

**DELIMITING DEMOCRACY?
MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF VOLUNTEERISM**

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INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a study conducted to identify how a selection of Calgary print newspapers represented and framed volunteerism. Emphasis was placed on identifying and discussing differences in coverage between service type volunteerism and advocacy type volunteerism. My contention is that the manner in which the media portrays (or ignores) these different types of volunteerism and voluntary association affect their ability to fully realize their democratic purpose.

A fundamental assumption underlying the study is that volunteerism plays an important role in the achievement and maintenance of democracy. Eminent political scholars from Alexis de Tocqueville to Robert Putnam support this position. De Tocqueville recognized the complicit relationship between the political freedoms of democracy and voluntary association. In his view, democracy allowed for free association which in turn encouraged individuals with common interests to work together and make their views known to governing bodies (de Tocqueville, 1945). Robert Putnam (2000) argued the relationship from a different perspective. He saw voluntary civic association and service as a “school” for democratic or political association; the

stronger the civic association the stronger the environment for democratic governance. One can thus conclude that the political and civic roles that volunteerism serves are important to democratic culture, both constituting it as well as making it manifest.

Newspapers are a key cultural communications vehicle. It is partially from media discourse that individuals create meaning surrounding issues and their cultures. David Taras states: “to argue that the media do not have at least some effect on the shape of public life is the equivalent of arguing that the world is flat or that Tinkerbell and the Tooth Fairy are real.” (1999, p. 30). Two key characteristics of the mass media help to affect public perceptions surrounding volunteerism and voluntary organizations. First, the media play a role in conferring legitimacy on organizations by directing attention to specific voluntary organizations and causes. With so many organizations knocking at the door of the public, the media provide a point of reference that seemingly separate the valid organizations from the fly by night. Second, the mass media can validate volunteerism as a cultural practice; Rausch (2000) found in a study of public attitudes in Japan that positive media coverage played a “role in generating positive volunteer consciousness” (p. 115). Conversely, media discourse that ignores or negates volunteerism can invalidate it as a cultural practice. This relationship can also be extended to newspaper discourse that distinguishes between different types of voluntary action. Media discourse that positively portrays some types of volunteerism over others validates certain acts of volunteerism while at the same time relegating others to relative obscurity. For the voluntary sector then, the newspaper and the mass media have the power to name and define them, certifying what constitutes “reality” in cultural understandings of volunteerism (Gitlin, 1980).

Media scholarship has long put to rest the belief that the media operate as objective mirrors of society. As a result of individual, organizational, and cultural influences, media discourse preferences some views or perspectives on issues over others. The theory of framing helps to explain how this works. Media frames are “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 7). What the daily newspaper includes as “news” and the emphasis they direct to certain aspects of issues define ... and define away cultural perspectives. For the voluntary sector, understanding the media frames surrounding volunteerism and voluntary organizations is essential to their work in communicating their goals, soliciting support and rallying new volunteers.

STUDY DESIGN & PURPOSE

This study employed content analysis and critical discourse analysis to look at the extent and nature of a selection Calgary newspaper frames surrounding volunteerism. Calgary was the site of analysis primarily due to its dedication to volunteerism. In Calgary, largely as a result of the 1988 Olympics, volunteerism is heralded as one of the city’s defining characteristics. The 2002 City of Calgary *Annual Report* states “Calgary is known around the world for its “can do attitude and volunteer spirit” (City of Calgary, 2002, p 5). The newspapers surveyed included the Calgary Herald, the Calgary Sun, the Globe and Mail and the National Post. The non-random sample included any newspaper reports with the term “volunteer” or “voluntary” (or any of their derivatives) printed during National Volunteer Week in 1983, 1993 and 2003. The final sample comprised of 113 articles from those three years.

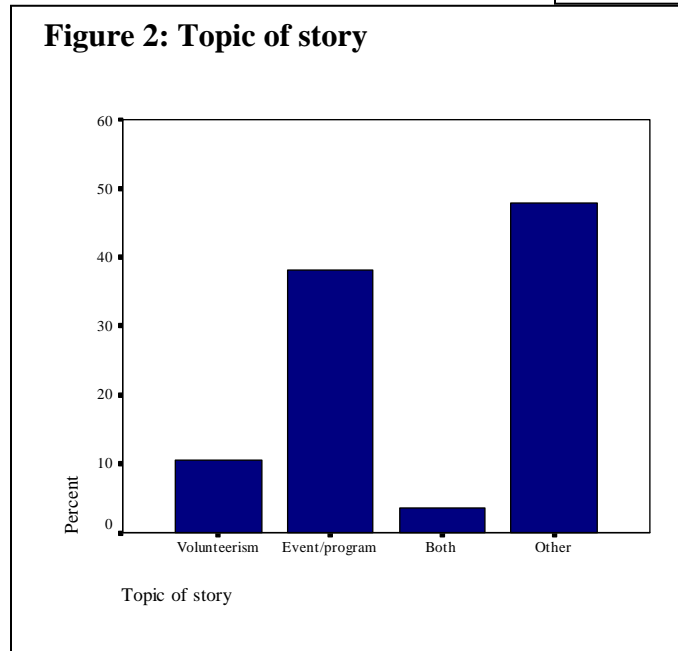
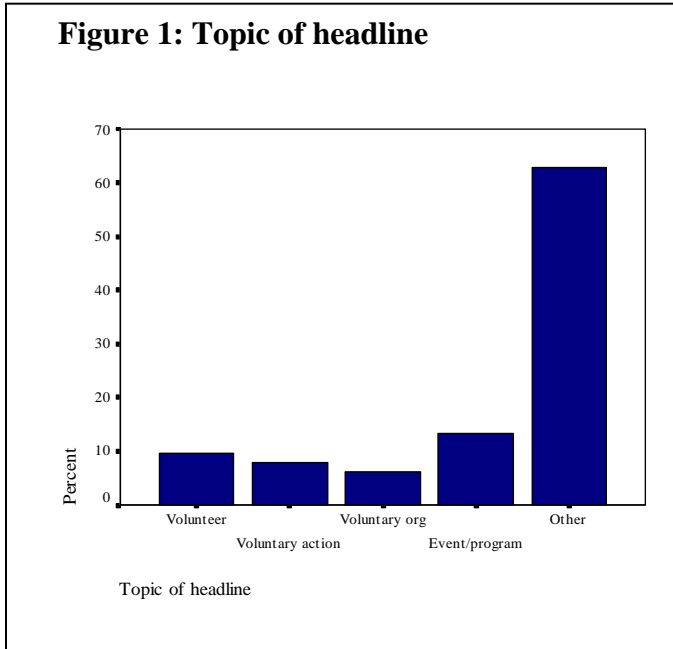
The dominant hypothesis guiding the study was that the media would present and frame service and advocacy volunteerism differently over time and across different media outlets. This hypothesis drew from Smith's (1997) assertion that a "flat earth" (p. 275) view of volunteerism exists (i.e. that the dominant association with the sector is service type organizations resulting in little attention being devoted to advocacy volunteerism), coupled with media scholarship that suggests that the media ignores or negatively portrays groups that challenge the status quo, as much of advocacy volunteerism does. Similarly, Deacon's 1999 study of media representations of voluntary organizations identified patterns of inclusion and exclusion in media representations of volunteerism dependent on the type of voluntary activity that was being reported on. This study attempted to replicate some aspects of the U.K. study in the Canadian context while at the same time extending it by subcategorizing the analysis of the groups being reported on.

Currently, there is little scholarship in Canada exploring media discourse about volunteerism. This study was limited to a critical analysis of a small sample of media messages and the implicit frames that underscored them. It did not investigate the intent of the message producers (the journalists, media organizations, voluntary organizations or volunteers) in the production of these messages. Nor did it attempt to determine the direct effects of the media messages on the media consumer. It is offered as a limited and exploratory study to identify important themes and issues relative to media discourse about volunteerism. As such it provides only a snapshot of media representations of volunteerism in Canada and discussed how these representations could impact the cultural role or meaning associated with volunteerism. Further research activity is required to more explicitly connect patterns of media discourse to cultural understandings of volunteerism.

RESULTS

A key result of the study was, for this sample of media, volunteerism did not generate significant news coverage. In the headlines, which is often the first point of definition of news reports (Pan & Kosicki, 2001), almost 71% did not relate to volunteerism or voluntary activities. (See Figure 1)

In the stories, the issue was also virtually ignored. Only 10.6% of the total coverage of the sample focused on volunteerism. The other 90% of the stories focused on an issue other than volunteerism (47.8%) or an event or program that utilized volunteerism (38.1%). (See Figure 2) For these stories, volunteers and volunteerism was often only a passing mention. The following examples



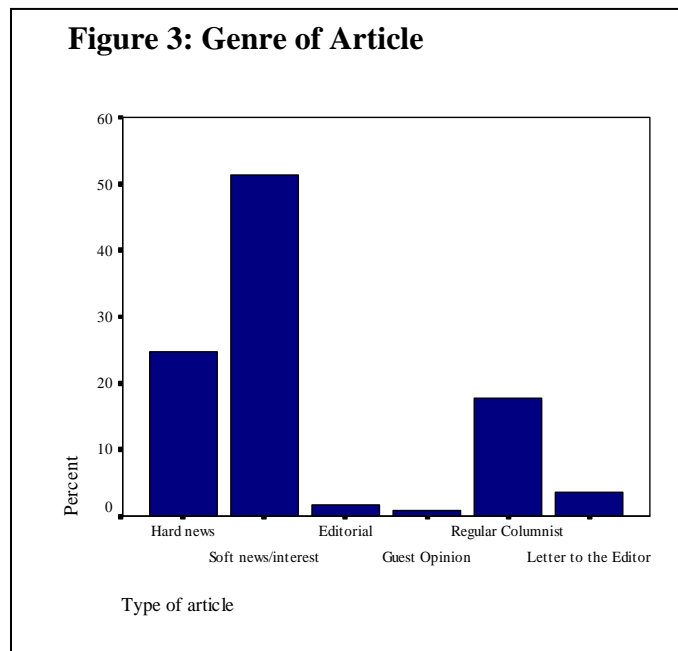
illustrate this point: the news report headlined “Rescuer meets skier he saved 40 years ago” (Calgary Herald, May 1, 2003) was a soft news story focusing on the chance reunion of two men. Included in this story was the following mention of volunteerism: “I figured I’d better get hold of him”, said Carey, now retired and volunteering for Calgary Stampede

Caravan” (Slade, 2003, B1). Volunteerism was but an afterthought. Similar treatment was

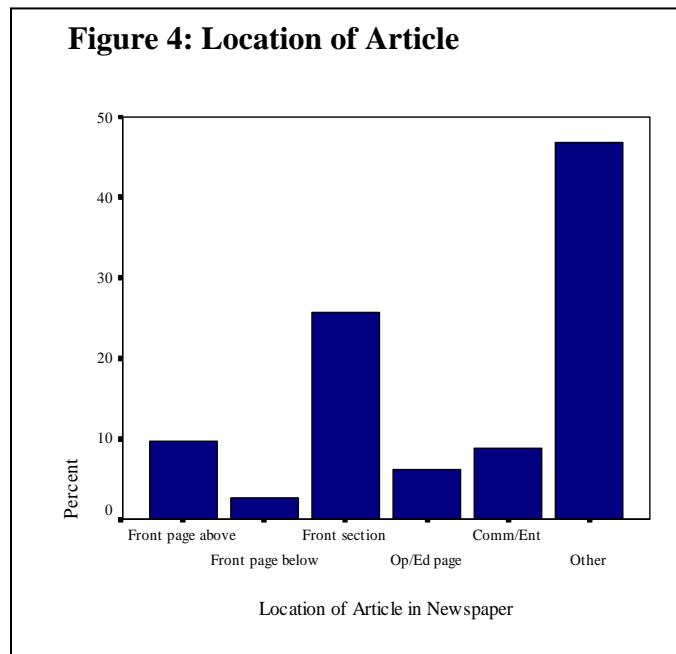
apparent in much of the Calgary Sun coverage in the sample. In the April 22, 1993 article “City’s YMCA stays in shape”, the following mention was made to volunteers and volunteerism: “the report – which paid tribute to the YMCA’s 700 volunteers – announced 1992 revenues increased to \$8,362,514 from \$7,927,256 the year before” (Calgary Sun, 1993, 51). In both of these articles, and many others within the sample, the reference to volunteerism was not pertinent to the story, nor was it discussed or evaluated at any length. Volunteerism was, at best, a tertiary mention in articles focusing on other issues.

Further evidence for the lack of interest in volunteerism within the sample was apparent from the genre and placement of the articles. 51% of the articles were soft news or human interest focused. (See Figure 3). An additional 17.7% of the articles were part of a regular columnist’s submission; many which were also soft news/human interest focused. Within the total sample, the categorization of volunteerism as soft news/human interest grew steadily over time. In the

1983 sample, 33% of the stories were considered soft news, in 1993 this increased to 52% and in 2003, to 65%. Overall, only 24.8% of the stories were hard news focused. However, as indicated above, because only 10.6% of the coverage actually focused on volunteerism as an issue, in most cases, the hard news focus of these stories was on an issue other than volunteerism.



The location of the articles identified in the sample also suggests that volunteerism was not considered pertinent “news” by these media organizations. Overwhelmingly, the articles were printed in locations outside the hard news real estate section of the newspaper (usually identified as the front section or the opinion/editorial page). In only 25.7% of the cases did the front section carry stories about volunteerism. (See Figure 4) Further analysis found that most often the stories that showed up in the front section of the newspaper were housed in the “In your City” or “Community” pages rather than the hard news, issues pages. There were only three instances where articles that included references to volunteerism made the front page of the newspaper. On May 5, 2003, the Globe and Mail article “Cutbacks fed SARS calamity, critics say” included the following mention of volunteerism “it was done despite skimpy resources and with the help of a fractured crisis-management crew that relied on favours, volunteers and “begging and borrowing” everything from software to scientists” (Abraham & Priest, 2003, A1). On April 21, 1993, the Calgary Herald article “Salute to volunteers: Teen’s career is helping kids” (Dawson, 1993, A1) brought attention to volunteer week by highlighting the efforts of one Calgary



volunteer. The same day, in an article that had a more prominent location to the previous one (“Happy 100 years: belly dancer brought centenarian’s wish”) was the following passing mention to volunteerism “Belly dancer Saphira appeared in a skimpy, two piece blue costume and turned the temperature up in the hospital auditorium filled with friends,

relatives and hospital staff and volunteers” (Ketcham, 1993, A1). Of the three articles that made the front page of the newspaper, only one provided in-depth coverage on the value of volunteerism. The others were either a passing mention in a hard news article on another issue or a passing mention in an “infotainment” human interest story.

These findings suggest that the news organizations didn’t perceive volunteerism to be an important issue worthy of critical in-depth coverage. The results can be partially explained in that volunteerism does not align with the typical news values of the mass media. Robert Hackett (2000) states that “the more of the following qualities a story has, the more likely it is to be considered newsworthy:

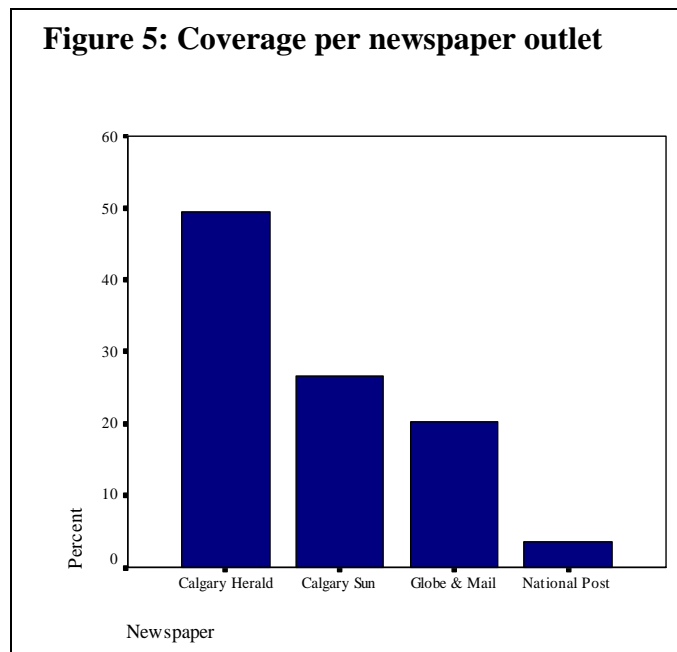
- timeliness;
- relevance to an ongoing topic or theme;
- political significance;
- consistency with journalists’ expectations, or conversely, novelty, shock or scandal;
- drama;
- conflict; negativity (harm, threat, death, destruction);
- scope or scale of impact;
- human interest;
- the involvement of individuals, especially celebrities and power holders” (p. 35).

Volunteerism, at least the service type volunteerism that was predominantly covered in the news reports in this sample (see discussion below) has little political significance, conflict or novelty to attract media attention. It doesn’t bleed, so it doesn’t lead.

Two key characteristics about the media frame surrounding volunteerism were apparent in the reports that did discuss volunteerism and voluntary organizations. First, advocacy and service volunteerism are not equally included in the frame. Second, the media frame ignored the contribution both types of volunteerism make to democratic society.

The dominant representation of volunteerism found in the news reports analyzed was service type community based efforts. The reach of the voluntary action reported on in the sample was predominantly at the community level (61%). This was constant across all news organizations: 66% for the Calgary Herald, 53% for the Calgary Sun, and 52% for the Globe and Mail. It was therefore not surprising that the local newspapers were much more apt to print stories about volunteerism than the national news papers were; the Calgary Herald and the Calgary Sun together represented 76.1% of the total coverage while the Globe and Mail and the National Post represented only 23.9% of the coverage¹. (See Figure 5). Further, in almost 70% of the cases (69.9%) the articles were written by an in-house journalist, columnist or editor. Only 8% of the coverage was sourced from national or outside news services.

In a prior study, Deacon (1999) suggested that local journalists turn to the voluntary sector to generate stories that can be used as fillers and to localize news coverage. Consequently the “topicality” and “generality” of the



volunteerism was found to be an essential component of the news value of that volunteerism.

One can argue that the larger the audience that can associate with the volunteer or volunteer group, the more likely it is to receive media attention. This trend rang true for this study. The most prevalent form of volunteerism reported on in the sample related to health and wellness.

¹ Note that the National Post was only sampled for 2003

Second most popular was volunteerism that benefited children and third was volunteerism related to the environment. In Canada, public opinion poll after public opinion poll confirms that the public health system is the most important issue on the minds of Canadians. It follows then, that for these newspapers, the news value of the volunteerism related to health and wellness was their “topicality” and “generality” of the cause, not the importance of or civic contribution made by the volunteerism.

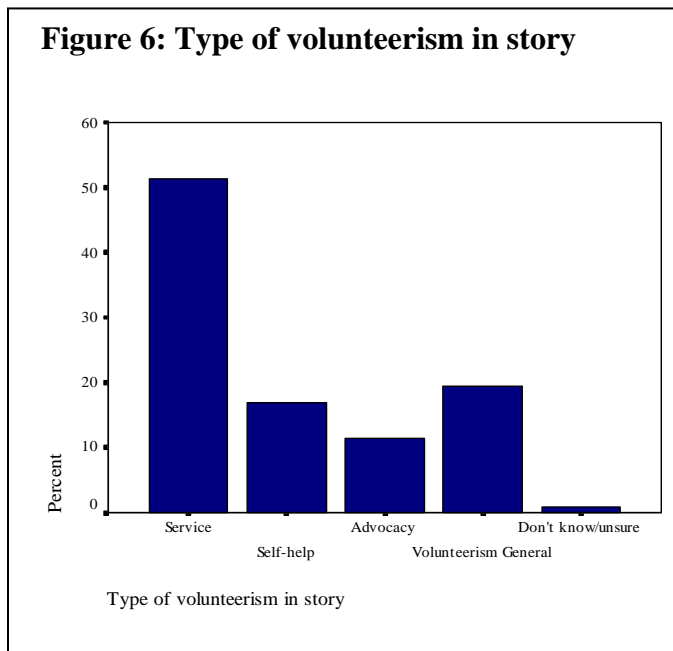
Although further research is required to confirm this point, this practice may have the additional result of virtually obliterating advocacy type volunteerism from the media frame. Lobby and advocacy volunteer groups who often have narrow mandates would likely have little value to a news organization that is looking to associate and affiliate with as many readers as possible.

While many of the voluntary organizations highlighted in the news reports studied had a broad reach, there were a few anomalies that could be seen to be in alignment with the traditional news values of the media, specifically drama, novelty or shock. For example, a Calgary Herald report on May 2, 2003 reported about the Saskatchewan Gopher Derby (Pederson, 2003, A10) and the Globe and Mail on April 21, 1993 reported on the Japan Toilet Association (Raymond, 1993, B7). Admittedly the instances of this type of sensationalistic reporting about service volunteerism were extremely rare. However, it was not uncommon for reports about advocacy volunteerism. Other than volunteerism related to political parties, reports about advocacy volunteerism regularly highlighted the more colourful groups and their actions. Groups such as the Club Compassion of Montreal (a group promoting the legalization of marijuana); the Zapatista Army for National Liberation, and the controversial National Action Committee

received the bulk of the media coverage dedicated to advocacy volunteerism. In these instances it was the otherness of these organizations that was the story, not the volunteerism. The stark contrast in the reporting styles, in addition to the overemphasis of service volunteerism uncovers a media frame that normalizes service volunteerism and systematically defines away advocacy volunteerism.

The polarization of the two types of volunteerism was further evident in the quantity and manner of coverage. In the sample, across all media outlets, service type volunteerism received far greater coverage than advocacy type volunteerism. Over 85% of the coverage concentrated on the volunteerism related to service, charity or hobby groups whereas only 11% of the coverage related to advocacy or grassroots type volunteerism. (See Figure 6). Interestingly, the results across time for this variable found that the focus on service type volunteerism was relatively stable, but that reports on advocacy volunteerism became less prominent over time, dropping significantly in the 2003 sample. These newspapers have over time more clearly articulated a

Figure 6: Type of volunteerism in story



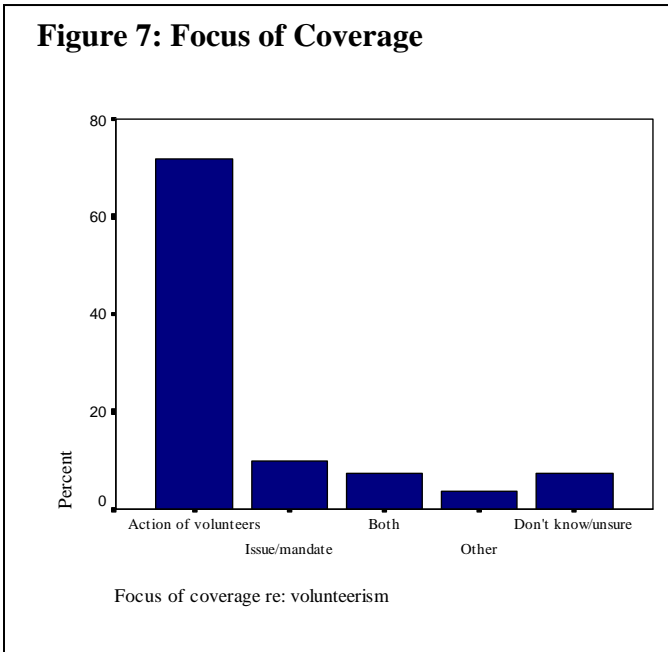
media frame surrounding volunteerism that includes almost exclusively service type volunteerism.

The discourse within the media reports provides further evidence for the argument that the media frame surrounding volunteerism delineates between service volunteerism and advocacy volunteerism.

The following examples are illustrative of this point. One article about service volunteering in the Calgary Herald stated “today the city is sitting down about 100 Calgarians for lunch as a thank you gesture for knocking themselves out in the past year through hours and hours of volunteer work” (In our City, 1993, B1). Another stated: “Volunteer Esther Rock, gets up at 4 a.m. to do her housework so that she will have her days free to drive cancer patients for treatment...” (Mainstreet Calgary, 1983, F6). Conversely, from the few articles including references to advocacy volunteerism, came the following excerpts: “I am a Christian and I feel that my mandate is to live a Christian life, and I have to help those who are in trouble” the volunteer at Aid for Women which supports pregnant women’s said in an interview. We have hundreds of women coming to our doors who regret their decision to have an abortion.” (Fine, 1993, A7). “Ms Rebick called on Prime Minister Brian Mulroney to toss Mr. MacDougall out of the Conservative Caucus” (CP, 1993, A6). These excerpts illustrate how service volunteerism was presented by these newspapers as being highly valuable for society, and conducted by individuals who are heroic in their efforts and personal sacrifices. Advocacy volunteerism and volunteers on the other hand were portrayed in a less positive light with coverage focussing not on their value to civic society but rather on the militant efforts of individuals seen to be forwarding their own personal agendas.

Finally, and perhaps most concerning, was that the media coverage of the volunteerism in the sample, regardless of whether it was service or advocacy in nature, rarely discussed its integral role in (democratic) society. Volunteers and voluntary organizations were more likely to get coverage of their actions rather than their issues; 71.8% of the coverage in the sample focused on the actions of the volunteers as opposed to the issues or mandate of the

voluntary organization (10.0%) (See Figure 7). This emphasis was relatively constant across news organizations; Calgary Herald 69%; Calgary Sun 77%; and Globe and Mail 65%.



Tuchman (1978) and others argue that news routines and processes deal with tangible events rather than philosophical issues. Episodic coverage therefore is not exclusive to news reports about volunteerism. This emphasis on the actions of volunteers, often performed at social or public events, however does little to assist voluntary organizations in achieving their mandates of bringing

issues to the public debate and garnering public support. As suggested by Deacon (1999) “collectively these findings suggest ... a broad lack of interest in reflective debate about their actions, motives, opinions and functions” (p. 59).

CONCLUSION

The study of the media frames surrounding volunteerism in the four newspapers available in the Calgary market suggested that these newspapers subscribe to and perpetuate the flat earth view of volunteerism. In our media saturated society, the media have the ability to “name the worlds parts” and “certify reality as reality” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 6). “Reality” is what comes to be included and valorized in media reports. That which is not included or that which is ridiculed gains no stature. The findings from this study suggest that “reality” according to these four newspapers is

the local, service type voluntary actions that support community events. Any organization or practice of volunteerism that falls outside of this definition is relegated to obscurity and therefore must work very hard through alternate means to gain legitimacy and validity in the eyes of the public.

Further, the overall lack of coverage and the anodyne treatment of volunteerism when there was coverage ignores the important role the sector plays in democratic society. This has far reaching implications for both the voluntary sector and the society in general. Coverage that ignores the contribution volunteerism makes also ignores the tremendous political and social value it has for society. This disassociation does little to repair and could perpetuate the democratic malaise that plagues North American societies. Further, the negative representation of advocacy volunteerism has direct consequences to democratic practices. Media discourse that values only the service aspects of volunteerism and delegitimizes its role in public debate and public policy, effectively sets limits on democratic participation. Negatively portraying advocacy efforts ensures that “voting remains the only citizen feedback ... that counts” (Gans, 2003, p. 116). Negative coverage surrounding advocacy volunteerism may also dissuade individuals and groups from becoming involved in these types of voluntary organizations. Without volunteers, these voluntary organizations are not sustainable.

The manner in which the media portrayed and ignored the different types of volunteerism if internalized by volunteers and non volunteers has the ability to affect how the public understands volunteerism and its role in society. This in turn has the ability to delimit democracy by affecting the ability for our voluntary sector to fully realize its democratic purpose.

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