

Analyzing Canadian Print Media Coverage of the 2004 Southeast Asian Tsunami

by

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Abstract

Using the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami as a case study, this paper considers how natural disasters are covered in the media in order to develop a better understanding of disaster reporting. The analysis builds upon Alexa Robertson's 2008 study of television coverage of the tsunami. Data was collected through a content analysis of three daily Canadian newspapers in the three months immediately following the tsunami. The findings show that although there are some notable differences between newspapers, simply catering to the same type of audience (i.e. national) is no guarantee that coverage from different newspapers will produce similar trends. However, the research did identify four trends across the three newspapers studied: pieces that are framed as political stories and critical of the government are not necessarily fuelled by inherent political bias, at least with regard to a foreign natural disaster; in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, the abundance of dramatic stories that can be told raises the threshold with regard to the level of drama a disaster story must have in order to be printed; recovery stories are generally re-framed as aid stories, thereby making it easier to relate the story to the audience, and; there does not seem to be any pattern to when a disaster disappears from newspapers' front pages, as even an anniversary commemorating a disaster is no assurance of front page coverage. This study found that although narrative arcs in disaster reporting follow similar patterns across newspapers, other aspects of disaster coverage – such as the quantity or location of coverage – vary from newspaper to newspaper.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family and friends who offered me their ideas when I had none of my own, their encouragement when things went wrong, and their ears even when they had no idea what I was going on about.

1.0 Introduction

Saturation coverage tends to shine a spotlight on select events for a brief period of time before moving on to another event, which then becomes the focus of a great deal of attention. When media coverage of a natural disaster dwindles, public attention also tends to shift to other issues. This can have an impact on both private donations for humanitarian relief efforts, as well as the pressures put on governments to offer official aid packages to afflicted states (CARMA 9).

Using three Canadian newspapers' coverage of the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami as a case study, this study seeks to answer three questions:

1. How does media coverage of a natural disaster change over time?
2. Why does coverage of a natural disaster change over time?
3. What patterns, if any, exist in disaster reporting across media organizations?

1.1 Rationale

With the changing climate, people around the world face the threat of natural disasters that are increasingly frequent, as well as increasingly devastating (Schneider 789). Bearing this in mind, how natural disasters are covered in the media should be re-evaluated and how decisions about covering these catastrophic events are made should be studied. Journalists have a responsibility to act in the public interest and must understand that this responsibility extends not only to their audiences, but also to those whose hardships and suffering they report on.

There is already debate over how long natural disasters should remain on the news agenda, and journalists' responsibility for keeping such stories there. Some argue it is inevitable that the news agenda will move on, and journalists have a responsibility to allow this to happen (International Correspondents, CNN). Others argue that the news agenda evolves through the decisions journalists and others in the media business make about what they will cover (International Correspondents, CNN). There are no easy answers to questions of how long stories

about even the most devastating natural disasters should remain on the news agenda. However, having a clearer understanding of the impact coverage can have on relief and recovery efforts will add a new dimension to the debate.

There are also concerns that continuing coverage of natural disasters and the suffering they inflict on affected populations will lead to “concern fatigue,” also referred to in the literature as “compassion fatigue.” Here, the argument is that even if journalists continue to devote time to covering natural disasters over the long term, their audiences will lose interest in the topic (Robertson 8). Interest can be maintained for a longer period of time by covering natural disasters and their aftermath from new angles; however, it is unclear whether this approach also leads to concern fatigue.

Based on Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge’s analysis of foreign news values, natural disasters that occur abroad are attractive options for the media to report on for two reasons: first, they evolve suddenly and often without warning, and second, they are unambiguous (Franks 283). Galtung and Ruge argue that it is straightforward, rather than complex events that tend to make international headlines, as audiences often lack the interest needed to make an effort to understand more complex foreign events (Galtung and Ruge 66). In light of this, natural disasters are an easy fill for time or space that media organizations set aside for international news.

2.0 Literature Review

Case studies published in academic journals across disciplines have analyzed media coverage of foreign events – including natural disasters that occur overseas – and compared coverage of different events and disasters in foreign media. While these case studies offer thorough explanations of what factors drive foreign events to become foreign news, answers as to why these events are covered as they are by foreign media are harder to come by.

This literature review will explore both the why and the how of foreign events becoming foreign news. As it is also the topic of this thesis project, this review will use the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami as a case study to test the ideas put forward by various academics, identify gaps in the existing literature and recommend areas for further investigation.

2.1 What Made the Tsunami “News”?

A number of scholars have studied international news, searching for explanations of why some events taking place around the world get picked up by foreign media while others go unreported. Since the 1960s, much of this work has made reference to Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge’s study on foreign news values, which is considered a seminal piece in the field. In their study, Galtung and Ruge considered three case studies of foreign events that made their way into Western news coverage and, after careful analysis, hypothesized a list of criteria that must be met before “foreign events” become “foreign news.” They also found that foreign news values should be consistent across different cultures (Galtung and Ruge 68). As such, the values emerging from their studies of Norwegian newspapers should be applicable to the Canadian context.

Galtung and Ruge produced a long and extremely detailed list of hypotheses that account for factors such as a country’s standing in the international community, the social standing of the people involved in or affected by an event, and the type of event (positive or negative) in

considering which events are likely to be picked up and reported as foreign news. The hypotheses that are of greatest relevance to this thesis include the following:

- An event with a clear interpretation, free from ambiguity in its meaning, is preferred to the highly ambiguous event from which many and inconsistent implications can and will be made (Galtung and Ruge 66);
- An event that takes place over a longer time span will go unrecorded unless it reaches some kind of dramatic climax, but events that are rare or unexpected have the greatest chance of making foreign news (Galtung and Ruge 67);
- Once something has hit the headlines and been defined as news, it will continue to be defined as news for some time (Galtung and Ruge 67);
- News from culturally distant or low rank countries will have to refer to people, preferably top elite, and be preferably negative and unexpected (Galtung and Ruge 84); and
- News from culturally distant or low rank countries will also have to be simple and should, if possible, provide the reader with some sense of identification, such as a reference to the reader's nation or group of nations (Galtung and Ruge 84).

More than 40 years after Galtung and Ruge first published their study on foreign news values, scholars still tend to base their analyses on values suggested by Galtung and Ruge. Much of the literature employs these foreign news values in explaining why natural disasters like the 2004 tsunami make news abroad, citing the fact that they happen suddenly, require little explanation or contextualization, and tend to produce negative narratives.

However, the literature offering a critical analysis of Galtung and Ruge's hypotheses is underdeveloped, particularly in light of the changes the world has experienced since the 1960s. Although some scholars have examined news values associated with foreign natural disasters on a small scale (i.e. comparing and contrasting coverage of a handful of disasters), a comprehensive study of foreign news values in the new millennium has yet to be conducted.

Given the drastic changes that the media and society as a whole have experienced, this absence of new studies is problematic. In the Internet age, Jens Jensen argues, newspapers can publish virtually unlimited video and audio content online, and give site visitors access to hundreds of photos. According to Jensen, the birth of online journalism and the advent of participatory or citizen journalism have dramatically changed the media landscape, allowing citizens to start covering breaking stories before news organizations arrive on scene. In short, the Internet has wrought dramatic changes that Galtung and Ruge's work could not foresee. For this reason, this literature review will consider Galtung and Ruge's main hypotheses in light of the media environment in the 21st century, as well as other scholars' work on the media, disaster reporting and media coverage of the 2004 tsunami.

At first glance, there appears to be some inconsistency in Galtung and Ruge's analysis of foreign news values. Natural disasters, including tsunamis, tend to strike suddenly, which Galtung and Ruge found to increase the likelihood of these events being covered as foreign news. However they are not uncommon. Each year an average of 60,000 people globally are killed by natural disasters, and another quarter of a billion people are otherwise impacted (Downman 4). According to Galtung and Ruge's hypothesis, the routinization of deaths caused by natural disasters should decrease the likelihood of foreign media covering these stories. However, regular reading of a daily newspaper or viewing of a nightly newscast will quickly lead one to conclude that natural disasters overseas are often covered as international news.

This may reflect a subtle shift in foreign news values since Galtung and Ruge first proposed their hypotheses. As technology has advanced, making it easier for news organizations to report on events abroad and for scientists to predict some types of disasters (i.e. hurricanes), the threshold a disaster must cross in order to become newsworthy may have changed. It may be that it is no longer the rarity of the disaster itself that determines its news value, but rather, the rarity of its impact. This is suggested in Philip Brown and Jessica Minty's study of the

relationship between media coverage and charitable giving after the Asian tsunami. According to Brown and Minty, United Nations (UN) records counted more than a quarter of a million people killed or reported missing after the tsunami, making the scope of the disaster rather than the disaster itself a rare event (5). Based on Galtung and Ruge's analysis of foreign news values, sweeping victims from the shores of 14 countries guaranteed the tsunami would be mentioned in most major news organizations' coverage of world events.

What Galtung and Ruge struggle to offer is a satisfactory hypothesis for the quantity of coverage devoted to a foreign news event. Their assertion that once an event has been defined as news, it will continue to be defined as news is generally accepted by other scholars as true, however the hypothesis does not adequately explain why foreign media initially devoted so much coverage to the tsunami. After the tsunami, CNN alone deployed more than 80 anchors, correspondents and producers to Southeast Asia in order to provide round-the-clock coverage of the disaster (Brown and Minty 5). In their analysis of foreign news values, Galtung and Ruge seem to have overlooked what most scholars recognize as a core news value in any type of reporting: timing. When the tsunami struck on December 26th, 2004, many governments around the world were in recess and most major corporations were operating at reduced capacity over the holiday period. Due to the timing of the disaster, the tsunami faced considerably less competition for limited column inches and broadcast time than it would at virtually any other time of year.

Galtung and Ruge's hypotheses on foreign news values also, in large part, fail to explain the duration of the media's tsunami coverage. One study of American media coverage found that peaks in tsunami coverage occurred on December 30th, 2004 and January 4th, February 1st, February 19th, March 8th, March 26th and March 28th, 2005 (Brown and Minty 6). The duration of this coverage is unusual and cannot be explained by Galtung and Ruge's analysis. To understand

why the media continued to devote so much coverage to the tsunami throughout the post-disaster recovery period, one must consider Peter Vasterman's work on so-called "media-hype."

In a 2005 study, Vasterman noted the existence of "positive feedback loops," in which the media begins by offering regular news coverage of an event, during which journalists report facts and offer analysis. After a while, the event or topic is seen as less newsworthy and media attention will diminish and start to shift elsewhere. However, there are some events, such as the tsunami, which prompt media coverage to continue independent of how stories are (or are not) unfolding. When this occurs, Vasterman argues, a theme begins to develop in news coverage and the threshold of newsworthiness is lowered for events and stories that can be tied to that theme. Even after coverage of a theme has gone into decline, the threshold for newsworthiness remains lowered, allowing for coverage to extend even further (Vasterman 515).

However, though Vasterman's work offers an explanation for the duration of tsunami coverage by foreign media, his analysis does not explain the peaks in coverage that occurred through March 2005 – three months after the tsunami struck. For that, one must return to Galtung and Ruge's study of foreign news values.

Galtung and Ruge posited that news from countries that are culturally distant or of low rank in the international community must refer to elites, be negative or unexpected, or allow an audience to identify with the story. This hypothesis was proven to hold true some 40 years later when a study by Brown and Minty identified peaks in tsunami coverage and cross-referenced those peaks with events happening at the time.

With the exception of the March 26th peak – which resulted from media organizations commemorating the three-month anniversary of the disaster – Galtung and Ruge's hypotheses account for every peak found in American coverage of the tsunami. On December 30th, 2004, American donations to relief efforts were reaching unprecedented levels and were expected to climb further after the federal *Tsunami Disaster and Tax Relief Act* extended the deadline for

tax-deductible charitable donations from the traditional December 31st deadline through until January 31st (Brown and Minty 6). Americans' unexpected outpouring of generosity generated numerous stories, boosting the amount of coverage devoted to tsunami-related stories. Unexpected events also account for the March 28th peak, when American media reported on an 8.7 magnitude earthquake that shook the area near the epicenter of the earthquake responsible for causing the Boxing Day tsunami. Meanwhile, elites were tied to peaks on January 4th (when Secretary of State Colin Powell visited affected areas), February 1st (when former President Bill Clinton was appointed as a special American envoy to South Asia), and March 8th (when Clinton and former President George H.W. Bush briefed President George W. Bush on the disaster). Finally, the February 19th peak coincided with the publication of vacation photos taken by a Canadian couple that died in the tsunami – victims that an American audience could identify with in terms of both culture and geography (Brown and Minty 6).

Overall, many of the hypotheses about foreign news values that Galtung and Ruge first proposed in 1965 still appear to apply more than 40 years later. That is not to say, however, that scholars should wait another 40 years before re-examining foreign news values. Although there is evidence to support the continuing validity of Galtung and Ruge's work, a more comprehensive study is still necessary to understand how a more mobile global population, the Internet, citizen journalism and other realities of the 21st century have impacted modern foreign news values.

This thesis project will examine the quantity and duration of coverage, and the threshold for “newsworthy” stories in the Canadian print media's coverage of the 2004 tsunami. However, more general analyses of foreign news values and the role of the Internet in tsunami coverage are beyond the scope of this project.

2.2 What Factors Shaped News Coverage of the Tsunami?

How the media covers an event is as important as what the media chooses to cover. However, in some instances – for example, immediately after a natural disaster – how media organizations operate inside the disaster zone may actually be *more* important than the stories they pursue. This, arguably, may be doubly so in the case of a foreign media organization covering a natural disaster.

In a 1997 study, Penelope Ploughman analyzed newspaper coverage of seven disasters – both natural and technological (man-made) – and found the common belief that, “disasters provoke widespread community breakdown, including panic, flight, looting, psychological dependency and shock,” is not rooted in fact (121). Rather, Ploughman concluded, “rationality and altruism tend to prevail and most [people] respond in ways designed to restore normality” (121). However the media, she concluded, generally does not. The situations tsunami-affected states encountered as foreign journalists streamed into the disaster zone after the tsunami lend support to Ploughman’s findings.

In a presentation to the 2005 Journalism Education Conference at Griffith University, Scott Downman stated that many media organizations do not have clear policies on covering natural disasters abroad. Moreover, Downman noted, relatively inexperienced crews are often dispatched to report on foreign disasters before questions about what they will eat, where they will sleep and how they will file stories can be answered (4). An influx of foreign journalists ill-prepared to function independently in a post-disaster environment can add to the demand for scarce basic resources like food, safe drinking water, shelter and medical care, as well as luxuries like electricity and telephone access that may be vital to rescue and recovery efforts (Downman 4). This, Downman concluded, was the case in much of Southeast Asia and especially the Indonesian city of Banda Aceh in the days and weeks following the disaster.

After the tsunami, organizations like the International News Safety Institute (INSI) issued guidelines for journalists headed to affected areas. The INSI recommendations were straightforward, and included such common sense suggestions as all journalists ensuring their vaccinations were up-to-date and that they traveled with a first aid kit complete with sterile needles, insect repellent, painkillers, and basic antibiotics. But Downman's study found that many journalists arrived in Banda Aceh without clean food or water, money, laptops or satellite phones and without local language skills or a translator (9). In fact, he reported that some arrived with only a credit card, expecting to purchase the necessary supplies inside the disaster zone (Downman 9). Many of those journalists who arrived unprepared became dependent on aid agencies for basic supplies and scrounged the resources needed to file stories from local media organizations, many of which had been devastated by the tsunami (Downman 13). Ultimately, Downman concluded that the presence of so many journalists in devastated areas – especially Indonesia's Banda Aceh – hindered relief efforts.

Downman attributes the phenomenon of journalists flocking to Southeast Asia, unprepared for the conditions they would have to operate in, to the fact that many affected areas were easily accessible to journalists. That is, these areas were geographically close to places where many journalists were already stationed to cover foreign news, and flights into the disaster zone were relatively cheap (Downman 5). However, this conclusion fails to explain why a handful of organizations, such as Reuters – a world renowned news organization with journalists permanently stationed around the globe – adhered to their existing policies, insisting that all their journalists traveling to the disaster zone complete an extensive training course on how to be self-sufficient in the field prior to departure (Downman 11). Downman's findings fail to take into consideration how the foreign reporting experience and reputations of the news organizations represented by journalists traveling to a disaster zone might impact the area. His findings also

leave the question of why so many foreign journalists traveled to tsunami-affected areas unanswered.

Alternate explanations also fail to provide satisfactory answers. In a 1998 study of television news coverage of disasters, Tamar Liebes posited that media organizations can resist participating in marathon-length coverage of a natural disaster (73). However, he determined that professional norms, journalists' perceptions about their roles in democratic society, and the economic pressures on decision makers in the newsroom have a tendency to pressure journalists into devoting a great deal of coverage to natural disasters (Liebes 73). In a more recent study of media-hype across mediums, Vasterman offered a similar explanation, noting that editors are pressured to report on any number of events because their competition is doing so, because there may be consequences or implications for important public figures, or – as was the case after the tsunami – because the news wave of related stories is itself a story (509). As the other two factors have already been discussed elsewhere in this literature review, the potential impact a story may have on public figures will be considered here.

Not long after the tsunami struck, coverage of the humanitarian side of the disaster started decreasing and some media organizations began running stories that focused on the impact decisions related to tsunami relief and recovery would have on politicians not in affected areas, but in the West. For example, in early January, one Canadian newspaper reported on a CNN prediction that, “the [George W.] Bush administration’s efforts to stop the growth of Islamic terrorist organizations in Southeast Asia would suffer a setback because shadowy terrorist groups would use the chaos and confusion to further their nefarious ends” (Doyle R2). Just two days later, the same paper ran a story about the balancing act Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin was performing by offering aid money to Sri Lanka while insisting that none of this money was reaching the Tamil Tigers, a group recognized as a terrorist organization by the UN and some of Canada’s allies (Wong and Campbell A1). Both the Bush and Martin governments

were left in difficult positions after the tsunami, as were countless other public figures whose decisions about relief and recovery efforts in Southeast Asia may potentially have had serious implications for the survival of affected people, as well as terrorism and ongoing conflict in the region. These dilemmas, and their potential consequences in future elections, may explain why there was so much media coverage of Western governments' responses to the tsunami. However, while these circumstances may explain why journalists flocked to cover the tsunami, they still do not adequately explain why foreign journalists flocked to Southeast Asia. Evidently, there is still analysis that must be done on this topic, as the existing literature falls short of offering satisfactory answers.

The Western focus of much foreign reporting on the tsunami raises another interesting question, namely why so many Western politicians fed the news cycle with tsunami-related stories. A 2006 report by the global media analysis firm CARMA International analyzing media coverage of six natural and humanitarian disasters, including the Southeast Asian tsunami, may offer some insight into this. CARMA International found that the amount of coverage devoted to a humanitarian disaster is, in fact, tied to the political capital – such as voter support at home or support for an initiative to be presented to the international community – to be gained from the disaster (9). From a political perspective, the organization identified two uses that humanitarian disasters may be put to: the disaster can either be used to fuel an ongoing debate (the “grist to the mill” approach) or used to serve the national interest (the “strategic” approach) (CARMA 9). In the grist to the mill approach, CARMA found that both the media and politicians downplay the humanitarian dimensions of a crisis, and the focus is instead shifted to the political arguments being made (9). This claim is supported by the content analysis conducted for this thesis project, which found that Canadian newspapers focused on the humanitarian aspect of the disaster immediately following the tsunami, but soon began shifting their tsunami coverage to focus on more contentious issues, such as aid and recovery.

Under CARMA's criteria, this would indicate that coverage of the tsunami performed a strategic rather than persuasive function in Canada. This strategic function may explain why so many politicians made themselves available to the media for post-tsunami stories: politicians are able to drive coverage of a disaster, but they will only do so in order to serve their own interests (CARMA 7). But what interest did politicians have in perpetuating the flood of tsunami-related stories?

Vasterman's media-hype study offers an answer: an expansion of the definition of a problem, resulting in the broadening of the scope of a problem as news organizations engage in thematic reporting (517). In some post-tsunami reporting, however, the theme was not the tsunami, as one might expect. Rather terrorism – a theme of much greater and longer lasting interest to Western politicians since the September 11th attacks – was being re-visited by the media. While Vasterman and CARMA can explain why a steady flow of public figures were willing to speak to the media to push their political agendas on other issues in the wake of the tsunami, neither study explains why the media chose to run terrorism-themed stories.

To understand that, one must return to Ploughman's study of the credibility hierarchy after a disaster. As other scholars have noted, Ploughman found that patterns in the distribution of social power and prestige are reflected in the selection of what is news. These patterns create a so-called credibility hierarchy, in which credibility is defined as both the right to be heard and the perceived importance of the view being expressed (Ploughman 119). According to Ploughman, the government is usually the dominant newsmaker after a disaster, largely because it has control over information about the disaster, as well as relief and recovery efforts, and because it has so many resources at its disposal in terms of manpower, expert knowledge and equipment (119). After examining media coverage of seven different disasters, Ploughman concluded that in disaster reporting, the media relies upon the established credibility hierarchy, particularly governments from their places at the top of the hierarchy, to determine the salience

of issues and set the agenda for social and political discourse on those issues (120). To date, there has been little written about citizen journalism's place in this hierarchy, or its impact.

Clearly scholars have found many factors that work together to shape media coverage of an event. But many questions remain unanswered in the existing literature. Further research is needed to explore issues such as whether reporting on individual natural disasters is itself part of a broader theme, such as climate change, if these broader themes determine which natural disasters are covered by foreign media or how these disasters are covered, and how the advent of citizen journalism, which empowers eyewitnesses to break news as governments are mobilizing, has impacted foreign disaster reporting.

Some of these questions will be addressed in this thesis project, employing the 2004 tsunami as a case study of the Canadian print media's disaster reporting practices. However, a more thorough investigation of these issues is required if the ideas and theories in the literature on these and other subjects are to keep pace with the realities facing journalism in the 21st century.

2.3 Summary

Many academics have studied issues that are relevant to this thesis, ranging from everyday reporting to reporting on natural disasters, and from foreign news values to the motivations of various actors involved in media coverage of a disaster. All of these avenues of research have made valuable contributions towards understanding why and how foreign events become foreign news. However, a number of questions remain unanswered, and new questions are arising as journalism grapples with technological and social change in the 21st century. Media coverage of the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami offers insights into foreign news and disaster reporting in the age of globalization, the Internet and citizen journalism. Yet as a case study, it

also serves as a cautionary tale, warning of the potential dangers if knowledge and best practices fail to keep pace with change.

3.0 Research Method

This thesis project focuses on print media and consists of a content analysis of three Canadian newspapers over the three months immediately following the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami.

3.1 Research Questions

1. How does media coverage of a natural disaster change over time?
2. Why does media coverage of a natural disaster change over time?
3. What patterns, if any, exist in disaster reporting across media organizations?

3.2 Design and Data Sources

The data collected for this analysis was drawn from a content analysis of three Canadian newspapers. The project compares local coverage with national coverage of the tsunami, considering coverage in the *Vancouver Sun*, the *Globe and Mail*, and the *National Post* over the three-month period immediately following the tsunami (December 27th, 2004 – March 31st, 2005). Building upon the methodology Alexa Robertson established in her 2008 content analysis of American television coverage of the tsunami, the relevant print content is coded as follows:

- Number of stories;
- Length of stories, by word count;
- Presentation of stories. All stories are classified as either text only, text and photo, or photo only;
- Framing of stories. All stories are coded into one of five categories, including four identified by Robertson (“human”, “political”, “aid” and “other”), and one new category created for the purpose of this research project (“recovery”). Stories that contained

elements of more than one category were assigned to the category that reflected the greatest emphasis of the story.

- Location of story. Stories are allocated to one of three categories based upon where they appear in the newspaper: front page, front of section, or inside pages.

The data in each category is presented day by day in order to study changes in each publication's coverage over the three-month period.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data collected for the content analysis was drawn from editions of the *Vancouver Sun*, the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail* published between December 27th, 2004 and March 31st, 2005. In the cases of the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail*, which publish national editions as well as editions targeted at major metropolitan areas, like Toronto, the national editions were analyzed. This was done to ensure consistency in the content analysis, which looks at newspaper coverage available to readers living in Vancouver. Each newspaper is published six days a week (Monday through Saturday). The tsunami occurred on Sunday December 26th so print coverage of the tsunami did not begin until December 27th in all three newspapers.

During the content analysis, broad themes emerged and the data were subsequently organized accordingly. Those themes were the *newsworthiness* of the tsunami, the *scale* of the event, the *media agenda* at the time the tsunami struck, and the *emotional impact* of the tsunami.

4.0 Findings

This section reports on the data collected during the content analysis.

4.1 Quantity of Coverage

In the days immediately following the tsunami, the three newspapers studied for this thesis provided their readers with extensive coverage of the disaster (see Fig. 1).

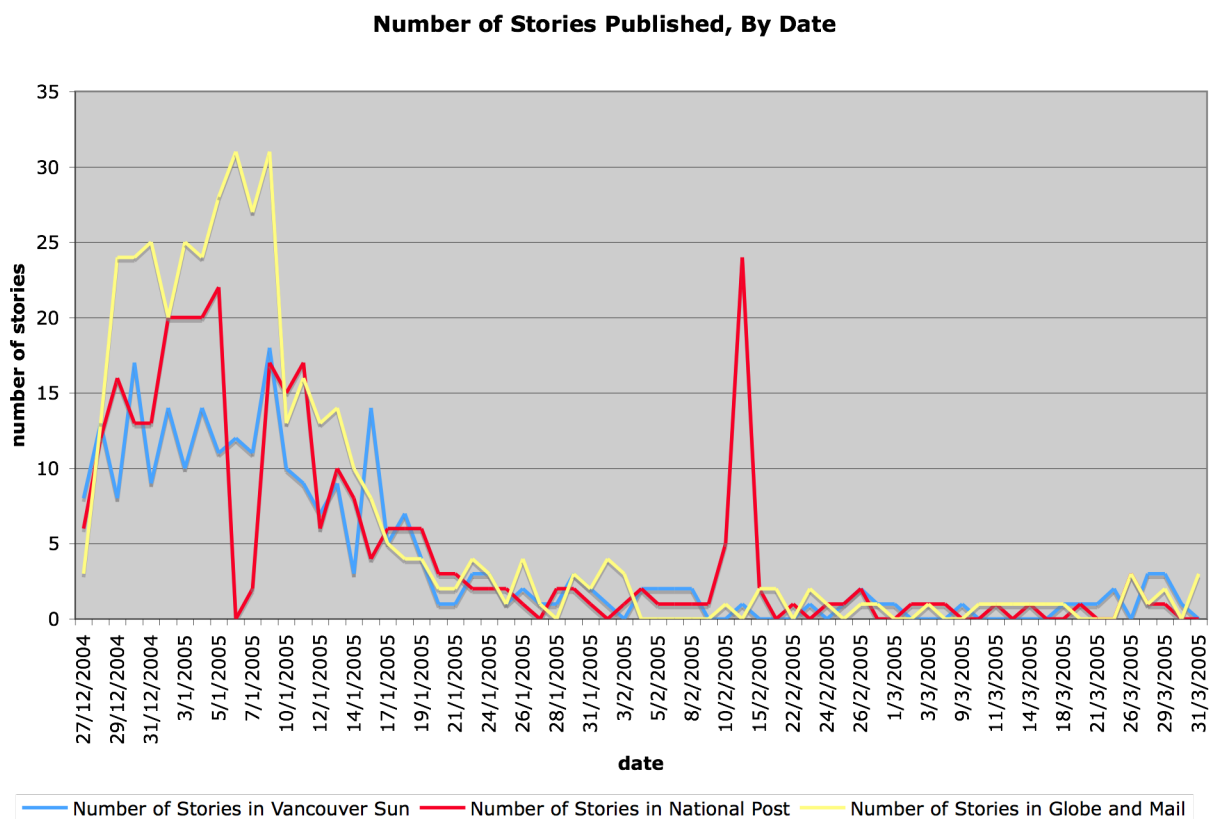


Fig. 1: Number of Stories Published, By Date

All three newspapers returned from a non-publishing day on December 26th with modest coverage of the events unfolding half a world away. As the week immediately following the disaster unfolded, however, the amount of coverage increased dramatically. The most noticeable increase occurred in the *Globe and Mail's* coverage, which peaked on January 6th and 8th. On

both days, the newspaper ran a total of 31 stories related to the tsunami. From then on, the quantity of stories each of the three newspapers printed on a day-to-day basis were approximately the same. The exception to this was on February 12th, when the *National Post* ran a total of 24 tsunami stories, by far surpassing the amount of coverage offered by the other two newspapers.

Coverage of the tsunami began to decline in all three newspapers between January 10th and 12th. In terms of the word count that each of the three newspapers devoted to their coverage, peaks occurred within the first two weeks after the tsunami struck (see Fig. 2). The first to peak was the *National Post*, which ran a total of 12,335 words about the tsunami on January 4th, 10 days after the disaster. The *Globe and Mail* and the *Vancouver Sun* both peaked four days later, on January 8th, when they ran 23,780 words and 15,820 words, respectively. Following these highs, the average word count devoted to tsunami stories through the remainder of the study period dropped for all three newspapers. The *Vancouver Sun* averaged 2,412 words per day across the study period, dropping to 1,283 words per day after the peak. Meanwhile, the *Globe and Mail* dropped from an average of 3,531 words per day to 1,392 words after the peak, and the *National Post* dropped from an average of 2,315 to 1,544 words per day.

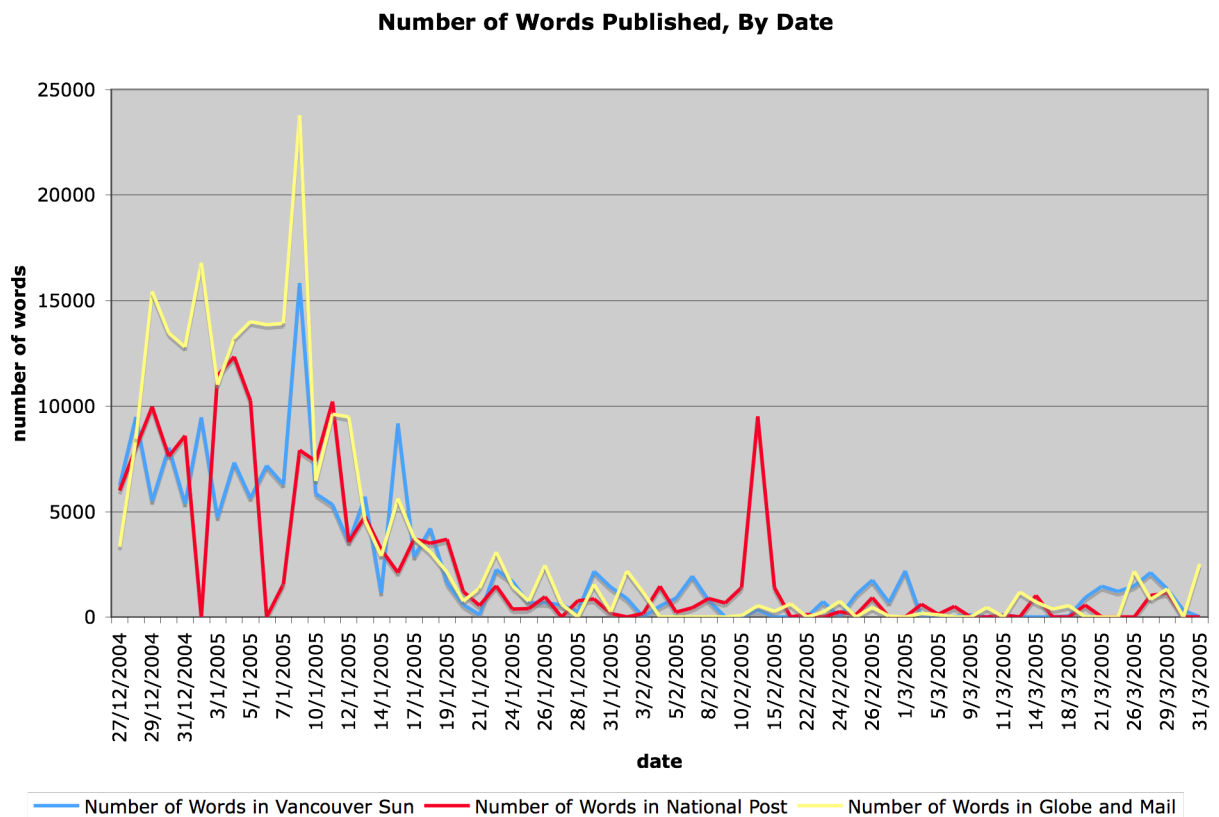


Fig. 2: Number of Words Published, By Date

However, simply considering average word counts does not give an accurate sense of the amount of coverage each newspaper devoted to the tsunami. This is particularly true in the case of the *National Post*. The newspaper's February 12th spike to 9,505 words of tsunami coverage artificially inflates the newspaper's average word count for the post-peak period. Had this second spike in coverage not occurred, the *National Post* would, in all likelihood, have offered the least coverage of the tsunami in terms of post-peak word count. Had the newspaper run 1,400 words that day (similar to the 1,402 words it printed on the following day), its average post-peak word count per day would have dropped to 1,270, placing it behind both the *Globe and Mail* and the *Vancouver Sun*. This raises questions about why one national newspaper would offer more coverage of the tsunami than a local paper, and so much more coverage than another national paper.

Interestingly, in only one case did a newspaper's peak in word count fall on the same day as the peak in the number of photographs the newspaper published. For the *Globe and Mail*, the peak day for printing both photographs and text was January 8th, when a total of 28 photographs (see Fig. 3) ran with the newspaper's 31 tsunami stories. In comparison, the *National Post* ran a high of 22 photographs (and 12 stories) on December 28th, making it the first newspaper to peak in photographic coverage of the tsunami. The *Vancouver Sun* was the last to peak in visual coverage, running a total of 17 photographs (and 14 stories) on January 15th.

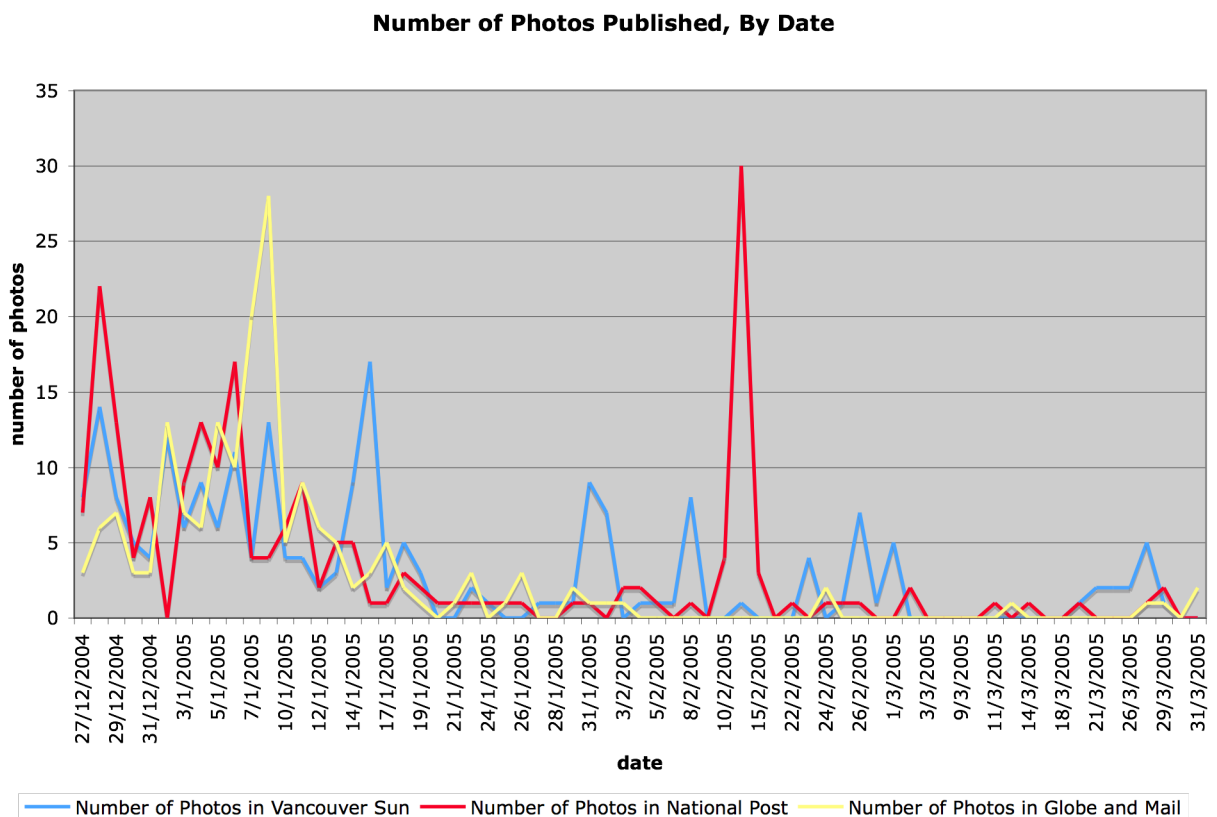


Fig. 3: Number of Photos Published, By Date

4.2 Framing of Coverage

By mid-January, according to various stories published in the three newspapers considered in this analysis, estimates of the numbers of dead and missing had stabilized. Most of the Canadians affected by the tsunami had already been located and either reunited with their

families or memorialized on the pages of these newspapers. In Canada, the focus had shifted, just as it had on the ground in Southeast Asia, to reconstruction and recovery efforts. This shift was reflected in the pages of Canadian newspapers (see Fig. 4, 5 and 6), where stories about aid and the politics inherent in supporting reconstruction and recovery began to appear more frequently.

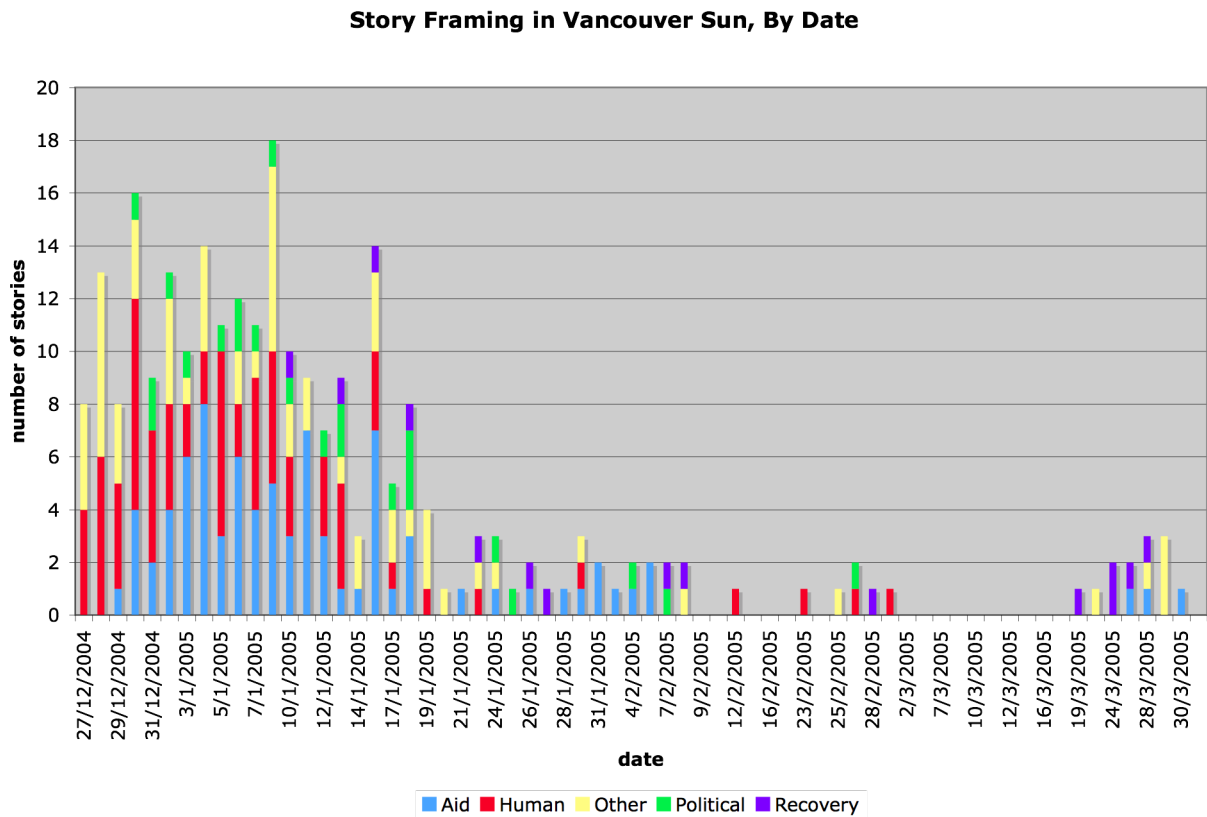


Fig. 4: Story Framing in Vancouver Sun, By Date

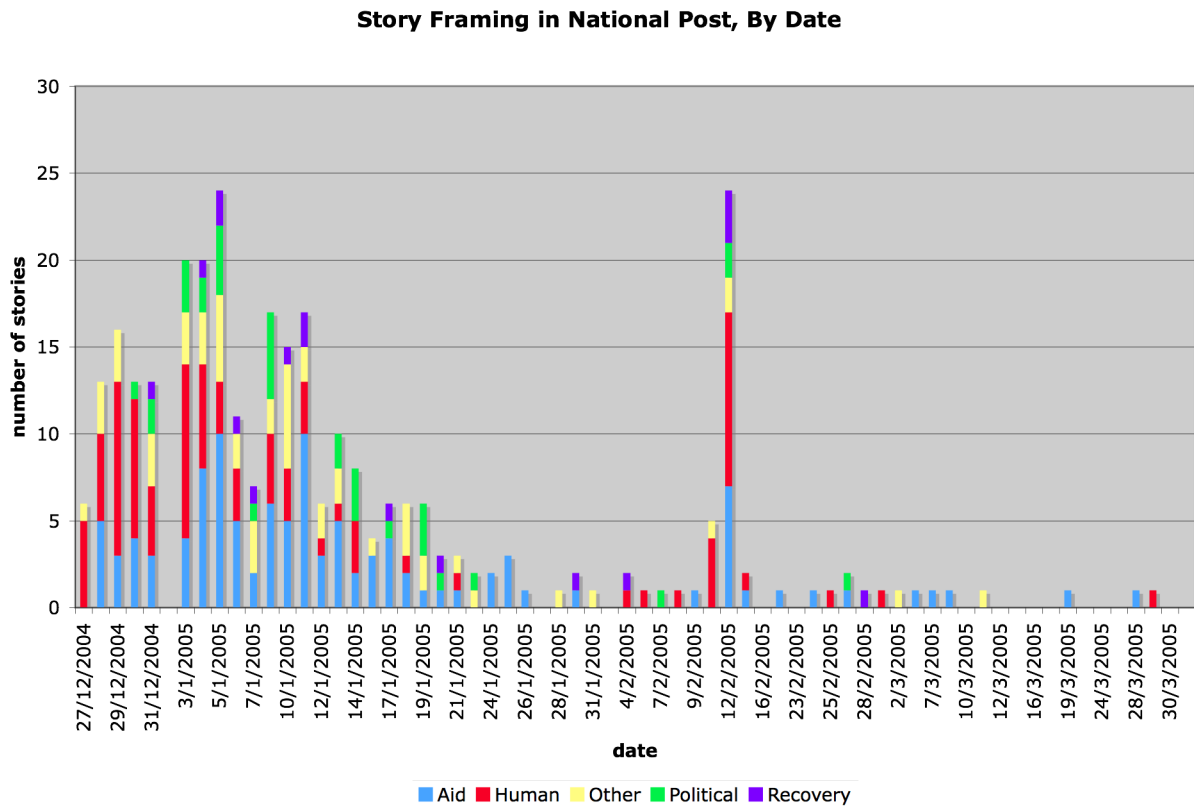


Fig. 5: Story Framing in National Post, By Date

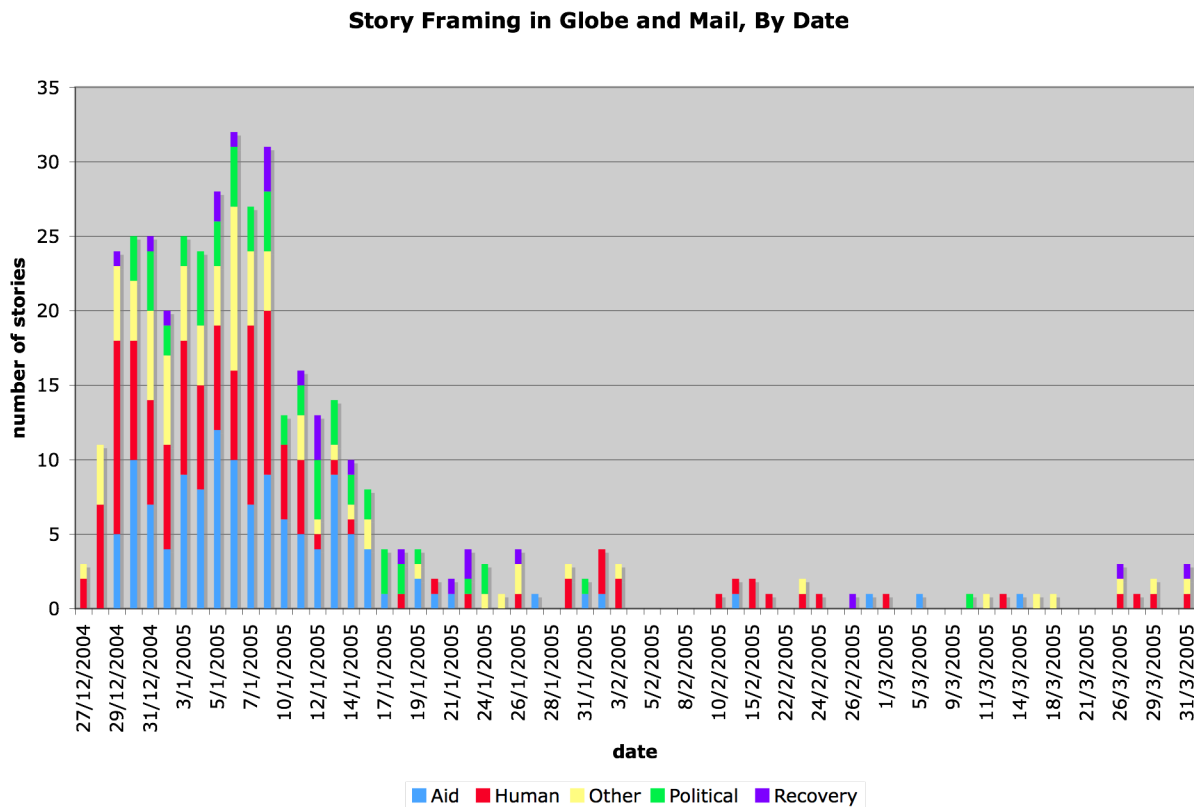


Fig. 6: Story Framing in Globe and Mail, By Date

4.2.1 Political Stories

Stories assigned to this category dealt with actions and responses by the Canadian government, foreign governments or other authorities (i.e. the United Nations).

Tsunami stories considered political appeared for the first time on the same date – December 30th – in all three newspapers. The stories themselves, however were presented somewhat differently. The *Vancouver Sun* reported that Foreign Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew and International Cooperation Minister Aileen Carroll were both cutting their holidays short and returning to Canada to coordinate the country's response to the tsunami, and noted that Prime Minister Paul Martin would not be returning from his own holiday until later in the week (Curry A7). Despite the prime minister's absence, the story made it clear that Defence Minister Bill Graham and Health Minister Ujjal Dosanjh were both in Ottawa, coordinating the federal government's response to the disaster and staying in close contact with Martin, Pettigrew and Carroll (Curry A7). The *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*, however, focused more on the criticism surrounding Martin's decision not to return earlier. The *National Post's* story was perhaps the most political of the three, running the story on its front page under the headline "Martin on holiday, Tories say people 'ashamed to be Canadian'" (Sokoloff and Curry A1). These stories were the first of many on what would eventually become a theme in the Canadian media's tsunami coverage: criticizing the federal government's response to the disaster.

4.2.2 Recovery Stories

Stories assigned to this category focused on rehabilitating survivors, rebuilding homes, repairing infrastructure, long-term programs and projects sponsored by foreign governments, and long-term projects and programs sponsored by other authorities (i.e. the United Nations).

Where the three newspapers differed greatly was in their coverage of recovery stories. The *Globe and Mail* was the first to publish a recovery story, running a piece on December 29th –

one day before publishing its first political story – highlighting the financial challenges that tsunami affected countries would face as they rebuilt (Pitts B1). Two days later – on December 31st – the *National Post* published its first recovery story, focusing on tourists returning to a popular Thai beach even as clean-up efforts continued further down the shore (Wordsworth A13). The last of the three newspapers to turn its attention to recovery was the *Vancouver Sun*. It was not until January 10th that the first recovery story appeared in the newspaper, highlighting some coastal Thai villagers’ fears of losing their land to developers after the tsunami cleared their homes off prime, beachfront property (“Thais fear losing their land to developers” A13).

4.2.3 Human Stories

Stories assigned to the “human” category focused on identifying the dead, saving the injured, locating missing persons, controlling the spread of disease among survivors, aiding traumatized survivors and helping foreign citizens return home.

The *Vancouver Sun* was the first to stop daily publication of human stories. The *Vancouver Sun* continued to run human stories daily until January 14th, while the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail* both ceased to print daily human stories as of January 15th. In light of the types of human stories that were being covered by each newspaper, the reason for at least the *Vancouver Sun*’s change in focus can be easily explained.

The two national newspapers tended to focus on human stories more broadly, publishing tales about victims, immigration and refugee policy decisions made by governments around the world by way of the people they impacted, and Canadians impacted by the tsunami, either as victims or as workers involved in rescue and recovery efforts. The *Vancouver Sun*’s coverage of human stories generally had a narrower focus, keeping readers apprised of the situation of British Columbians in Southeast Asia when the tsunami hit and in the immediate aftermath. On January 12th, the *Vancouver Sun* reported the body of the final missing British Columbian the newspaper

had been chronicling had been positively identified (Baglole A1). Although other stories with local connections emerged throughout the remainder of the three-month period being studied, the confirmed death of Richmond resident Rubina Wong effectively ended one of the last local human narratives the newspaper had been following. From January 13th onward, the *Vancouver Sun*'s human stories tended to focus on the health risks facing survivors and what Canada's Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) was doing to combat these risks. Survivor stories also continued to appear periodically, though much less frequently than in the days immediately following the tsunami.

Throughout the remainder of January and well into February, dramatic human stories continued to unfold around the world. Both national newspapers covered the Baby 81 saga in detail (Tran A1) and, like the *Vancouver Sun*, the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail* continued to publish stories about the many health risks threatening tsunami survivors, and Canada's involvement in initiatives and programs to mitigate them. On January 21st, after the Indonesian government raised its estimated death toll by 50,000, bringing the total dead in that country alone to 166,000, the *Globe and Mail* covered the revision (Dillon A17). The next day, after the British government announced it would issue death certificates for all 550 of its citizens still unaccounted for, the *National Post* reported on the decision ("British to issue death certificates for missing tsunami victims" A15). From this date on, both the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail* began to scale back their coverage of the human stories emerging from the disaster.

4.2.4 Aid Stories

Stories assigned to this category focused on charitable donations from private citizens, foreign aid offered by governments (including offers of financial, material and human resources), and logistical problems in delivering aid to tsunami-affected areas.

Perhaps the most striking thing about pieces classified as aid stories in this analysis was the narrative of Western generosity that emerged within this theme. The front page of the *Globe and Mail* on December 31st read, “Canadian donors ‘amaze’,” and went on to note that private donations were on track to beat the \$40 million of aid the federal government had already pledged to tsunami relief (Vallis and Suhanic A1). Almost a week later, the *Globe and Mail* printed a front page story with the headline, “Donors swamp charities” (Alphonso A1), while the *National Post*’s front page included the headline, “World aid for victims hit ‘incredible’” (Wordsworth A1). By January 15th, the *Vancouver Sun* was reporting, “United Way drive nets record \$30.2m” (Wilson B1). Some of the headlines were so euphoric, it almost seemed as if the three newspapers were competing to publish the most self-congratulatory story.

Some of the aid stories published in the first few weeks after the tsunami profiled specific donors. These stories focused on celebrities and sports icons, as well as unique characters doing their bit to raise money for tsunami relief. The *Vancouver Sun* introduced its readers to a group of local Buddhists offering to sell a temple and donate the proceeds to relief efforts (Todd A1). The newspaper followed up on the story when the sale of that temple resulted in a \$500,000 donation (Todd A4). The *National Post* reported on a Calgary Zoo elephant whose paintings were sold to raise \$6,300 for tsunami relief (“Kamala, the Calgary Zoo elephant, raises \$6,300 for tsunami relief” A5), and a group of homeless alcoholics in Denmark who raised \$3,400 to protest their government’s initial “stingy” donation of \$1.8 million (“Homeless Danish alcoholics do their bit for tsunami relief, raising \$3,400” A13). These stories highlighting the generosity of individual donors generally fed into a broader narrative of Western generosity after the tsunami.

That is not to say, however, that all aid stories painted Western generosity in a positive light. On January 11th, the *Globe and Mail* published a pair of front page stories under the headline, “Federal tsunami aid hits \$425-million... as cash woes hurt African AIDS fight,”

highlighting how short donors' attention spans can be, and how quickly they can forget about a particular crisis once a more dramatic one comes along (Nolen A1 and Mahoney and Leblanc A1). One week later, a *Vancouver Sun* article urged, "Let's stop patting ourselves on the back and face reality," in which the author opined that the Canadian tsunami response, "smacks of a feel-good effort by well-intentioned people," but that more serious, concerted efforts were needed for tsunami recovery to succeed (Campbell D3). As time wore on, all three newspapers also criticized the federal government's decision to send aid money to Sri Lanka, despite concerns that at least some of this aid would be diverted to support the Tamil Tigers, a group recognized by the UN and some of Canada's allies as a terrorist organization (Wong and Clark A1). These types of stories, offering a more critical view of the so-called "aid tsunami," tended to emerge later in the study period, at approximately the same time that human stories were disappearing from daily coverage of the disaster.

4.2.5 "Other" Stories

The "other" category employed in this study was initially created to be a general category for stories that did not fit into the more strictly defined thematic categories. However, as the analysis progressed, eleven distinct categories emerged out of the stories classed as "other," and several noticeable differences were observed across the three newspapers (see Fig. 7). As a result, the "other" category is worth exploring in greater detail.

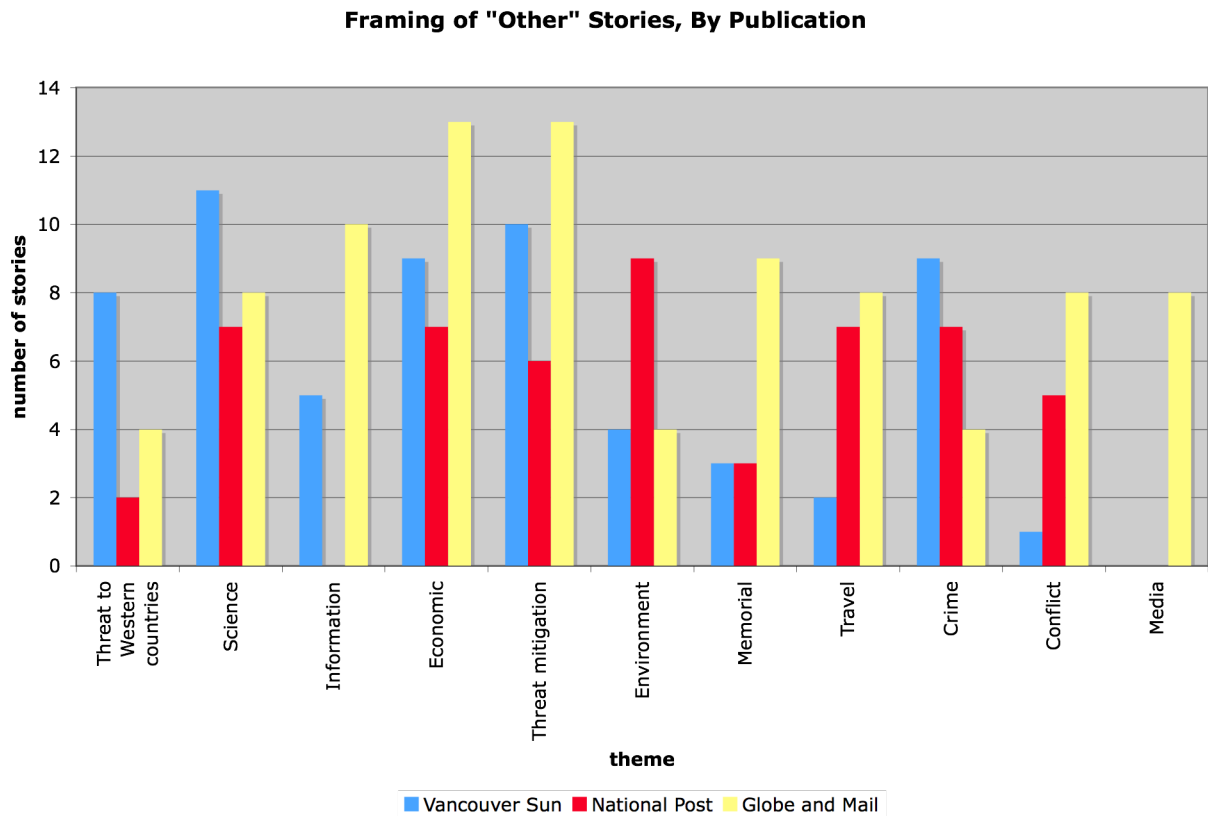


Fig. 7: Framing of “Other” Stories, By Publication

This analysis includes a total of 205 “other” stories: 89 from the *Globe and Mail*, 62 from the *Vancouver Sun* and 54 from the *National Post*. Stories falling within the “other” category have been assigned to the following sub-categories: tsunami threat to Western countries, science, information (i.e. stories containing contact information for updates about the situation in the countries hit by the tsunami), economic, threat mitigation (i.e. stories about national and regional early warning systems), environment (i.e. stories about the tsunami’s impact on wildlife), memorial (stories about vigils and obituaries for tsunami victims), travel, crime (i.e. stories about donation thefts and scams), conflict (i.e. stories about how the tsunami has impacted ongoing conflicts in parts of Sri Lanka and Indonesia), and media.

4.2.5.1 Tsunami Threat to Western Countries Stories

During the three-month period considered in this analysis, the *Vancouver Sun* printed twice the number of stories as the *Globe and Mail* on the threat tsunamis pose to Western countries, and four times as many of these stories as the *National Post*. This may reflect the fact that the *Vancouver Sun* caters to an audience in a coastal locale, while the two national newspapers write for audiences that are mostly landlocked. As early as December 27th (the first publication day after the tsunami), the *Vancouver Sun* published a story in which a scientist with the Geological Survey of Canada explained that British Columbia shares many of Southeast Asia's tsunami risk factors, and when – “not if,” the expert stressed – a “catastrophic” earthquake strikes, coastal communities like Tofino and Port Alberni could be “seriously affected” by the resulting tsunami (Ward A10). Later stories explored what would happen if a tsunami struck British Columbia, how well prepared the province was to respond to a tsunami, and what happened when a tsunami struck off Port Alberni in 1964 (Boei A6). The *Globe and Mail's* stories also dealt mostly with the tsunami threat facing British Columbia's coast, including the perceived threat motivating 14 of the province's First Nations communities to seek assistance from the federal and provincial governments in moving at risk houses to higher ground (Hume A1). The *National Post* printed just one story about the west coast's insufficient tsunami-warning system (Blackwell A1) and one about the likelihood of the country's east coast being hit by a tsunami, as it was in 1929 (“Atlantic Canada has been hit by a tsunami before, and it will be hit again: Expert” A8).

4.2.5.2 Science Stories

The same reasoning may be applied to explain why the *Vancouver Sun* ran more science stories than either of the national papers. All three newspapers published general, informational stories about the science of how an earthquake can trigger a tsunami, and how the earthquake

that created the Southeast Asian tsunami altered the rotation of the Earth. However, the *Vancouver Sun* delved deeper into explaining why coastal areas of British Columbia – particularly Richmond, on the mainland, and Port Alberni, on Vancouver Island – would be vulnerable to a tsunami if a large enough earthquake ever rocked the area. Presumably, given that the majority of their readers live inland and therefore are not likely to ever find their lives threatened by a tsunami, the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail* were less interested in educating their readers about the science behind specific tsunami threats facing coastal Canadians.

4.2.5.3 Travel Stories

Also noteworthy is the slightly greater emphasis the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post* placed on travel stories compared to the *Vancouver Sun* in the three months following the tsunami. Considering the city's reputation as a so-called "gateway to the Pacific", one might have expected the *Vancouver Sun* to publish at least as many travel stories as the two national newspapers. However, some areas of Southeast Asia hard hit by the tsunami were popular destinations for Western tourists, including people from all across Canada (Sokoloff A1). In light of this, it seems that the newspapers judged Canadians across the country and not just those living in the country's "gateway to the Pacific" to have an interest in stories about post-tsunami travel to Southeast Asia.

4.2.5.4 Basic Information Stories

Interestingly, the *National Post* was the only newspaper considered in this study not to publish stories containing basic information, including where people could call for specific information regarding each of the countries impacted by the tsunami. This is curious, as these types of stories can be prepared quite quickly and, in some sense, fulfill the audience-informing role of the newspaper at its most basic level. This raises questions about what the *National Post*

envisioned its role as being in the aftermath of the tsunami, and how that vision might differ if covering a domestic rather than a foreign disaster.

4.2.5.5 Conflict Stories

Also noteworthy are the discrepancies in the number of conflict stories published across the three newspapers. These types of stories largely addressed decades old conflicts in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, and how the devastation wrought by the tsunami impacted the prospects for peace in both countries. These stories have periodically made it into Canadian newspapers, so it is not why these stories appeared after the tsunami, but rather why these stories appeared in some newspapers more frequently than others that deserves closer consideration.

At first glance, it may be tempting to attribute the *Vancouver Sun*'s minimal coverage of conflict stories to the city's relatively small diaspora populations of Sri Lankans and Indonesians. It might seem as though the national newspapers were catering to diaspora audiences, however, in both instances, the diaspora communities are largely concentrated in Toronto. This raises questions about why conflict stories appeared so often in the national editions of the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*, rather than in the Toronto editions of the newspapers.

4.2.5.6 Media Stories

Perhaps the most noticeable difference across the three newspapers is that the *Globe and Mail* alone published pieces about the media's coverage of the tsunami. These stories covered a range of issues, including the ethnic media's role in providing coverage, decisions around publishing disaster images, and critical reflections on overall media coverage of the tsunami. These stories are particularly interesting in the context of this study, as they suggest that some of the questions considered in this analysis were, in fact, being raised in the newsroom during the study period.

4.3 Location of Stories

Analyzing where tsunami stories were published also offers insight into some interesting differences between newspapers. Not surprisingly, the front pages of all three newspapers carried tsunami stories for days after the waves washed ashore. The first paper to drop the tsunami from its front page was the *Vancouver Sun* (see Fig. 8), which, on January 1st published a total of 14 stories: 13 on its inside pages, and one front of section story comprised of assorted Internet postings from survivors and people searching for information about missing friends and family (“Lost in paradise” C1). Four days later, on January 5th, the *National Post* (see Fig. 9) published a story about the tsunami’s impact on Manulife’s Asian operations on the front of its FP section, and scattered 22 other tsunami stories across its inside pages (Dabrowski FP1). It was not until January 15th that the *Globe and Mail* (see Fig. 10) followed suit, bumping coverage from its front page and running all eight tsunami stories on its inside pages. For the remainder of the three-month period of this study, tsunami stories would periodically run on the front pages of all three newspapers, however they would not dominate the front pages as they had in the immediate aftermath of the disaster.

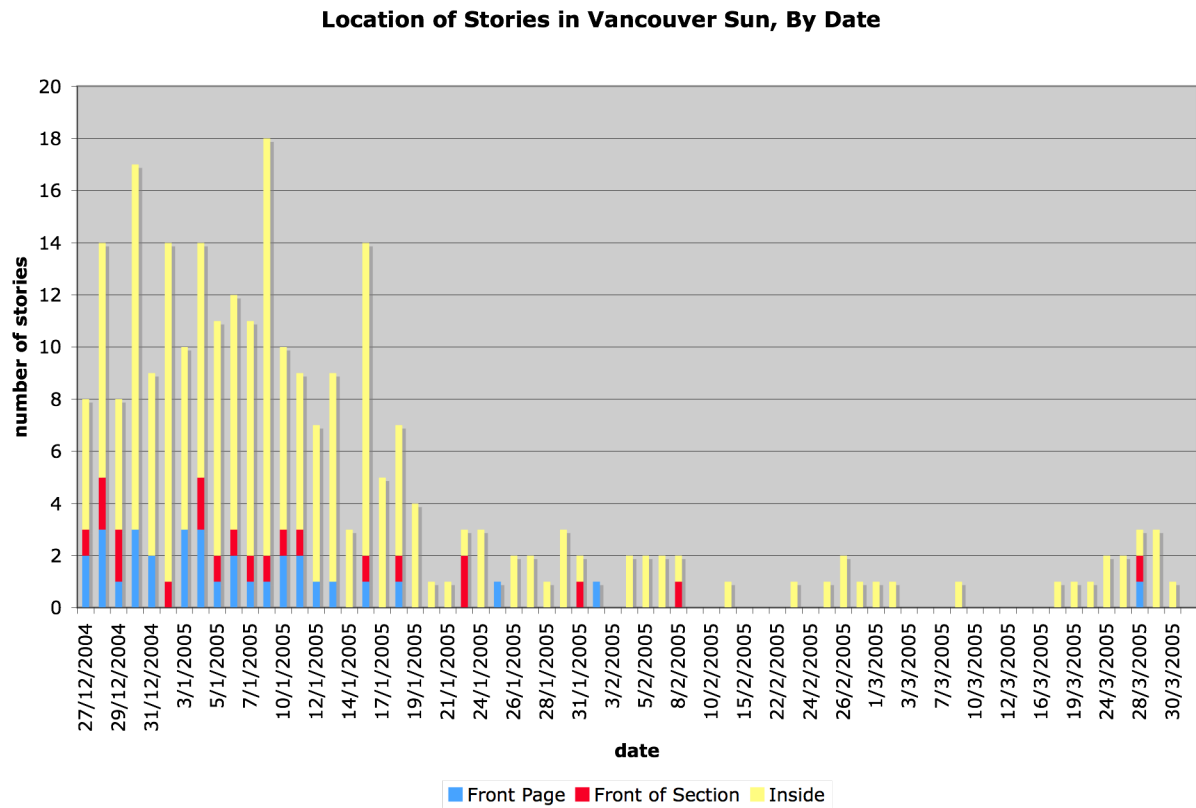


Fig. 8: Location of Stories in Vancouver Sun, By Date

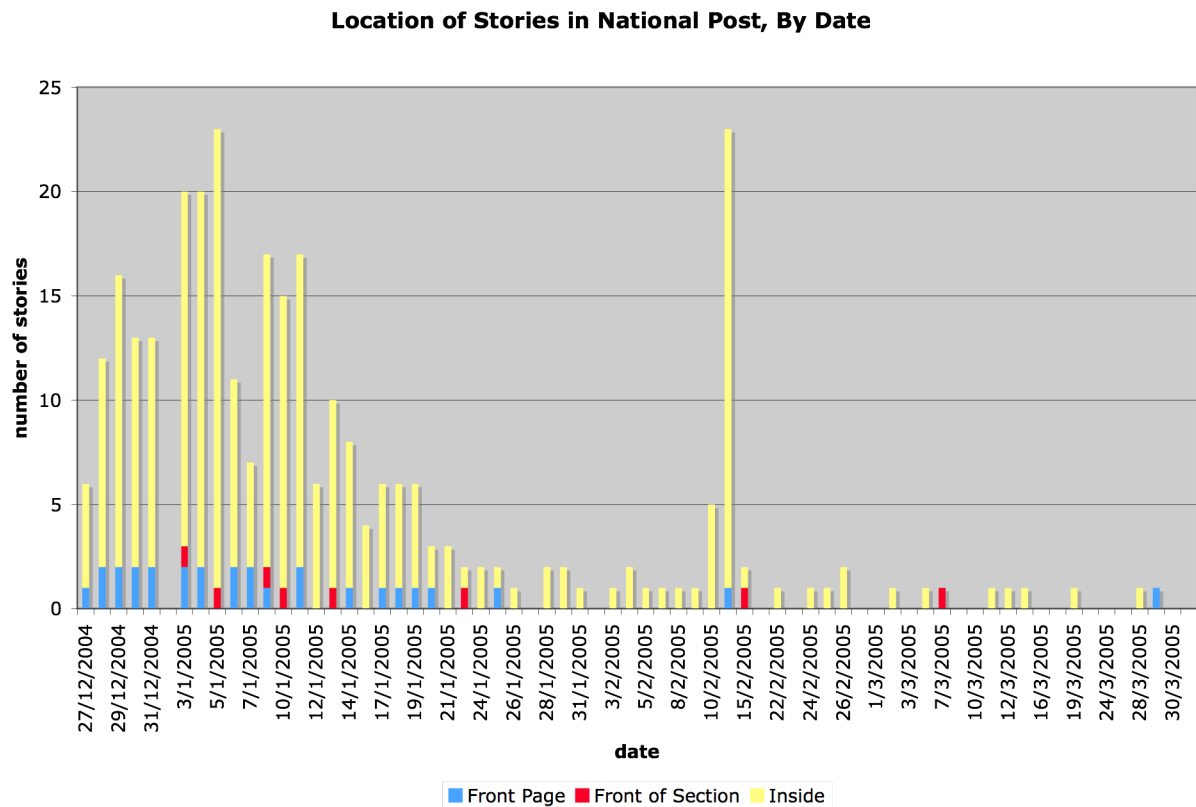


Fig. 9: Location of Stories in National Post, By Date

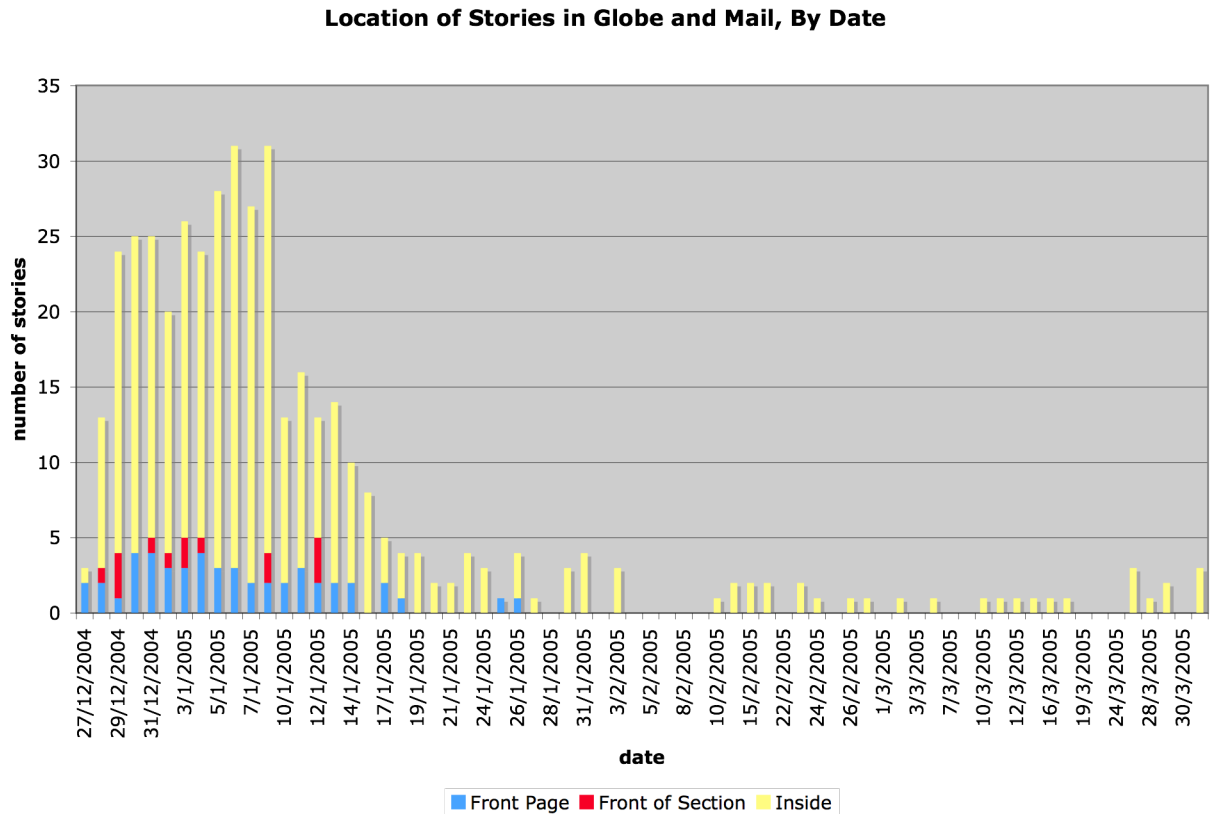


Fig. 10: Location of Stories in Globe and Mail, By Date

Even on March 26th, the three-month anniversary of the disaster, tsunami coverage ran on the inside pages of all three newspapers. On this day, the *National Post* published both of its tsunami stories in the A section (pages A9 and A18), while the *Vancouver Sun* ran its stories on pages C9 and J4, and the *Globe and Mail* ran one story on page A12 and published the other two on pages T5 and T6. It seems that by March, all three newspapers had largely lost interest in the tsunami story.

The *Vancouver Sun* and the *National Post* did publish tsunami stories on their front pages one final time during the study period. On March 28th, the *Vancouver Sun* ran a piece critical of the Canadian government's dispersal of aid for tsunami ravaged countries (Eaves A1), and on March 29th, the *National Post* reported on an 8.7 magnitude earthquake that struck the Indonesian island of Sumatra, sparking fears that another tsunami would hit the area (Stinson

A1). However, these stories dealt with the tsunami only peripherally. They were more focused on new events related to the disaster and not on the disaster itself.

5.0 Discussion

This section explores some of the issues raised in the content analysis in greater detail and offers analysis of the findings.

5.1 Quantity of Coverage

As noted in the previous section, on February 12th, the *National Post* published a total of 24 stories about the tsunami. The discussion offered in this section will focus on that edition of the *National Post*.

This spike in the *National Post*'s coverage was anomalous, as it appeared on a day when both the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Globe and Mail*'s coverage had dropped off to just a single tsunami story. Moreover, that single story in both newspapers dealt with the tsunami only indirectly. Both carried the news that the World Press Photo of the Year honour had been awarded to Reuters' Arko Datta for his photograph of an Indian woman mourning beside the body of a relative killed in the tsunami ("Tsunami image captures world: Devastating loss to killer waves top picture of 2004" A17). In contrast, the *National Post*'s coverage ranged from survivors' stories ("Bravery on the Beach" A20) to the impact of the tsunami on Southeast Asia and the West alike ("It was the West's window" A14), and from outlining overseas suspicions about American motives for offering aid (Manthorpe A25) to the story of Britain's 10 year-old Tilly Smith, whose science class taught her to recognize the early warning signs of a tsunami and enabled her to clear the entire beach her family was vacationing on before the deadly wave washed ashore ("Schoolgirl deserves an A+" A22).

In light of this, there may appear to have been no reason for the spike in the *National Post*'s coverage on February 12th. There was not, judging from other media coverage, a wealth of new information coming out of Southeast Asia at this time. It seems that rather than merely allowing the flow of information out of the region to dictate the amount of coverage it devoted to

the tsunami, the *National Post* decided to make the disaster a major focus for its February 12th edition. On that day, the newspaper printed stories recapping statistics about the disaster, including the magnitude of the earthquake that triggered the tsunami, the speed of the waves that swept people away, and the estimated national death tolls from the disaster. It also delved deeper into stories like the “Baby 81” saga – the tale of a three-month old survivor identified by nine different couples as the son they saw swept away when the tsunami struck – and introduced readers to additional characters involved in the custody drama playing out in Sri Lanka, even though there was not any new information to report (“The fierce love of parents” A23). Finally, the newspaper seems to have used its February 12th edition to publish pieces that had been filed earlier but had not, for whatever reason, made it to print, including a story about how the Indian government was coping with relief and recovery independently after refusing to accept international aid (“The nation that refused aid” A11).

This spike in the *National Post*’s coverage is significant because it demonstrates that the newspaper is both able and willing to act independently of unfolding events, at least some of the time. The content analysis hints that the *National Post* decided to focus its February 12th edition on the tsunami and its victims, disproportionate to the amount of new information coming out of Southeast Asia. This has serious implications, particularly for newspapers covering natural disasters and other types of humanitarian emergencies. It seems to suggest that, given the right circumstances, newspapers – and indeed this may be true for all types of media – can and do set aside concerns regarding professional objectivity in order to report on an issue or cause from an activist rather than a journalistic perspective. However, any media organization that does so will, in all likelihood, reach a point when it must decide that it cannot take up a cause. This is particularly problematic with regard to the ethics of reporting on natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies, as media organizations may be forced to decide which lives are or are not worth campaigning to save.

5.2 Framing of Coverage

This section offers analysis on trends that emerged in the framing of stories appearing in the *Vancouver Sun*, the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail* during the study period.

5.2.1 Political Stories

At various points during the three-month study period, each newspaper published stories that were critical of the Canadian government's response to the tsunami. However, the target of the criticism, as well as the severity of the criticism, varied from newspaper to newspaper. Arguably, the *National Post* was the most critical of the three, pointing the finger of blame directly at Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin (Sokoloff and Curry A1). The *Vancouver Sun*, in contrast, published considerably fewer political stories and those that were published were less critical of the government than those printed in either of the national newspapers.

Although it may seem to be the easiest answer, these differences cannot simply be attributed to the political bias of each newspaper. In the 2006 federal election, called less than one year after the tsunami struck, the *National Post* ("Stephen Harper for Prime Minister" A20), the *Globe and Mail* ("Three reasons why it's time for a change" A22), and the *Vancouver Sun* ("Stephen Harper is our choice to clean up Ottawa" A14) all endorsed the Conservative party. Though the generally negative tone of the two national newspapers' coverage of the Liberal government's response to the tsunami may, in part, stem from some measure of political bias, the same cannot be said for the more positive tone of the *Vancouver Sun*'s coverage. At least at first glance, the differences in the tone of political tsunami-related stories do not seem to be attributable to mere ideological bias.

A better explanation may be found in considering the mandates of each newspaper. While the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail* both aim to serve a national audience, the *Vancouver Sun* aims to serve a local audience. Although Vancouver residents certainly have an interest in

knowing what their federal government is doing, there are numerous sources they can get this information from. Given the wealth of stories with strong Vancouver connections arising from the tsunami, the *Vancouver Sun* seems to have decided to devote the majority of its resources and column inches to telling those local stories, leaving it up to other news organizations to tell other types of tsunami-related stories. This would account not only for the smaller number of political stories published in the *Vancouver Sun*, but also for the less critical tone of those stories. While the *Vancouver Sun*'s stories were merely updates on the government's actions, the two national newspapers, in fulfilling their mandates, were keeping a closer watch on the government and providing more in-depth coverage of its response to the disaster.

Ultimately, in trying to serve a local audience, the *Vancouver Sun* devoted a great deal of coverage to a story unfolding half a world away while only peripherally covering the story unfolding in the nation's capital. The two national newspapers, however, struck a more equitable balance between covering both the domestic and the international aspects of the tsunami story. This raises questions about how newspapers make decisions about what stories are relevant and newsworthy in light of their mandates and target audiences.

5.2.2 Recovery Stories

At first glance, it may seem as though all three newspapers published shockingly few stories about recovery after the tsunami. However, a careful reading of stories that were published in the three months immediately after the tsunami reveals that, in fact, all three newspapers generally framed recovery stories around the aid that funded recovery and reconstruction projects. Stories related to recovery tended to focus more on the *amount* of aid money being spent and where that money had come from, rather than on *how* the money was being spent or how a specific project fit into the broader recovery effort. As a result, these stories were classified as aid stories rather than recovery stories in this analysis.

For example, on January 26th, the *National Post* published a story in which NGO workers discussed how aid donations made in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami would be used to fund long-term reconstruction and recovery projects. However, because the story focused on the international outpouring of aid in the wake of the tsunami and what that would mean in terms of fully funding recovery efforts in the long term, rather than focusing on the actual recovery efforts, the story was classified as an aid story rather than a recovery story (Wattie A4).

Likewise, on February 1st, the *Globe and Mail* reported that former American President Bill Clinton had been selected by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to head the organization's tsunami relief efforts in Southeast Asia. The story also reiterated an earlier announcement that Clinton was aiming to raise \$45 million to support clean water projects in the region, emphasizing the fundraising effort rather than the long-term nature of the projects and how they would support recovery after aid donations dried up ("Clinton to head tsunami relief" A12). These are just two examples of recovery stories that were ultimately re-framed as aid stories.

This framing raises questions about why recovery stories were re-framed as aid stories, and about framing more broadly. One possibility is that the outpouring of aid donations from individuals and governments alike in the wake of the disaster became a key narrative in coverage of the tsunami. Given the sheer number of stories about aid that were published after the disaster, what Vasterman refers to as a "positive feedback loop" may have developed, whereby a theme emerges in news coverage and, over time, the threshold of newsworthiness is lowered for stories that can be tied to that theme (515). Perhaps, then, as discussed earlier, the tsunami developed as a broad theme in the news media and, within that theme, aid emerged as a sub-theme in its own right. It may have been easier for journalists to pitch recovery stories as aid stories, in fitting with this narrative theme and the lowered threshold of newsworthiness that was then applied to aid stories relative to recovery stories.

Alternatively, recovery stories may have been re-framed as aid stories in order to enable journalists to more directly relate these stories to their audiences. In a recovery story, tsunami victims were engaged in rebuilding efforts, but in an aid story, it was the donors – a term which, due to the aid package the federal government offered up for tsunami relief, encompassed every Canadian taxpayer – who were making recovery efforts possible. This re-framing may explain, at least in part, the duration of tsunami coverage evident in the three Canadian newspapers being studied: much of the coverage was actually about Canadians and only indirectly about tsunami victims.

5.2.3 Human Stories

For the first few weeks after the tsunami, all three newspapers printed story after story about the harrowing ordeals survivors overcame. But, as noted in the previous chapter, by the end of January, all three newspapers had shifted the focus of their human stories to the health threats facing survivors and government decisions relating to tsunami victims. Given the scope of the disaster, there was no shortage of survival stories to report on, so one might wonder why survival stories virtually disappeared before the one-month anniversary of the tsunami.

It may be that in the days immediately after the tsunami, when dramatic tales of survival and suffering were abundant, the threshold for how much drama a human tsunami story had to contain in order to be reported was set quite high. Newspapers dutifully covered these stories but as time wore on, they exhausted the most dramatic stories. Though there was no shortage of stories to be told, readers had come to expect a certain level of drama in their coverage, which became increasingly difficult to find. In effect, in the days immediately following the tsunami, as the scope of the disaster became apparent, simple survival stories were crowded out by accounts of particularly harrowing ordeals. After reading the *Vancouver Sun*'s piece about Australian vacationer Jillian Searle, who was washed out to sea, let go of her 5-year old in order to keep

herself and her 2-year-old afloat, and later found her eldest child alive (Shadbolt A3), a reader could hardly be faulted for finding the newspaper's earlier eyewitness account from a vacationing Vancouver radio reporter rather less gripping ("Local man flees tsunamis while on vacation" A1).

It is also worth considering what other stories were making headlines at the time. Internationally, in the lead up to American President George W. Bush's second inauguration (on January 20th), newspapers were publishing pieces speculating on his plans and priorities for his second term in office and reporting on preparations for the inauguration ceremony in Washington (Alberts A13). Later that month (on January 30th) Iraq was scheduled to hold its first legislative elections since the 2003 American-led invasion, which prompted many journalists to reflect on the country's past and contemplate its future (Fisher A8). Nationally, Canada's relationship with China (Fife A13) and the debate about same-sex marriage (Laghi A1) were taking up ink and column inches, slowly squeezing tsunami coverage out of the country's newspapers.

5.2.4 Aid Stories

The narrative of Western generosity that emerged across aid stories published in all three newspapers may have driven Canadians to further charitable giving. As discussed in Brown and Minty's study of American media coverage and charitable giving, a combination of the "buy-in" and "commitment" models can actually cause media coverage of giving to encourage further giving (6). The buy-in model posits that, after reading about the generosity of their fellow Canadians day after day in a newspaper, readers would feel compelled to help tsunami victims (Brown and Minty 6). The commitment model suggests that Canadians would feel compelled to help because their family, friends and colleagues had already donated (Brown and Minty 6). By repeatedly reporting on Canadians' outpouring of charitable donations, the newspapers may, in

fact, have been informally fundraising for charitable organizations. This is incredibly problematic for all three newspapers' claims of reporting on events accurately and fairly, given how that reporting may have, in fact, shaped the story. However, there was a newsworthy story in Canadians' unprecedented generosity. The challenge then is how to report on this type of story without falling into a cycle where donations continue to rise dramatically simply because newspapers (or, indeed, any news medium) are reporting stories about donations that essentially serve as unofficial fundraising campaigns for charitable groups.

As the content analysis in the previous chapter indicated, stories critical of aid offered by governments and private citizens did emerge in all three newspapers, however, these types of stories generally did not appear until after the newspapers had ceased daily publication of dramatic and wrenching human stories. The combination of dramatic human stories and extremely positive stories about charitable giving evident in the *Globe and Mail*, the *National Post* and the *Vancouver Sun* raises additional questions about each of the newspapers' impartiality in covering the tsunami. Given the timing of the disappearance of daily human stories and the appearance of stories critical of aid, it might appear that the newspapers were assisting charitable organizations in their fundraising efforts by disseminating heart wrenching stories while delaying publication of pieces that might make Canadians think twice about donating to relief efforts. When it comes to a newspaper's credibility and reputation, whether this was actually the case matters far less than whether this is perceived to be the case.

Despite the ethical issues around reporting on charitable giving after a major disaster, the fact remains that the outpouring of aid for tsunami victims was unprecedented, and therefore newsworthy. The issue is not *whether* the newspapers should have reported on it, but rather *how* they should have reported on it.

5.2.5 Terrorism Stories

Several stories classified as “crime” stories in the content analysis, as well as a number of the political stories were related to concerns about the presence of terrorist groups in areas affected by the tsunami. More specifically, each of the three newspapers published stories about the likelihood of charitable donations being funneled to groups in Sri Lanka and Indonesia that would use the funds to support terrorism. The introduction of terrorism into the tsunami narrative raises several interesting issues and will be considered briefly.

Raising the specter of terrorism also raised the amount of political capital Western politicians stood to gain from the disaster. Those who advocated providing aid to areas and groups where terrorism concerns existed were essentially staking their political careers on confidence in the systems their states and the international community alike had implemented in order to prevent money laundering in support of terrorism. This entailed big risks for politicians planning to run in future elections however, for some, like Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin, there were big electoral gains to be made by pushing for aid to be distributed to these areas.

Martin refused to join some of Canada’s allies, as well as international organizations like the UN, in adding the Tamil Tigers to the federal government’s list of terrorist organizations and insisted that the country should send aid to areas of Sri Lanka controlled by the Tamil Tigers (Wong and Clark A1). Although Martin drew criticism for his decision, particularly from members of the Conservative party, he also increased the Liberal party’s popularity among Tamils across Canada (Wark A19). With more than 300,000 Tamils, Canada is home to the largest Tamil diaspora population in the world, and, since most Tamils in Canada have concentrated in and around Toronto, they represent a significant proportion of eligible voters in a handful of federal ridings (Eaves A5). For Martin, the risk of being credited with enabling Canadians to fund terrorism appears to have been worth the potential reward of swaying a few

hundred thousand Canadians to vote for the Liberal party in key constituencies in the next federal election. Evidently, the opportunity to increase his political capital was one Martin could not allow to pass.

Politics aside, the terrorism-related issues raised by all three newspapers in the course of providing tsunami coverage are significant. The focus on terrorism after the disaster suggests that although the tsunami emerged as a theme in Canadian print media for a time, some aspects of the disaster itself fit within the broader, more established theme of terrorism that has become a staple of media coverage since the September 11th attacks. This may explain why the tsunami remained a major focus of media attention for so long after the waves receded.

5.3 Summary

This study found that although there are some notable differences between the *Globe and Mail*, the *National Post* and the *Vancouver Sun*, simply catering to the same type of audience (i.e. national) is no guarantee that an analysis of coverage from two different newspapers will produce similar results. Although both cater to national audiences, there were many differences between the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail* in terms of the amount of coverage afforded to the tsunami, the timing of peak coverage and where tsunami-related stories were published.

The *Globe and Mail* published a greater number of stories and photographs on its peak coverage days than the *National Post* did (31 stories vs. 24 stories, and 28 photographs vs. 22 photographs, respectively). The *Globe and Mail* was also later in dropping tsunami coverage from its front page than the *National Post* (January 15th edition vs. January 5th edition).

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the newspaper's more local focus, the *Vancouver Sun*, offered the least tsunami coverage of the three newspapers, publishing 18 stories and 17 photos on its days of peak story and photographic coverage. The *Vancouver Sun* was also the first to

drop tsunami coverage from its front page, publishing its January 1st edition with all of its tsunami coverage inside the paper.

Despite these differences, however, four trends related to story framing and the narrative arc of the disaster did appear to hold true across all three newspapers. First, pieces that are framed as political stories and critical of the government are not necessarily fuelled by inherent political bias, at least with regard to a foreign natural disaster. Also, it appears that in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, the abundance of dramatic stories that can be told raise the bar in terms of the level of drama a disaster story must have in order to be reported. As time progresses, coverage of these stories may drop off altogether simply because the most dramatic stories have already been told and others, though still quite dramatic, do not meet the new standard. Next, it seems that recovery stories are often re-framed as aid stories, thereby more directly relating the story to the audience. The story becomes about what they, as donors, have made possible, rather than what people in a far off place are doing following a disaster. Finally, there does not seem to be any pattern to when a disaster disappears from a newspaper's front page. Even an anniversary commemorating a major disaster is no assurance of front page coverage.

5.4 Implications

5.4.1 Implications for Foreign News

The saturation coverage the three newspapers considered in this study devoted to the tsunami – and the lively debate some of that coverage sparked on those newspapers' letter to the editor pages – demonstrates that Canadians are interested in events happening around the world, and journalists know it. Despite the newsroom restructurings that have seen many news organizations scale back or even drop their foreign bureaus altogether, Canadians are still hungry for foreign news beyond so-called “calendar reporting,” that is, covering foreign elections and

international meetings that are scheduled in advance, rather than covering unpredictable, breaking news. The challenge then, is to feed this appetite for foreign news on little or no foreign news budget.

But this challenge can be overcome. As some did after the tsunami, newspapers can publish foreign news pieces written by journalists working in other mediums who are already in place when stories break. For example, the *National Post* published Global News at Noon anchor Anne-Marie Mediawake's travel journal about how the tsunami impacted her native Sri Lanka, documenting recovery efforts one month after the disaster (Mediawake A2). The *Vancouver Sun* did something similar, although in that instance local radio reporter Michael McLaughlin was vacationing, not working, on the Malaysian island of Penang when the tsunami struck ("Local man flees tsunamis while on vacation" A1). In addition to tapping into the pool of journalists already present, traditional media organizations can turn to citizen journalists to report on breaking foreign news – a practice that has become increasingly popular since 2004. The implications this may have for citizen journalism are considered later in this thesis.

5.4.2 Implications for Disaster Reporting

As illustrated by the *National Post*'s coverage of the tsunami on February 12th, when the newspaper's coverage was disproportionate to the amount of new information coming out of Southeast Asia, under the right circumstances, a media organization may decide to set aside professional considerations – such as impartiality – in order to take up an issue or a cause. Arguably, all three newspapers analyzed in this study took up the cause of tsunami victims to some extent, publishing a multitude of stories about aid and even turning Canadians' outpouring of charitable giving to tsunami relief and recovery into a narrative theme in their disaster reporting. Beyond the obvious issues surrounding impartiality, this is problematic in that it inevitably forces journalists to take on the work of international organizations and charities,

choosing which causes to fundraise for, and, particularly after natural or humanitarian disasters, which lives are worth campaigning to save.

There are ways, however, for journalists working inside disaster zones to maintain a measure of objectivity without turning a blind eye to the suffering around them. For example, they can share stories with their personal networks and encourage those people to donate to a cause, or, they can donate to a cause themselves once they have finished reporting. Professionally, journalists would do better to tell compelling stories in the immediate aftermath of a disaster and, in the long run, after media attention has drifted elsewhere, periodically report on stories that remind the audience that human suffering did not end when the last of the foreign journalists left. Although this might be difficult to pitch outside the window for anniversary stories commemorating a disaster, journalists who are persistent in seeking poignant tales from former disaster zones are likely to find them, as is evident from the quantity of coverage included in the *National Post*'s February 12th edition.

5.4.3 Implications for Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism and technological change have enabled citizens to begin reporting for media organizations before journalists arrive on the scene. Thanks to technological advancements, anyone with a cell phone can break stories for print, radio, television and online mediums by capturing audio, video and still images, or posting text online.

In the wake of the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami, the newspapers considered in this study did not, for the most part, draw on material from the public. In part, this may reflect the nascent nature of citizen journalism at the time of the tsunami. Although blogs were popular by late 2004, the photo-sharing website Flickr was still relatively new and growing slowly. Moreover, websites like YouTube and Twitter had not been developed yet (the former was created in 2005 and the latter was not created until 2006). The absence of citizen journalism from most of the

tsunami coverage analyzed in this study may also be explained by the medium being analyzed. Since this analysis considered the print editions of all three newspapers and did not look at web content, there were limited opportunities for the inclusion of citizen journalism. In a print edition of a newspaper, text and a limited number of photos can be re-published – and, in all three newspapers considered in this study, they were – however there is no opportunity to share audio or video submitted by users. An analysis of traditional news organizations’ online tsunami coverage may very well demonstrate a much greater use of citizen journalism.

However, there are ethical considerations around citizen journalism that must be taken into account. Just because citizen journalists can post content online instantaneously does not mean they should, nor does it mean that traditional media organizations should disseminate works of citizen journalism indiscriminately. In their reporting on the tsunami, the three newspapers analyzed in this study demonstrated caution when re-producing works of citizen journalism, doing so sparingly and tastefully. However, as citizen journalism evolves and technology continues to advance, traditional news organizations will likely have more and more citizen-generated content available to incorporate into their own reporting. Traditional media organizations must continue to exercise careful judgment in terms of what works of citizen journalism they re-publish if they are to protect their reputations. Likewise, citizen journalists should consider issues of taste and decency when publishing breaking news online, lest citizen journalism become little more than tabloid-esque shock journalism.

Citizen journalism has proven to be particularly useful in providing coverage of major natural disasters, including Hurricane Katrina and the January earthquake in Haiti, since a disaster can happen quickly and leave many hard hit areas inaccessible. When covering these types of stories, ethical considerations become even more important, as citizen journalists may find themselves surrounded by the sights and sound bytes of suffering and death. Just as traditional media organizations play a gatekeeper role, making decisions about what they should

disseminate, citizen journalists must exercise judgment in deciding what to publish. Like traditional news organizations, citizen journalists' reporting can have consequences (i.e. emotional consequences for disaster victims and their families). However, unlike many traditional news organizations, most citizen journalists are not guided by *proactive* policies regarding standards of taste and decency. Instead, citizen journalists tend to take a *reactive* approach, commenting and debating when they feel one of their number has crossed a line in their reporting. Citizen journalists must continue to exercise judgment in their reporting and continue to band together, enforcing standards of taste and decency upon one another, particularly when engaging in disaster reporting.

5.5 Conclusion

This descriptive research project discovered four trends in disaster reporting that appear to hold true across all three newspapers, regardless of whether they cater to a local or national audience. Firstly, as CARMA notes, political capital is tied to the amount of coverage a disaster gets, although findings from this study suggest that coverage isn't necessarily inherently political (9). Secondly, Vasterman's positive feedback loops – instances where a theme develops and, over time, stories that fit within that theme are held to a lower standard of newsworthiness – do seem to exist (515). However, a second loop also appears to exist in which the most dramatic stories are disseminated after a disaster, establishing a high threshold for the amount of drama a story must contain in order to be reported. Over time, fewer stories meet the new standard and eventually these types of stories disappear altogether. Thirdly, all three newspapers tended to re-frame recovery stories as aid stories. This may have been done to more directly relate the story to a Canadian audience, suggesting that Galtung and Ruge's hypothesis still holds true: news from culturally distant or low-rank countries must allow an audience to identify with a story in order for that story to be reported (68). Finally, there does not appear to be any pattern to when a

disaster disappears from the front page, or what is required to get it back there after it has been bumped. Ultimately, this study found that although narrative arcs in disaster reporting follow similar patterns across newspapers, other aspects of disaster coverage – such as in the quantity or location of coverage – vary from newspaper to newspaper.

5.6 Limitations

Although this research produced some interesting results, limitations inherent in the methodology employed to collect the data must be taken into consideration. First and foremost, the results of the content analysis were not peer-reviewed for inter-coder reliability. If a peer-review were to be conducted, some of the coding in the content analysis might be expected to change. Although this would result in revisions to real numbers, it would be unlikely to have a significant impact on the broader trends noted in the study.

The research is also limited in that it seeks to examine print media coverage available to residents of Vancouver but limits its scope of analysis to mainstream, English language newspapers available in the city. A study of the Vancouver's ethnic newspapers, particularly those targeted at the city's Asian communities, may produce vastly different results from this study.

6.0 Suggestions for Further Research

After donations flooded organizations mobilizing relief and aid programs for victims of the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami, researchers sought to understand the link between media coverage and charitable giving. An American study found that a 700-word story in a major daily newspaper raised charitable donations by an average of 18.2% (Brown and Minty 13). To date, no similar studies have been conducted to determine the impact of media coverage on charitable giving in Canada, or most other states. The American study also determined that encouraging the media to keep humanitarian crises in the news is in the best interest of charitable organizations, however, the needs of those charities – particularly those that invest their limited resources in positioning themselves to provide post-disaster updates over the long run – generally do not enter into the media's decision-making (Brown and Minty 13). Ethical issues aside, these areas require further research because in order for the media to act in the public good, journalists must have a thorough understanding of the impact their work can have.

Another area for further research involves examining what opportunities exist to reduce the number of foreign journalists accessing a disaster zone. Ill-prepared journalists can drive up the cost of living as they stockpile food, water and medical supplies for their own use (Downman 5). Additionally, if they are forced to turn to international organizations and NGOs for supplies, the presence of these journalists can put a strain on relief efforts (Downman 10). However, as some did after the tsunami, news organizations can limit the number of journalists dispatched to a disaster zone by turning to journalists capable of working across mediums for disaster coverage (i.e. turning to a television reporter for print coverage). Citizen journalists in the area who are able to work in multiple mediums may also be well positioned to provide coverage, further reducing news organizations' need to dispatch foreign journalists to a disaster zone. Future research should consider how to balance the need for journalists to access a disaster area in order

to report on it against the need for minimizing access to a disaster zone in order to best serve victims.

Another area for further research is that of the narrative themes that typically emerge during disaster reporting. As Penelope Ploughman noted in a 1997 study of seven disasters – both natural and man-made – disaster reporting typically focuses on community breakdown, characterized by people panicking, fleeing the affected area and looting. However, Ploughman found that in reality, the majority of people react rationally to disasters in an effort to try and return to normality as quickly as possible (121). Though this community breakdown narrative did not emerge in the media’s coverage of the Southeast Asian tsunami, it appeared in media coverage of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Bevc 61) and has been a theme in coverage of the January earthquake that devastated parts of Haiti (“Haiti Earthquake: Is the term ‘looting’ racist? Past Kanye West comments fuel debate”). Additional research in this area would serve two purposes: furthering understanding of why certain narrative themes emerge in media coverage of some disasters but not others, and exploring ways to reorient media coverage to better reflect a post-disaster situation, rather than lapsing into the familiar narratives that journalists seem to rely on.

This leads into another area for further research: the ethics of disaster reporting. The sheer quantity of coverage that saturates the media after a natural disaster indicates that disaster reporting is not “business as usual” in terms of journalistic practices, but it is less clear whether the usual ethical considerations apply. This study’s findings suggest that under the right circumstances, newspapers can and do set aside concerns regarding professional impartiality in order to report on an issue from an activist rather than a journalistic perspective. More research is needed to explore if this is the case for all news mediums and, if so, why. If this does, in fact, prove to be a trend, the long-term implications of this practice for media credibility should also be studied.

Finally, the question of where citizen journalism fits into Ploughman's post-disaster credibility hierarchy requires further research. Ploughman's research has established that in disaster reporting, the media relies upon the established credibility hierarchy – usually governments – to determine the salience of issues and set agendas for discourse on those issues (119). However, with the advent of citizen journalism – be it blog entries or uploading user-generated content to a traditional media organization's website – advances in technology that have equipped millions of cell phone users with camera phones, and websites like Twitter and YouTube that allow users to spread news faster than journalistic principles of verification allow, the established credibility hierarchy no longer accurately reflects the environment most journalists involved in disaster reporting must operate in. Due to the nature of the medium analyzed here and the time period considered, these changes were not major factors in this study. However, all these changes have empowered citizen journalists, giving them a voice in post-disaster agenda setting and challenging the government's position at the top of the credibility hierarchy. As citizen journalism continues to evolve, the need for research into how this type of journalism fits into broader disaster reporting grows.

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