

## PERCEPTION OF WINTER IN CANADA THROUGH LA PRESSE NEWSPAPER (1959-2006)

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### ABSTRACT

A classification has been developed in order to analyze how *La Presse* Newspaper (one of the largest French-speaking newspapers in Canada and published in Montreal, Quebec) introduces winter to its readers (about one million). A total of 10 winters (from November 1<sup>st</sup> to April 30<sup>th</sup> with focus on page 1 and 3) ranging from 1959 to 2006 were selected: 1959-1960, 1965-1966, 1970-1971, 1975-1976, 1980-1981, 1985-1986, 1990-1991, 1995-1996, 2000-2001 and 2005-2006. In all, 894 articles were classified into 7 categories: 1) Snowstorm/Accident/Death, 2) Sport/Tourism, 3) Debates/Ideas, 4) Crime, 5) International News, 6) Festivals, and 7) Environment. As years go by, one notices that the number of articles talking about winter is considerably less significant (for instance 355 articles for 1959-1960, and only 52 articles for 2005-2006), but is more targeted on the front page and on page 3, occupying a larger space and focusing more and more on negative aspects (including more pictures) of the cold season. (Keywords: *La Presse* Newspaper, classification, winter, snow, cold)

### INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Rockies as well as Eastern Canada are the snowiest areas in Canada (Brown, 2008) and in the world (Toupin, 2007, 2008). While the Rockies are unpopulated, more than 10 million people live in Eastern Canada and every year from November to April several snowstorms affect people's day-to-day life considerably. Cities like Montreal get over 200cm of snow every year while Quebec City gets 300cm. What message is then sent to this population through *La Presse*? Recent research in Social Psychology (Marchand, 2004; Bénilde, 2007) shows how newspapers can greatly affect the perception and opinion of people on different topics. In order to do so, newspapers tend to use shocking headlines focusing mostly on the front page. Assuming that Eastern Canada is hit just about every year by several snowstorms (Plamondon, 1979), this paper looks at how *La Presse* introduces winter to people in a very negative way.

### METHODOLOGY

Every single page was scrutinized from November 1<sup>st</sup> to April 30<sup>th</sup> for the ten-year period. Focus was made predominantly on headlines and the first 10 lines converging on words such as: winter/snow/cold published on page 1 (front page) and page 3 (very visible) and were recorded. The location on the page (top left, top right, middle, bottom left, bottom right), length for every article and pictures were also classified. According to this methodology the content was recorded as: negative, positive or neutral. A seven-category classification was developed from this set of data (Table 1).

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the 894 articles tracked down, about one third (31%) falls into the most negative category: Snowstorm/Accident/Death (276 articles). However this total rises to 77% if one looks at page 1 and 3 (generally the most visible pages). As time goes by fewer articles on this topic is published by *La Presse* (102 in 1959-1960, 23 in 2005-2007, Table 1) but occupies twice as much space per page and represents a much higher percentage from all articles published. Indeed those 102 articles on Snowstorm/Accident/Death in 1959-1960 represent only 29% from all articles referring to winter but the 23 published in 2005-2006 counts nevertheless for 44%. Table 1 illustrates this trend. From our classification three (3) other topics tend to introduce winter as a bad season blaming it for several human problems: Editorial/Opinion (7% from the total), International News: in most cases Snowstorms in the United States (14%) and Environment (17%). Therefore from the 1959-1960 to the 2005-2006 period, 69% of all the material published (618 articles on a grand total of 894) on winter by *La Presse* is negative. A merrier side of winter (267 articles, 30%) is mostly illustrated by only Sport/Tourism and Festival.

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Winter	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		Total	% Total						
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%								
1959	10	2	10	2	2	6	4	1	4	1	1	4	6	1	355	45.5						
1960	2	9	4	9	0				8	4	4		3	8								
1965	50	3	24	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	7	5	1	1	132	17.0						
1966		8		8	3	0			2	7			4	1								
1970	18	3	15	2	5	1	1	2	6	1	0	0	9	1	54	7.0						
1971		3		8		0				1				7								
1975	13	2	27	4	3	5	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	60	8.0						
1976		2		5									4	3								
1980	7	1	8	1	8	1	0	0	8	1	0	0	1	3	46	6.0						
1981		5		7		7				7			5	3								
1985	17	3	3	6	5	1	0	0	1	2	1	2	1	2	47	6.0						
1986		6				1			0	1			1	3								
1990	9	3	3	1	4	1	0	0	6	2	1	3	7	2	30	3.5						
1991		0		0		3				0				3								
1995	9	1	11	2	3	6	0	0	1	2	2	4	1	3	53	7.0						
1996		7		1					1	1			7	2								
2000	28	4	12	1	1	2	1	2	9	1	1	18	2	3	65	10.0						
2001		3		8						4	2											
2005	23	4	16	3	1	2	0	0	5	1	6	10	1	2	52	7.0						
2006		4		1					0													
Total	276		223		63		9		126		44		153		894	100						
% Total	31.0		25.0		7.0		1.0		14.0		5.0		17.0		100							
Legend																						
1. Snow storm-Accident-Death					2. Sport -Tourism					3. Editorial-Opinion					4. Crime		5. International News		6. Festival		7. Environment	
*Publicity as well as professional sports were omitted																						

Table 2 shows most frequent words used in the headlines as well as in the first ten lines for articles classified under Snowstorm/Accident/Death. Barring a few exceptions, most words were used in a negative way. The word snow is the most common followed by snowstorm (Headlines: 42 and 37 times and top ten lines: 78 and 40 times), also words such as: cold, winter, death, snow removal and closed street/ slippery are more common in headlines, while terms such as: traffic, strong wind, accident/collision tend to dominate the top ten lines. Table 3 represents the most frequent words (headlines and top ten lines) for International News, Sport/Tourism, Environment, Crime and Editorial/Opinion. Terminology is similar between Table 2 and 3. Sport/Tourism and Festival (Table 3) refer to terms used generally speaking in a more positive context (ski, snow, enjoyment, and holiday). Most of those articles (60%) are published during the months of January and February.

## CONCLUSION

When it comes to winter, *La Presse* Newspaper clearly emphasizes the negative aspects of the cold season which could possibly affect the population. It stresses more specifically on Snowstorm, Accident and Death caused by this season. Articles written on International News, the topic of Environment as well as Debates and Ideas also tend to be on the dark side. Although fewer and fewer articles are published over the years they are nevertheless more visible and shocking. Further studies including the examination of a different newspaper in Canada (The Edmonton Journal, published in Alberta Western Canada located in a drier winter) is en route. This will allow us to compare both newspapers and see how journalists react in a less snowy environment. While Montreal receives on

Themes	Titles	(n of times)	First 10 lines	(n of times)
Snow storm-Accident-Death	Snow*	42	Snow*	78
	Snow storms	37	Snow storms	40
	Cold **	16	Traffic	34
	Winter	16	Strong wind	16
	Death	10	Cold	15
	Snow removal	10	Snow removal	10
	Closed street,	9	Accident,	7
	Slippery	5	Collision Death	4
	Accident,	5	Ice storm	4
	Collision New	5	Black out	4
	(min/max)	4	Delay,	4
	Ice storm	3	Cancellation	3
	Buried	3	Injuries	3
	Injuries	3	Fire	
	Blizzard	3		
	Black out	3		
	Fire	2		
Windy				
Worst, blocked				

the average about 225cm of snow with several snowstorms, Edmonton gets about 123cm of snow, so a snowstorm is a relatively unusual event.

Themes	Titles	(n of times)	First 10 lines	(n of times)
International News	Snow storm	10	Snow storm	9
	Death	10	Snow*	8
	Snow*	5	Death	6
	Avalanche	3	Avalanche	2
	Blizzard	2	Blizzard	2
Sport	Ski	6	Ski	7
	Snow***	5	Enjoyment	4
Environment	Ice	5	Snow***	4
	Water	4	Ice	5
	Cold	2	Cold	4
	Minus zero	2	Snow	3
Festival	Holiday	2	Ship (Ferry)	3
			Water	2
Crime	Holiday	2	Light	3
	Death Body	3	Holiday	2
	Frozen	2	Frozen	3
Editorial-Opinion	Find	2	Death Body	2
	Dissatisfaction	2	Dissatisfaction	4
	Harsh	2	Harsh	3
Note:				
Snow regarded as a negative factor *				
Extreme cold **				
Snow regarded as a positive factor ***				

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