

Who Was Really #StandingWithWendy:

A content analysis of Canadian and American online news coverage of Senator Wendy Davis's filibuster of Senate Bill 5 in the Texas Legislature

Introduction

On June 25th, 2013, the world watched as Texas Democrat Senator Wendy Davis exercised an amazing demonstration of physical and mental strength to delay the passage of Senate Bill 5 regarding abortion laws in a special legislative session in Texas. To do so, she staged a filibuster: a political technique used in parliamentary proceedings to extend a debate on a piece of legislature past a deadline in order to delay its passage. During a filibuster, politicians are held to very strict regulations in an effort to legitimize their actions as an acceptable political method; these regulations include lack of access to food, water, and washrooms, a requirement to continue relevant discussion uninterrupted, and an obligation to remain standing the entire period. This was a small price to pay for Senator Davis, who took both a literal and symbolic stand for what she believed in. With this filibuster of Senate Bill 5, which would severely restrict abortion accessibility in the state of Texas, she was able to prevent the passage of a piece of legislation that she believed was the “most anti-woman, anti-family legislation that Texas has ever seen” (Jennifer Quinn). Senator Davis proved herself a force to be reckoned with as she refused to compromise her efforts to represent women and advocate for gender equality.

Originating from the hands of the Republicans, Senate Bill 5 would introduce new regulations on abortion procedures in Texas that would make it one of the strictest states in the country regarding abortion policies. In the United States, the legality of abortion operates under a

federal system whereby each individual state has the authority to impose their own laws on the matter (Centre For Reproductive Rights 2013). Under this new legislation in Texas, abortion would be banned after 20 weeks of pregnancy, doctors performing the procedure would be required to have admitting privileges at nearby hospitals, and clinics would be held to the same surgical standards as other health centres in the area. Effectively this would result in a closure of the mass majority (37 of 42) of abortion clinics in the state and therefore severely restrict access for women (Chris Tomlinson and Jim Vertuno.) Senator Davis took to the floor to oppose this bill and these limitations, and to stand up for women's health and women's rights.

As Senator Davis fearlessly protested away in her filibuster, the world began to tune in. Broadcast news networks were slower tuning into the spectacle but within hours Senator Davis became an international internet sensation especially on social media websites. This event went beyond an act of political theatre with citizens as mere spectators; it rallied citizen support and fostered active political participation both online and in person by organizing collective action such as protests in the legislature and letter writing campaigns to other public officials. Blue Knox and Erica Woolf describe this impact: "With all the ferocity of a lion she bravely stood; for choice, for women, and for our generation. Senator Davis couldn't have predicted just how far her determination would resonate with others. From Austin to Edmonton, around the world and on the internet, her audacity was applauded." Davis' filibuster was very evidently an impactful event that permeated media and discussion of gender politics in current debate, and will continue to set a precedent for future generations.

Because Davis became a headline across the world, her filibuster presents an important avenue for further research that examines the relationship between gender politics and the mass media. This research study seeks to examine how selected Canadian and American online news

sources reported on Senator Wendy Davis' filibuster of Senate Bill 5 on June 25th, 2013. It examines several elements of the coverage, including the visibility of Senator Davis in the coverage, the use of gender stereotypical descriptions of Senator Davis, the overall coverage of the abortion policy, and the overall tone towards Senator Davis. Examining North American media coverage of Senator Davis' filibuster will cover two important topics in the subject of gender politics in the mass media: how women politicians are presented and how women's issues are discussed. This analysis will determine how Canadian and American coverage converge and diverge, and the ways in which their national standards on the status of women influence the coverage.

Significance and Literature Review

Previous research on how female politicians are depicted in the media has revealed consistent discriminatory conclusions. Despite the advances women have made in society, specifically in the public sphere and in political arenas, societal attitudes have not kept pace. As such, females active in political positions are often scrutinized and criticized according to gender stereotypes, and this is proliferated in the mass media. Cindy Burke and Sharon Mazarella identify this issue: "Studies of news coverage of female political candidates provide compelling evidence of the gender biases in news reporting. This is partly because high-level participation in the political sphere by women across the globe is still a relatively recent phenomenon. . .this non-traditional aspect that often leads to the tendency to frame women in a different light than their male counterparts" (398). For this reason, it becomes particularly important to dissect media practices and portrayals.

The media remains one of the largest vehicles for the transmission of political information, and as such has a major effect on the socialization of political ideas. Rand Dyck stresses the importance of this feature of political socialization as it is what helps individuals build their political values, attitudes, information, and overall opinions (282). This includes socialization about both the players and the game: the politicians and the issues. Therefore, the ways in which media choose to report on female politicians has a great influence over political opinion and their overall success. By examining coverage of how Senator Davis was depicted as an individual, the use of gendered biases can be assessed in both Canadian and American coverage to reveal their impact on depiction of the event at large, and national attitudes towards gender.

The depiction of political issues that are women's issues is also an important factor to consider in the examination of media coverage. Senator Davis's filibuster of Senate Bill 5 targeted legislation around abortion, a controversial and highly contested subject, which increases the significance of its framing in media representation. As Lance Bennet contends, "The American information system can produce impressive levels of good information and public deliberation, leading publics and policymakers to helpful understandings of complex social problems. Issues receiving such rich news deliberations most often tend to be personal matters, from moral values to jobs and taxes, over which there is considerable public conflict" (21). Next, it is important to ensure that the media plays a fair role in covering this topical issue, so as not to proliferate bias gendered attitudes that would render it inferior. Because women are still regulated to an 'other' position in the current heteronormative and patriarchal society, it would be reasonable to predict coverage around a women's issue would not be portrayed as mainstream or significant. Craig Leonard Brians and Steven Greene note the importance of this:

“With abortion policy presenting a highly emotional issue and continuing pitched battle over its future in this country, the degree of accuracy with which the press represents groups’ policy positions is of paramount importance” (3). For the media to give equal, balanced, and fair coverage to abortion policy would mean to give women’s issues proper treatment, and be a move towards ending gender discrimination.

Looking specifically at Canadian and American coverage adds significant insight into the study of gender politics and the mass media, because it reveals North American gender ideals including a standard on the status of women. In general, Canada falls more to the left on the political spectrum than the United States, and as such Canada upholds a greater emphasis on particularism, diversity, tolerance, and the recognition of group rights over individual rights (Dyck 258). Another difference between the two countries is the heightened importance of egalitarianism in Canada, which suggests equality for all people in the face of diversity. Dyck highlights this difference:

One striking example of the claim that Canada is more egalitarian than the United States is in the constitutional equality of women. In the United States a proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the constitution failed to pass, whereas at about the same time, Canada adopted a strong guarantee of gender equality (including affirmative action) in the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Charter also aims to guarantee equality and prevent discrimination on many other grounds such as ethnicity, religion, age, and sexual orientation (260).

It is also crucial to recognize that Canadian women have moderately higher rates of legislative representation in parliament in comparison to women in the United States (The World Bank 2013). Indeed this signifies greater political representation of the female voice, and could imply more representation of women’s issues in Canada. Also important to note are the differences in abortion laws between each country; this proves to be one of the most significant differentiating factors in determining their attitudes toward women. Abortion has been decriminalized in

Canada for over forty years, with full access being granted in 1988 during the Morgentaler case involving reforms to the Canadian Criminal Code (Dyck 159). In contrast to the federal system the United States maintains on abortion laws, this presents an advancement and recognition of women's rights and asserts their bodily autonomy. In these ways, Canadian social and political culture has proved to be arguably more advantageous for women than in comparison to the United States. By comparing Canadian and American coverage of a political event by a woman for women, conclusions can be drawn regarding the similarities and differences of national attitudes of gender equality.

Methods

For this research study, a content analysis was performed. A sample of Canadian and American news articles covering the June 25th filibuster by Senator Davis against Senate Bill 5 were selected and measured for the visibility they provided of Senator Davis, their descriptive techniques, the coverage of the abortion policy they provided, and the overall tone towards Senator Davis (see Appendix 1.)

A selection of 16 Canadian news articles and 16 American news articles were selected and analyzed from online newspapers. During the study, two Canadian articles were removed from their respective websites, which lowered the sample size down to 14 Canadian news articles and 16 American news articles. The reduced sample size still remained sufficient for the study and did not skew the results. Articles were collected using online search engines from the following sources: *National Post*, *The Globe and Mail*, and *The Star* from Canada, and *CNN*, *New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* from the United States. These sources were covered because they maintain some of the largest audiences in their respective countries, are extremely

reputable, and all focus on national coverage. Efforts were made to collect samples from across the ideological spectrum, so as to reduce bias. Online sources were chosen because of the increased preference of citizens to use the Internet as a source of political information (Dyck 293).

Visibility is the first variable measured in this study. It is important to consider the visibility offered to Davis' in media coverage of this filibuster because it helps determine if Senator Davis is being described as an object in this event, or as an individual playing an active role in the political process. A consideration of visibility is especially relevant for this study because women are often depicted as objects in media representations, and men are represented as power players. As Michelle Bligh et al., assert: "Overall, women candidates and women politicians tend to receive less coverage than do men and to receive more coverage on women's issues, and are frequently portrayed as less viable candidates" (566). Assessing visibility also helps determine whether or not Senator Davis is permitted a voice, and the ability to represent herself and the issue of women's rights, rather than having her representation constructed by the media. Burke and Mazarella speak to the importance of this: "The use of primarily male sources perpetuates the impression that males are the main purveyors of knowledge and expertise in a given culture" (2008, 402). For the purposes of this study, the visibility of Senator Davis is measured by whether or not she was named in the article's headline, whether she was named with or without her professional occupational title, and whether she was cited as a source in the article.

Professional versus personal naming is differentiated by whether or not her political title of "Senator" is included or ignored in coverage. The most common title usage was coded for each article, because articles frequently interchanged between personal and professional titles, therefore coding with the most popular format gave the most accurate depiction. Citations were

coded based on both direct and paraphrased quotations, permitting they were originally spoken by Senator Davis. This coding scheme for visibility was largely derived from previous work done by Burke and Mazarella and Linda Trimble and Joanna Everitt (2008, 2010). Visibility measurements have proven to be extremely useful and revealing in past research and will be one of the main factors in differentiating between how Canadian and American media depicted Senator Davis' political event.

The ways in which the media sources examined describe Senator Davis were explored by examining the use of gendered mediation, personalization, and sexualisation. These forms of gendered media coverage are frequently used against female politicians as a way to detract from their professional activities, and delegitimize their competency to fill positions of power. Gendered mediation describes any language that makes a reference to gender without being relevant to context, or when a gender neutral alternative could have appropriately been substituted. According to Burke and Mazarella, "gendered mediation is a type of framing that results when journalists use language differently depending on the sex of an individual or the gender-relevance of an issue" (397). Personalization involves any reference to the private sphere of a politician's life, without any importance to the rest of the discussion. This most often includes mentioning appearance, family, and sexuality, and is by and large disproportionately used against women in comparison to men. As Trimble and Everitt explain, "Personalization is assessed by the extent to which a politician's coverage focuses on them as an individual, on their private lives, or on their intimate selves" (57). Lastly, sexualisation entails rhetoric that relies on sexual references to describe an individual. Again, in previous research this has predominantly been used against women, often in efforts to annihilate them in areas that have been traditionally male-dominated. This definition has been constructed using Karbin Vasby Anderson's previous

work on the ‘pornification’ of political culture. Anderson defines the use of this concept as “sexuality in contexts that are otherwise not normally sexualized, and through the use of crude humour or gender based parody disciplines individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms” (335). Analysis of examples of gendered mediation, personalization, and sexualisation reveal the ways in which the sample sources treated Senator Davis alternatively due to the fact she is a female politician, and the ways in which these were used to support or oppose her actions in Canadian versus American media.

Evaluation of media sources’ coverage of the abortion issue is categorized as legitimizing, delegitimizing, or neutral. Qualifications for a legitimizing tone are any source that legitimizes abortion by including a dominant viewpoint that could be considered pro-choice, or that is in opposition to the restrictions to abortion access proposed by Senate Bill 5. A source is considered delegitimizing if it favours the viewpoint that supports Senate Bill 5 and seeks to strictly regulate or restrict the use of abortions; this could be considered a pro-life stance. Neutrality is designated to any source that provides equal discussion of both sides of the issue, or that focuses on discussion of Senator Davis without significant reference to the abortion policy itself. This coding system is derived from previous work done by John Crothers Pollock, James Lee Jr. Robinson and Mary Carnel Murray. Their coding scheme designated their labels as follows:

Articles were coded in three categories suggested by Hurwitz, et, al.: (legitimizing)—the dominant content of the article presented the position (elective abortion) as legal, competent, cooperative, stable, peaceful, progressive, non-exploitative, and/or moral; (delegitimizing)—the dominant content of the article presented elective abortion as illegal, uncooperative, threatening, disunited, leaderless, arrogant conflictive, oppressive, unintelligent, and/or immoral; and (balanced/neutral)—the dominant content of the article presented elective abortion without any favorable or unfavorable traits or with an equal amount of both types of material (545).

Classifying the articles as legitimizing, delegitimizing, or neutral towards the abortion policy will provide one of the clearest areas to examine the differences and similarities between Canadian and American media coverage of Senator Davis' filibuster.

Lastly, articles are evaluated to determine if their overall tone is supporting, opposing, or neutral toward Senator Davis' actions. A supportive tone provides the most coverage in favour of Davis' position, as well as predominantly positive descriptors of the event. An opposing tone focuses more on the critical aspects of the event, and features negative, condemning linguistic devices to describe the filibuster. A neutral qualification includes articles that provided equal representation of supporting and opposing viewpoints, and articles that focused more on the abortion policy than on Senator Davis herself.

Results

The results of these research findings demonstrated several differences amongst Canadian and American coverage. Visibility was measured by use of Senator Davis as a source, naming in headline, and type of title attributed to the politician. Sourcing was present in 50% of Canadian articles, and 44% of American. The majority of both Canadian and American coverage did not include Senator Davis' name in the headline; only 43% of Canadian and 44% of American article made the politician visible in this way. Of those that did, 36% of Canadian coverage used her personal name and only 7% used her professional title. To contrast, every occurrence of Senator Davis' name in American headlines only used her personal name. This amounted to 44% of the American articles. Throughout the rest of the articles, the majority of Canadian coverage, 71%, referred to the politician with her professional title, while only 56% of American coverage chose to do so.

Descriptions of Senator Davis were counted by each individual occurrence, not per article, therefore it is possible several types of these descriptors were present in a single article while being completely absent in other articles. However, total counts suggest that one occurrence of gendered mediation, personalization, or sexualisation was present once per article (on average) for both Canadian and American coverage: 14 examples were found in Canadian coverage, and 15 examples were found in the American samples. Gendered mediation constituted 43% of these descriptors of Senator Davis in Canadian coverage, and 33% of American coverage.

Personalization made up 57% of the Canadian descriptors, and 67% of American. The use of sexualisation was completely absent in all of the coverage of Senator Davis' filibuster analyzed in this study.

Each article was coded as legitimizing, delegitimizing, or neutral towards abortion access. The mass majority of Canadian articles, at 79%, demonstrated legitimizing coverage, taking a pro-choice stance, and opposing Senate Bill 5. The remainder displayed a neutral attitude, meaning absolutely none of the Canadian article exhibited support for the restrictive abortion policies outlines in the proposed legislation. American coverage evidenced 60% legitimizing, 37% neutral and 3% delegitimizing coverage.

In the final stages of the study, coverage from each country was analyzed for attitudes toward Senator Davis. Again, the majority of Canadian coverage at 79% showed support for Senator Davis' feat in their rhetoric. The remainder was divided, with 14% demonstrating neutrality, and 7% taking an opposing stance. In America, the majority again was supportive of Senator Davis, but only by 69%, ten percentage points lower than Canadian coverage. Neutrality was exhibited by 19% and an opposing view by 12% of the U.S. articles in the sample.

Discussion

The results of this study reflect what previous research about depictions of female politicians in the media and differences in political and social cultures between Canada and America have suggested. Overall, the outcomes were not surprising, as they remained in line with national attitudes and policies towards the status of women, with Canada presenting a more favourable and legitimate view of Senator Davis as a female politician. However the research results did reveal some interesting nuances.

The results in the visibility category remained fairly consistent between the countries, save for the personal vs. professional name distinction. In this category overall, Canada's media sources provided more representations of Senator Davis through naming her in the headline, and using her as source, but these were only marginal differences. Both countries used Senator Davis herself as a source at a low rate, which indicates she was not permitted to represent herself in the content. However, the use by Canadian media of Senator Davis' professional distinction was much more frequent than in American coverage. In this way, Canada did a much better job of representing Senator Davis as a professional, distinguished, and legitimate political player than did America. Canadian news coverage permitted Davis to represent herself, and depicted her as having an active, agentive role in the political process, rather than presenting her as simply an object of political discourse. These results indicate that the Canadian media on a larger scale helps legitimize women politicians, in this case Senator Davis, and foster gender equality, which is congruent with the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the country towards women as a whole.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that each country failed to overcome the stereotypical gendered journalistic practices of using gendered mediation and personalization to

describe female candidates; they did however completely refrain from the use of sexualisation which is potentially an important sign of progress. When used, the personalization technique most frequently centered on Senator Davis' shoe choice for the filibuster, and her personal narrative as a former teen mom turned Harvard graduate. These storylines were found consistently between both countries' coverage. Gendered mediation occurred more amongst Canadian coverage, and personalization was more prevalent in American articles. No substantial conclusions can be drawn from this difference.

It is important to note, however, that the use of gendered mediation and personalization were not always used to delegitimize Senator Davis as a competent politician, which is contrary to previous research. In fact, these framing strategies were commonly used to add weight to Davis's position, and often added in an attempt to further demonstrate the significance of her achievement. For example, one use of gendered mediation by American journalist Jena McGregor demonstrates a supportive tone: "Davis spoke with the kind of authenticity, authority, and credibility that no man- and even few women in the legislature- could ever have." Heather Mallick, another journalist writing for an American publication, provides a positive example of personalization by describing her shoe choice as, "an emblem of what women have to endure in places that hold them in contempt" and "guaranteed to outrun patriarchy on race day." Lastly, McGregor writes supportively while highlighting Davis' transition from single teenage mother to Harvard graduate by arguing that "her personal story lends her real authenticity and credibility." Yet, this was also easily spun in the opposite direction, and framed in an insulting manner to criticize Senator Davis' opposing stance to Senate Bill 5. One such example from Mallick demonstrates this tendency: "Texas Governor Rick Perry made a highly personal criticism on Thursday of Wendy Davis, the state senator who thwarted a Republic protest to restrict abortion,

saying she had not learned from her own experience as a teenage mother born to a single mother.” Coverage of Senator Davis’ filibuster provides an anomalous example of the ways in which gendered mediation and personalization can be using in a positive, supportive manner, although their general use still leaves much room for debate.

The results of the analysis of coverage of the abortion policy remain in line with the national policies and mainstream public opinion on gender equality of the respective countries. That the majority of Canadian coverage legitimized abortion policies and supported Senator Davis’ stance for safe and easy access to abortion is reflective of the national standard in Canada that has made the right to abortion a legal right and arguably a socially accepted norm. This reality is again pronounced in the fact no articles in this study presented abortion as illegitimate. While a fair number of articles expressed a neutral stance, this can be understood as an effort to produce balanced coverage. Less than half of American coverage took a legitimizing perspective on abortion, which is not surprising considering that abortion policy and women’s rights remain highly contested political issues in the United States. For this reason it is not surprising that a small proportion of the American coverage was suggestive of delegitimizing abortion, while half took a neutral stance. In this category, Canadian and American coverage diverged more evidently on the coverage of the abortion policies proposed under Senate Bill 5, but reflected national norms and opinions.

Lastly, Canadian and American coverage demonstrated differences in the depiction of Senator Davis as an individual. Canada had higher rates of supportive attitudes, and lower rates of oppositional attitudes in comparison to America. Neutrality was more frequently exhibited among American coverage. However, the differences between the two rates were not overly substantial. In addition, they remained along predicted outcomes based on national standards

towards women in politics and women's rights. Canada as a country exhibits much more egalitarian attitudes than the United States, and has had much greater relative success in achieving gender equality; the findings that Canadian coverage favoured Senator Davis at a greater rate than American coverage remain consistent with national attitudes. In conclusion, Canadian and American coverage diverged in predictable patterns, and did not appear to exhibit any ideological shifts.

Conclusion

This paper presented the results of quantitative content analysis comparing Canadian and American coverage of Texas Democrat Senator Wendy Davis' filibuster of Senate Bill 5. Overall, Canadian coverage did a better job of representing women politicians and women's political issue in legitimate and positive ways. This became most obvious in their predominant use of a professional versus a personal title in coverage, in legitimizing attitudes toward access to abortion, and in overall support for Senator Davis taking a stand towards having women's right to access to abortion recognized. While Canadian and American coverage diverged in nearly every category, it was not to an extreme extent and remained in line with social and political norms regarding gender equality in each country. The most interesting finding of this research is the use of gendered mediation and personalization to add support to Senator Davis' actions. Further research may classify each instance of these gender stereotypical descriptions as either supporting or opposing of a politician. Due to the nature of the examples used in this study, this case study may simply be anomalous. It would also be interesting to add coverage of the bill later passing despite efforts to block it. While the bill was signed into law a month later rendering Senator Davis' actions legally unsuccessful, the filibuster did spark international debate and political activism which will continue the battle for women's health and gender equality. Senator

Davis' June 25th, 2013 filibuster will thus remain a benchmark example of the impact that the sheer will and endurance of one determined politician to stand up to the injustices of gendered discrimination can have. Social change, legal change, and media change are inseparable, and if the marginal improvements in ending gender based discrimination in reporting present in this research study continue to increase, gendered discrimination in the political sphere will continue to be conquered.

Appendix 1- Tables

Table 1: News Articles in Sample, by Country of Origin

	Canadian	American	Total
Number of Total Articles	14	16	30
% of articles	47%	53%	100%

Table 2: Sourcing

	Canadian	American	Total
Use of Wendy Davis as a Source	7 (50%)	7 (44%)	14 (47%)
No Use of Wendy Davis as a Source	7 (50%)	9 (56%)	16 (53%)
Total	14 (47% of total/100% of Canadian)	16 (53% of total/100% of American)	30 (100% of total)

Table 3: Headline Sourcing

	Canadian	American	Total
Personal Name in Headline	5 (36%)	7 (44%)	12 (40%)
Professional Name in Headline	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	1 (3%)
Not Named In Headline	8 (57%)	9 (56%)	17 (57%)
Total	14 (47% of total/100% of Canadian)	16 (53% of total/100% of American)	30 (100%)

Table 4: Personal vs. Professional Sourcing

	Canadian	American	Total
Personal Naming	4 (29%)	7 (44%)	11 (37%)
Professional Naming	10 (71%)	9 (56%)	19 (63%)
Total	14 (47% of total/100% of Canadian)	16 (53% of total/100% of American)	30 (100% of total)

Table 5: Use of Gendered Descriptive Techniques

	Canadian	American	Total
Gendered Mediation	6 (43%)	5 (33%)	11 (38%)
Personalization	8 (57%)	10 (67%)	18 (62%)
Sexualisation	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	14 (average of 1 use/Canadian article)	15 (average of 1 use/0.9775 articles)	29 (average of once every 0.9666 articles)

Table 6: Attitudes Toward Abortion Coverage

	Canadian	American	Total
Pro-Choice/Legitimizing Abortion	11 (79%)	7 (44%)	18 (60%)
Pro-Life/Delegitimizing Abortion	0 (0%)	1 (6%)	1 (3%)
Neutral	3 (21%)	8 (50%)	11 (37%)
Total	14 (47% of total/100% of Canadian)	16 (53% of total/100% of American)	30 (100% of total)

Table 7: Attitudes Toward Senator Davis

	Canadian	American	Total
Supportive of Senator Wendy Davis	11 (79%)	11 (69%)	22 (73%)
Critical/Opposing Senator Wendy Davis	1 (7 %)	2 (12%)	3 (10%)
Neutral	2 (14%)	3 (19%)	5 (17%)
Total	14 (47% of total/100% of Canadian)	16 (53% of total/100% of American)	30 (100% of total)

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