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## World Press Freedom Day: Could you speak out, please?

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*The election campaign's end is the perfect time to take stock of concerns about freedom and transparency in the Canadian media*

The election campaign is over, and there are a number of other things we can start to worry about. Why, you might ask, should one of those things be freedom of the press?

Canadians, after all, are rather well off in this regard. In Freedom House's 2010 index of press freedom, Canada ties for 26th, placing it well within the 69 countries where the press is "free." In contrast, there are 127 countries in which the press is only "partly" or "not" free. The constraints the media face in Canada are, by international standards, rather limited.

But this doesn't mean we should take press freedom for granted. We should still take stock of just how free and transparent things are in the Canadian media, and in politics more generally. The 2011 election campaign, ending the day before World Press Freedom Day, seems to be an opportune time to do exactly this.

Why is this so? Let's note first that election campaigns matter. These are times when many citizens are unusually attuned to political matters. There is more national politics on TV. There are sections of newspapers dedicated to the campaign. There are new election apps.

All of this is important to the success of representative democracy. Democracy requires that citizens understand some of what's going on in politics, at least minimally. And decades of research show that people learn during election campaigns.

Canadian Election Studies have been critical in this regard. They have revealed repeatedly that citizens acquire knowledge during campaigns about the identity of party leaders, the positions of parties, and the campaign promises.

At the start of this year's campaign, for instance, one voter in five couldn't name their "most important issue." By election day, this proportion was down to one voter in 20. The number of those undecided, as well as those who couldn't rate the party leaders, also declined over the course of the campaign.

The mass media are our main source of election information. So campaign news matters because voters are learning during campaigns, and we do most of our learning through the media.

It follows that we need a responsible, diverse and enlightening media. This is a critical precursor of a capable and informed electorate. And press freedom is one critical precursor of this kind of media.

Still, given that Canada rates well internationally, it may not be clear that press freedom should be a major postelection concern. So let's note the following: Where politics is concerned, press freedom is not really different from freedom of information and transparency more generally. Since most of us learn about politics from the news, being concerned about journalists' access to information is not really different from being concerned about our own access to information. And Canadians' concerns about transparency, openness and accountability - while not directed at the media necessarily - have clearly been on the rise.

Journalists and politicians have also become increasingly concerned with access to information. And all these concerns are readily evident in the new Canadian Federal Election Newspaper Content Analysis, conducted at McGill University in conjunction with the Canadian Election Study.

Consider the following results tracking coverage of "accountability," "openness" and "transparency" in election campaign coverage by major English-language Canadian dailies. In 1993, there were 1.9 of these three keywords for every 100 articles. The issue played a rather small role in that election. In 1997, however, coverage increased: 2.7 of these three words were mentioned for every 100 articles.

In the 2011 campaign, 6.7 of these access-to-information keywords were mentioned for every 100 articles. That's surprisingly high compared with the 1990s. Indeed, it's even more coverage than in the 2004 campaign, in the midst of the sponsorship scandal, when there were 5.4 access-to-information keywords for every 100 articles.

This is, of course, an underestimate of the total amount of coverage dedicated to these issues. These keywords do not necessarily capture coverage of the Harper campaign's five-question limit or the unavailability of various parties' candidates during the campaign.

In short, the 2011 campaign reached a record high in media coverage of issues related to the availability of information in the political sphere.

Openness and transparency in politics - essentially, access to information - is one important component of press freedom. Voters, journalists and politicians learn about politics from the mass media; but they're also increasingly concerned about freedom of information. In the coming months, Canadian governments may do well to take to heart some of the themes of World Press Freedom Day.

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