

“Early Childhood Education and Care – Clearly not a ‘Woman’s/Mother’s Issue’: Assessing the Coverage of ECEC in Canadian Newspapers during the 2004 and 2006 Federal Elections”

**Patrizia Albanese**, Interim Chair, Dept of Criminal Justice and Criminology, Ryerson University, [palbanes@ryerson.ca](mailto:palbanes@ryerson.ca); 416-979-5000, ext. 2680;

**Ann Rauhala**, Associate professor, School of Journalism, Ryerson University, [arauhala@ryerson.ca](mailto:arauhala@ryerson.ca);

**Laura Hache**, Research Assistant, Ryerson University

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#### **ABSTRACT:**

We begin with the premise, like Minic (2008, 302), that as a central public forum, mass communication systems, like newspapers, help shape and precondition political rights and attitudes, since they help manage public access to information and political debate. In this paper we content analyze competing assessments of and approaches to child care policy debates—different ideological perspectives--in Canada as filtered through two Canadian newspapers—National Post and Toronto Star—during two federal election campaigns in 2004 and 2006. We assess which paper, if any, makes women’s interests and concerns a central priority (and how) when writing about child care during the two election campaigns. We explore and compare implicit and explicit assumptions about women, gender roles and families presented in newspaper stories about childcare in two Canadian newspapers during two key federal elections. We believe that the journalistic and ideological lens through which Canadians receive news and information is interesting and important to assess.

#### **BRIEF BIOS:**

**Patrizia Albanese**, interim chair of the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, is currently doing SSHRC-funded research on the child care needs and arrangements of employed mothers in rural Quebec and Ontario. She is also doing research on the well-being of youth in Canadian Forces families (also SSHRC-funded; Dr. Deborah Harrison, UNB, as PI); on how child care is depicted in Canadian newspapers (with Ann Rauhala, School of Journalism, Ryerson U.); on the intergenerational transmission of problem gambling (with Dr. Lorne Tepperman, U of T); and on immigrant children (with Dr. Morley Beiser, Psychology, Ryerson U).

**Ann Rauhala** spent 16 years at The Globe and Mail, where she worked as a copy editor, assignment editor, beat reporter, foreign editor and featured columnist. From 1994 to 1997 she was a television reporter, making documentaries, mostly on health and social policy, for CBC television's The National Magazine. Ms. Rauhala won an award from the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women for her beat reporting. The Globe's foreign desk received numerous National Newspaper Awards and honorable mentions during Ms. Rauhala's five years as foreign editor. Until 1999 she was senior editor of CounterSpin, on CBC Newsworld. In 2000, she worked as an editor at The Toronto Star. She is editor of The Lucky Ones, a collection of memoirs by families adopting from China, published by ECW Press in Toronto. The Lucky Ones was named a Best Book of 2008 by Adoptive Families magazine. She is also the recipient of the Dean's Award for Teaching.

## INTRODUCTION:

Canada has been blessed or cursed with having had an unprecedented *five* federal elections over the past eleven years (in 2000, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011). In at least two of these—2004 and 2006—childcare seems to have been a key election issue for almost all parties in the running. A superficial look at the election campaigns and their media coverage may lead some to believe that the interests and needs of children, women, and families have finally become central to politicians in this country. But is this indeed the case?

What I will discuss today is part of a larger project on media coverage of childcare between 2000 and 2007. For today, I will mostly focus on presenting some findings from an analysis of the coverage of two federal elections, in 2004 and 2006, in two major Canadian dailies, the *Toronto Star* and the *National Post*.

This presentation begins with the premise that as a central public forum, mass communication systems, like newspapers, help shape and precondition political rights and attitudes, since they help manage public access to information and political debate (Minic, 2008, 302).

According to Reese (2001: 25), journalists have the ability to frame issues and public deliberations in “a particular way.” As a result, the mass media have the ability—by emphasizing certain issues and downplaying others—to establish reference points and influence personal schemas, attitudes and behaviour (Major and Coleman, 2008; Iyengar, 1991).

This is especially significant when the behaviour to be influenced is voting practices, and which can inevitably affect election outcomes.

Many have noted that the media “assist” people in developing schemas and can indeed significantly influence the public’s perception of candidates and issues (see Major and Coleman, 2008). Reporters use frames to heighten and highlight certain aspects of events or individuals they cover (Devitt, 2002).

Frames have been defined as “principles of selection, emphasis and presentation” composed of implicit views about what matters most (Gitlin, 1980, 6). The power of frames lies in their ability to define the terms of a debate often without an audience’s knowledge; and analyzes of frames reveal different embedded political and ideological leanings (Devitt, 2002). I’ll speak more on this later.

We know that knowledge and facts are not neutral, nor is information a value-free commodity (Thurston, Rutherford, Meadows & Vollman, 2005).

We also know that the ways women’s issues are portrayed in the media have a significant effect on the way these issues are understood by the public, and also affect how women engage in politics and citizenship, because the ways issues are framed by the media tell us how we are valued as citizens.

It is problematic, then, that a review of the literature suggests there is a male bias in the media coverage of social issues in many ways (Elder, Green, 2003, 388; Devitt, 2002, 448). One way in which the media is male dominated is in the use of sources, in particular the gender of expert-sources. Freedman, Fico, and Love found that in American daily newspapers during a Senate election, stories citing only one male expert were 14 times more likely than articles citing only female experts (2010, 67). This has a major effect on how the public, particularly women, understand issues and weigh their importance.

It has also been found that the media often screen out feminist perspectives, or present feminists “in narrow and sometimes unflattering ways” (Schreiber, 2010, 104) [surprise, surprise!].

Trivializing feminist perspectives of women’s issues creates a belittling of women’s issues and causes them to lose political momentum and even fall off the political agenda. Freedman, Fisco and Love conclude that if people trust and rely on the media for information about the opinion of others in their social group, “then the absence of women in news stories...may discourage women from drawing on the media for information about political campaigns”. Alternatively, the absence of reliable sources in news stories may discourage women from civic engagement. This also ensures that certain more critical feminist voices are absent or marginalized, leaving us exposed to more conservative positions, often even in newspapers considered somewhat more “progressive.”

Conservative ideology has played a large part in framing the issue of federally regulated childcare (Teghtsoonian 89, Farney 242). Neo-conservatism is certainly not a homogenous worldview as it is expressed across and within various countries, however, the common components which constitute this ideology are most distinctly:

- 1) a commitment to small government, and with that,
- 2) limited welfare state,
- 3) a push for a “free market,” and
- 4) a commitment to maintaining traditional “family values.”

This latter component is more broadly defined as “social conservatism” which uses public policy to encourage traditional expressions of sexuality and family structure (Farney 243).

Interestingly, and ironically, the Conservative Party of Canada “rejects” social issues as political; and instead presents them as moral issues (Farney, 243). At the same time, since individual party members are left to make their own conclusions based on their “moral stance” on social issues, we end up with a push for a strong conservative agenda through public (social) policy decisions.

The way in which the issue of childcare has been presented in Canada by the Conservatives is deeply rooted in neo-conservative ideology and the conservative resistance to changing roles of women in society, as well as the commitment to the traditional values around the concept of the family (Teghtsoonian 97).

In Teghtsoonian's (100) comparative analysis of the Canadian's responses to child care policy, she found arguments could be categorized into three areas which exemplify the neo-conservative response to social issues in general: institution oriented, market oriented, and family-oriented arguments. Institution-oriented arguments typically regard the conservative opposition to big government, and in the Canadian case, the Conservatives argued that responsibility for childcare policy ought to remain within the jurisdiction of the provinces (Teghtsoonian 100). Market-oriented arguments are expressed as concern for increased costs to bring facilities up to new standards, as well as a concern for discouraging for-profit daycare providers from the free market. Finally, family-oriented arguments generally express apprehension for the intrusion on traditional family model. She notes that the Conservative party's response to federally regulated child care is generally contradictory; she writes that there is a contradiction between these two strands in neo-conservative ideology- between both encouraging women to work outside the home to participate in the labour market *and* encouraging them to occupy the role of full-time mother (Teghtsoonian 414).

### **OVERVIEW OF THE TWO DAILIES:**

For the larger project, we sampled four daily newspapers: the *National Post*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, and the *Ottawa Citizen* (more on this below). For this presentation (paper) I will focus only on The *National Post*—a 'national' newspaper, and The *Toronto Star*—a large-circulation daily thought to exert influence beyond its geographical borders. Each also has a distinct ideological position. The Star, which boasts that it has the largest readership in Canada, has a history of advocacy for social justice and is regarded as liberal or left of centre. Greenberg (2000) characterized the Star as a middlebrow paper catering to a more socially and economically diverse readership oriented to a social-liberal editorial stance.

A competitor, claiming status as a national newspaper, the Post began publication in 1998 with an explicitly right of centre agenda. Greenberg (2000) labeled the Post a right-wing, highbrow broadsheet that generally caters to the political and corporate elite. It is owned by Postmedia Network Inc., formerly CanWest.

### **METHODOLOGY:**

Using *Proquest Newstand*, four research assistants, searched the selected papers for the terms "childcare", "child care", "daycare", "day care." Each recorded dates, headlines, page numbers, reporter's name and URL links articles. During initial collection, many irrelevant articles emerged—items about pet day care, for example, and the team elected to refine the search.

The team decided to exclude letters to the editor—since they do not necessarily reflect a paper's stance, but to keep editorials—since they do. Greenberg (2000) explains that editorials are types of opinion discourse that typically appear in the front section of a newspaper and are the official voice of a media outlet on matters of public importance. Greenberg (2000) notes that the influence of editorials on political opinion-formation is formidable, and unlike conventional "hard" news reporting, editorials blend evaluative propositions (normative prescriptions) and

factual beliefs (social facts). In other words, facts are blended with values, notions of truth and falsity, knowledge and ideas, and the notion of “public opinion,” and as a result, become analytically problematic (Greenberg, 2000). Op-ed articles, on the other hand, are typically on the page opposite the editorial and usually represent the opinion of an individual not employed by the newspaper, who is *permitted* to contribute an opposing opinion. Some stories defied simple categorization – for example a business column – and these were counted as being both.

We included articles in which one of the terms (childcare, child care, etc.) appeared in the 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> paragraphs and at least once elsewhere in the text; to include articles where the term was mentioned three times or more (even when it was not mentioned in the first five paragraphs.) In articles of six paragraphs or less, one mention warranted inclusion. We excluded stories where daycare was offered at an event; advice columns; unaltered press releases and stories where terms referred to foster care, welfare services, etc.

Once rules were set, the research assistants identified and collected *all* articles about child care that appeared from the years 2000 to 2007, recording the stories’ word count and placement within the newspaper. Spreadsheets containing all the eligible child care articles for each newspaper were analyzed to determine the total number of articles for 2000 through 2007.

Between 2000 and 2007—the period of data collection, Canada had an unprecedented four federal elections. As noted above, in two of these, child care was a key issue as outlined in party platforms and campaigns. Child care seemed to be a special focus of attention in the January 2006 federal election (see Figure 1).

--Insert Figure 1 Here--

For this presentation, I focused on the child care stories that appeared in two dailies for the duration of the 2004 and 2006 election campaigns.

We asked:

RQ1: How has childcare been framed (women’s issue/family-oriented; market issue; institution-oriented—Teghtsoonian, 1993) in the 2 newspapers during the 2004 and 2006 Federal election?

RQ2: Which sources (who) have been used and how across the two papers and over the two elections?

RQ3: Has childcare been used to seek the women’s vote? Which women? How?

### **Hypotheses:**

H1: We expected the Star to be the more progressive/ democratic/woman friendly paper compared to the National Post.

H2: We expected more female (parent, politician & activist) and “expert” sources used in the Star, compared to the Post.

H3: We expected that childcare will be used in both papers to attract female voters.

--Insert Table 2 Here--

We first identified the total number of stories published in each paper, in each time period. We read each story thoroughly and for each, recorded the page it appeared on, the sex of the journalist or writer, the headline, the type of story, who was the first source (name, sex and type), the party featured in the piece, the party favoured, the party criticized, and specific positive and negative comments and quotes about childcare. We also counted the number of times the terms “woman,” “mother,” “parent,” “family,” and “choice” were used and how these terms were used in each story.

If a story was characterized as supporting the Liberal party and or its childcare plan, this meant he or she supported Paul Martin’s offer to double federal investment in his nascent national program to \$11 billion. In this plan, federal funds would go to the provinces, which would design their own systems and provide public reporting on their progress. The plan placed no conditions on Quebec, which already had universal \$7-a-day child care. The Liberals believed that child care could be Canada's next signature social program, and that its key goal was early learning.

In sharp contrast, support of the Conservative plan meant support for scrapping the Liberals' fledgling national program. Instead, the Conservatives offer a \$1,200 annual allowance to parents for every child under the age of six -- directed, for tax purposes, to the parent with the lowest income. They promised to allocate \$250 million a year for five years in tax incentives to encourage companies and community groups to build 125,000 new child care spaces. The Conservative plan’s projected cost would be \$10.9 billion. The Conservative platform characterized the Liberal approach as a “one-size-fits-all plan to build a massive childcare bureaucracy”, and promised that their plan, by contrast, provided “freedom of choice in child care... whether that means formal child care, informal care through neighbours or relatives, or a parent staying at home” (Conservative Party of Canada, 2006, p.16).

The New Democratic Party child care plan proposed to spend \$8.7 billion over four years to create 275,000 public and non-profit spaces and increase the federal child tax-credit for poor families to \$1,000. They believe that a publicly operated system will be better run, more accessible, with less variation from one province to the next.

The Bloc Quebecois’ (Canada’s only federal-level separatist, regional party) plan supports the funding of a low-fee child care system although Quebec would resist any attempt to put conditions on federal money or impose national standards.

#### FINDINGS:

During the 2004 election campaign—a 36 day campaign:

- The Star carried 14 stories directly and indirectly on childcare; (.39 stories/day)
- The Post carried 16 (.44 stories/day).

In the 2005-6 campaign, we see an increase in the number of stories, in part because the campaign lasted 55 days, through the December holiday season.

- The Star had 43 stories on cc (.78 stories/day),
- The Post carried 60 stories (1.09 stories/day).

While there were more stories in the 2005-6 period, in both newspaper, there are actually a smaller proportion of childcare stories that made the front pages (or section fronts) of both newspapers.

In 2004:

- 21 % of stories appeared on section fronts in The Star;
- 18.8 % of stories appeared on section fronts in The Post

In the 2005-6 election:

- 4.7% of stories appeared on section fronts in the Star
- 15 % of stories appeared on section fronts in the Post

Being positioned on section fronts signifies importance.

- Through both election campaigns, 2004 and 2005-6, there were more female writer/reporters in The Star (42.9% in 2004; 34.9% in 2005-6) compared to the Post (25% in 2004; 25% in 2005-6).
- Male first sources outnumbered female first sources in both newspapers, in both time periods, yet The Star had more female first sources (2 female first sources in 2004; 4 female in 2005-6) than The Post (0 female first sources in 2004; 4 female in 2005-6).
- In both elections campaigns, The Star contained proportionately more ‘news’ stories on childcare compared to The Post, which carried a wider range of story types including more editorials, business, general interest stories, etc.
- Not surprising, in The Star in both 2004 and 2005-6, had the most stories supporting the Liberals:
  - 3 or 21% of stories favoured the Liberals over other parties in 2004;
  - 19 or 44% of stories in 2005-6.

In contrast, more stories in The Post favoured the Conservative Party of Canada:

- 4 or 25% of stories in 2004, and
- 24 or 40% in 2005-6.
- 

The Star’s support of the Liberals in 2005-6 was exemplified by the following quote: “Martin is also clearly the best among the four leaders in grasping our challenges child care, early learning, higher education...which cumulatively contribute to a strong economy” (Siddiqui, “Disgruntled Liberal Backers Hold key to Vote”, Toronto Star, Jan. 19, 2006, A.17)

An example of an endorsement for the Conservatives found in the Post in 2005-6 was:

- “By providing parents with \$1200 per child per year to spend as they see fit, the Conservatives have shown they trust Canadian parents to make their own decisions about how to care for children and manage a family budget. But not the Liberals” (Editorial, Scot Reid’s Canada, National Post, Dec. 13, 2005, **PAGE #**).

While the Star had more pro-liberal stories in 2004 than pro-NDP, pro-Conservative, and pro-Bloc stories, they also carried stories criticizing the then-ruling Liberals. In 2004, The Star ran four stories that were critical of the Liberals, though they had slightly more—five—that were

critical of the Conservatives. Most of The Star’s criticisms of the Liberals were about Liberal unfulfilled promises, for example: “Or why didn’t the Liberals bring in the national child-care program they are now promoting when they first promised it, 11 years ago?” (“Walking the Planks,” Toronto Star, June 12, 2004).

The Post had 6 stories that were critical of the Liberals in 2004, and no stories critical of the Conservative Party of Canada.

In 2005-6 the newspapers seemed to sharpen their criticisms and stances, with The Star carrying 24 stories critical of the Conservatives (and only 4 critical of the Liberals). The numbers were almost reversed in The Post, with 28 storied critical of the Liberals and 4 critical of the Conservatives.

About the Conservatives, The Star wrote:

- “The Conservatives are downright hostile to the notion of a national child-care program. But recognizing its popularity in vote-rich urban Canada, they tried to defuse the issue last week by instead offering parents direct annual payments of \$1,200 per child” (“Face off, Toronto Star, Dec 11, 2005).

About the Liberals, The Post wrote:

- “The Liberals don’t trust parents to choose the right daycare provider, for the same reason they don’t trust parents to decide whether to put their kids in daycare at all: because, fundamentally, they don’t trust parents” (“Liberal Policy, Disguised as a Gaffe”, The National Post, Dec. 13, 2005).

We got the sense that the Conservative Party of Canada often tossing around the importance of “parental choice” and “trusting and respecting families.” So we became especially interested in knowing if and how each of the papers, during both election campaigns made use of the terms: women, mothers, parents, family and choice.

It was not surprising to find that the terms “women” and “mother” appeared in far fewer stories than the term “parent” or “family” in **both** newspapers, during **both** election campaigns.

Table 3 – Number of Stories that included at least 1 mention of the terms

	Star 2004		Post 2004		Star 2005-6		Post 2005-6	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Total stories during campaign	14	--	16	--	43	--	60	--
“woman”	5	35.7%	4	25.0%	5	11.6%	13	21.7%
“mother”	3	21.4%	2	12.5%	10	23.3%	8	13.3%
“parent”	6	44.4%	9	56.3%	25	58.1%	41	68.3%
“family”	7	50.0%	5	31.3%	24	55.8%	35	58.3%
“choice”	0	0.0%	8	50.0%	21	48.8%	26	43.3%



Again, interestingly, the gender neutral term “parent” appeared in 68% of Post stories in 2005-6, compared to the term “mother,” which appeared in 13.3% of stories and the term “woman” which appeared in 21.7% of stories in the Post in the 2005-6 campaign.

While both papers had equally few references to the terms “women” and “mothers”, they used the terms quite differently. For example in the 2004 campaign, the Star while in only a few stories, it nonetheless directly spoke about childcare as an important issue for women and mothers:

- “If the campaign stays fixed on sharp social-policy differences, it could reopen gender-gap politics that have traditionally pushed **women** toward the Liberal left and away from the Conservative right in past elections”

Another story discussed how women face obstacles in the business world, noting the importance of childcare, even if just in passing.

One story quoted a single mother, who said

- “finding cheap child-care is big-time important for me, so I can work.”

OR: “About 1.3 million of those kids have mothers in the paid work force.”

One story discusses cc as a benefit to low-income mothers

- “benefit of allowing low-income mothers to work”

Interestingly, and in contrast, in 2004, in the Post, the term “women” was actually used to bash the Liberals:

- “They cannot withdraw initiatives put in place to appease the family-friendly lobby and sold as a way of retaining women workers...” (*This is an Office, not a school or nursery*’ Series: *Baby Backlash* June 1<sup>st</sup>)

I especially liked the conservative bias in this quote, as anyone who sought or fought for child care was automatically labelled part of “the family-friendly lobby.” [I wished such a lobby group actually existed!]

This is only part of a preliminary analysis, but what it hints at is that while childcare seemed to finally hit front-page news, especially in the 2004 election, it was not, in either papers, actually treated as a women’s issue or a mother’s issue—except in a few cases in the Star.

Childcare was instead used as a “wedge” issue to help parties distinguish themselves from one another.

Childcare in and of itself was seemingly not that important. Any other social issue at the time could have been used.

The types of stories that ran, who was used as an “expert” or quoted as a first source clearly showed the paper’s ideological biases but not necessarily an interest in digging deeply into the issue and the challenges that mothers face.

This reminds us that the “knowledge” some think they gain through newspapers is neither neutral nor complete. There is bias, and limitations, and clear ideological positions are being promoted through the words and sources they use, but also through the voices they ignore and silence.

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