data next year. M
The past few years there’s been a common theme amongst Canadian mainstream news media and how they report international news, that being that they don’t actually report it, they buy it. Severe budget cuts in the newsroom have been seen largely in the area of foreign reporting as it has resulted in the closing of foreign news bureaus, decreasing the number of foreign correspondents based abroad, and becoming increasingly dependent on a select few newswires to supply foreign news reports.

As it stands, Canada’s major news organizations are hardly employing enough journalists to paint an accurate picture of the world for Canadians. At one point in the 1980’s, the CBC had an impressive 28 foreign bureaus. Now the corporation only employs nine correspondents, CTV six foreign correspondents, and the Globe and Mail a more impressive 13. The National Post and Global receive their international news from Canwest News Services (CNS) with its five correspondents abroad. At least, Canwest has representation abroad. That CNS is responsible for the international coverage of two of Canada’s major news organizations (not to mention its other TV and city newspaper holdings), shows a lack of diversity of stories and opinions across the country. So the question is, in light of this situation, can newswires accurately represent and serve the Canadian public at home and abroad?

The problem with forming a dependency on select newswires for international news is that they all define what is and is not newsworthy in the same way, including areas of the world considered to be worth covering. This leads to a gross homogenization of the international news available to Canadians. By and large, newswire stories are shorter and generalized pieces created to sell to a mass world media market. This differs however, compared to individual stories by Canadian correspondents who research and report specifically for one news outlet and one nation’s audience.

Additionally, the newswires tend to be American (AP) or European (Reuters and AFP), and limit the perspectives in the news to a select few origins. It does matter where journalists come from, because they are more apt to relate a story back to their country of origin, under their unique cultural and historical lens.

For example, Canada has a large number of people from Asia, including, China, India, the Philippines and Pakistan. Foreign newswires can’t be expected to represent or acknowledge the Asian minorities of Canada, or their interests in their news reports, as these wouldn’t sell to news companies worldwide. Consequently, the interests of Asian minority groups are under-represented while they are segregated from mainstream Canadian culture. With a growing Asian population in Canada, news from the Asian region should be an area of civilian concern and interest, and this should be represented in the news from this region.

Asia is also an area of high policy concern for the Canadian government. Included in some of DFAIT’s key priorities are seizing opportunities in the emerging markets of India and China, while CIDA has boasted of many bilateral aid agreements with less fortunate nations in the Asian region. Yet, how often do Canadians read or hear news of these important government priorities and investments? The lack of foreign reporting by Canadians creates a strong disconnect between Canada’s actions abroad and the information disseminated to the public, as Canadians are absent, and international newswires care little about Canadian foreign affairs. In a time when Canada is trying to extend its activities abroad, Canadian media should be sending journalists abroad, not cutting back.

Geoffrey York with the Globe and Mail is one example of a journalist who frequently reports on Canada’s political actions in China. In November of 2007 for example, York wrote an article entitled “Arrested Development” in which CIDA is criticized for giving aid money to a nature reserve in Inner Mongolia that in fact turned into a high-end tourist museum that the locals can’t afford to access. Not your typical big headline news story that would be reported by Reuters or AP, but rather a story geared toward the Canadian public to question CIDA’s actions abroad and hold them accountable for bad decisions, and bad use of taxpayer dollars.

The disturbed state of foreign reporting in Canada is not new; as both the Davey Committee and the Kent Commission criticized the coverage of international news in Canadian media in the 1970’s and ‘80’s. But now, when we live the world of media plenty, with increased access to travel, and faster and easier ways to send and receive information, why is the number of foreign correspondents so low? Why are Canadians actually receiving less variety of information from abroad?

Politicians, the media, and Canadians themselves boast about multiculturalism and making further inroads into minority cultures and communities. But how can this be so when the media can’t even provide the news from a Canadian perspective or accurately represent the multicultural population of Canada, and its role abroad. This could point in the direction of the general Canadian public becoming less informed and developing one stereotypical view of the world.

What Canada needs is to establish a culture of international reporting. Canadian news organizations need to become players in international reporting rather than mere consumers of international news. To use the words of one Canadian foreign correspondent, what we need is “less gloss and polish from the studio, and much more mud on boots.”

Kimberley Brown
The Last Word

Kimberley Brown is a recent graduate of the School of Communications at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia.
THE MICHENER AWARD: Recognition for journalism that makes an impact

The 2007 Michener Award went to The Globe and Mail and La Presse for reporting on the treatment of detainees in Afghanistan.

Call for Entries: Michener Award 2008

The Michener Award is presented annually for journalism that makes a significant impact on the public good. To be selected as a finalist, a news organization must be able to demonstrate that its entry achieved identifiable results. The results may include improvements in public policy, ethical standards, corporate governance or the lives of Canadians.

Winning subjects have ranged from reporting on logging truck safety to misuse of public or private funds and irregularities in the justice and police systems.

The award is presented to an organization rather than an individual. It is open to print, radio and television stations and online journalism. Size is no barrier to success. Previous winners have ranged from national networks and daily newspapers to weeklies and periodicals. The judges are required to take into account the resources available to support the entry.

The contributions of individual journalists to the entries selected as finalists are recognized by invitations to, and participation in, the prestigious annual Awards Ceremony at Rideau Hall in Ottawa.

A senior editor or executive must submit the entry on behalf of a news organization.

All candidates must include five (5) copies of a full written explanation of the entry, including a description of the public service performed and the results that the entry generated. It is helpful to describe the resources that were available to the entry.

All entries must include a registration fee of $50. Payment may be by cheque or money order (no GST required). Credit cards are not accepted.

Entries should be submitted during January 2009 and up to the February 27 deadline. For full details on entry rules please visit our website: www.michenerawards.ca

Entries should be sent to:
Michener Awards Foundation
The Ottawa Citizen, 1101 Baxter Road, Box 5020
Ottawa, Ontario, K2C 3M4

THE MICHENER-DEACON FELLOWSHIP

The Michener-Deacon Fellowship is Canada’s premier award to encourage excellence in investigative print, broadcast, and online journalism that serves the public interest.

The Fellowship is granted annually to a mature journalist for four months’ leave. It provides $30,000 and accountable expenses of up to $5,000 to allow the winner time to complete a project that serves the public interest and enhances the journalist’s competence.

Canadian citizens or residents of Canada who are active in Canadian journalism are eligible to apply. Proposals of direct Canadian interest are preferred.

Applicants are expected to submit five copies of a written outline with supporting documentation for a proposed project. The judges will take into consideration the candidate’s enthusiasm for the project and the quality of the presentation.

Applicants must provide copies of academic records and relevant work history. They should include a written authorization for leave and disclose any additional means of financial support that may be available such as continuing salary and travel expenses.

Study at a Canadian university may be part of a successful application but it is not a requirement. University approval must accompany applications whose projects include such study.

Fellowship projects have included inquiries into the relationship between pharmaceutical companies and research funding at universities, the future of public broadcasting, threats to privacy, and issues arising from Canada’s diversified racial mix.

Applications must include an expression of interest or, preferably, a commitment to publish or air the completed project. The project or a summary must be made available for posting on the website of the Michener Awards Foundation.

Entries for the 2009 Michener-Deacon Fellowship (five copies) should be sent to:
Michener Awards Foundation
130 Albert Street, Suite 1620
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5G4

Deadline for receipt of entries: Friday, February 27, 2009

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