



## Policy crisis conference questions media's influence

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The influence of national media's rhetoric on Canadian public policy was called into question during a panel as part of a two-day Public Policy in Crisis conference, organized by the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, which attracted major players involved with public policy, including politicians, consultants, public servants, journalists, and pollsters.

Held Thursday and Friday at the Faculty Club, the conference featured an opening keynote address from Jim Flaherty, the current Finance Minister, and four panels throughout the day Friday.

In a panel titled "Do Media and Public Opinion Really Matter?" Nik Nanos, President and CEO of Nanos Research, one of the top polling companies in Canada, noted a decline in the quality of political discourse in Canada, remarking that national media should shoulder the blame.

"Good politics does not necessarily reflect good public policy," said Nanos, describing a media sensationalization of simplistic polling questions, eventually causing a political reaction. "Good research presents tradeoffs," he continued. "If you ask people if they want to lower the GST, of course they will say yes."

"[Newspapers are] where policy makers test their proposals," said La Presse editorial writer Alain Dubuc. "We know media can derail a project," he added, pointing to newspapers' framing and selection of stories, editorials, and letters to the editor – all of which affect public consciousness.

Moving news to an online medium is also dangerous, according to Dubuc, because it's incredibly easy for commercial media to track what people are reading about, and shifting their coverage accordingly.

"The topics that are most popular on the Internet are not the most noble," said Dubuc. "Newspaper newsrooms are the largest producers of news; TV and radio steal our news, and people go on the Internet."

While Sandra Buckler, the former communications director for Prime Minister Stephen Harper who presently works as a private-sector consultant, agreed that newspapers are much more reliable as factual sources than blogs. But she also expressed her general disdain for the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery (CPPG) – a group of national press reporters covering federal politics – and instead praised local journalists, akin to the Conservative government's media strategy over the past three years.

"Maybe there are too many of them [in the CPPG] and not enough news to cover," Buckler said of the CPPG, arguing that local media tend to editorialize less. She added that the CPPG often focuses on trivial stories and gaffes, rather than more consequential policy issues.

"In this new environment, you're always on. There's no room for errors," she said.

Buckler also spoke to students, lamenting their lack of involvement in campus politics and youth wings of the party, noting that her party did not have a youth wing – something the Liberals, NDP, and Bloc Québécois all have. Since youth are the most likely to follow current events from new media sources, such as the Internet, it is paramount that public policy discussions permeate the web.

"It makes me a little depressed when students feel they don't connect with politicians," Buckler said.

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Christopher Waddell (from left), Nik Nanos, Sandra Buckler, and Alain Dubuc discuss media problems.  
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