

Keeping up with the times: Canadians and their news media diet

by Leslie-Anne Keown

News is the first rough draft of history — Philip Graham

An informed and engaged citizenry is considered by commentators and political scientists to be the cornerstone of an active and thriving democracy.¹ Of course, one of the main ways that a citizen becomes informed is by following news and current affairs. Furthermore, the type of media used is considered important, especially in relation to levels of political participation.²

Therefore, knowing who follows news consistently allows us to build a more thorough understanding of the amount of political activity Canadians engage in. In addition, it is important to know the sources they use to follow the news and just how varied their “diet” is.

This article explores Canadians and their consumption of news and current affairs media, using the 2003 General Social Survey (GSS) on social engagement. First, it looks at how Canadians who follow news and current affairs frequently differ from those who do not. Then the focus shifts slightly to consider only frequent consumers and the variety of media that comprises their news diet. It explores the sources of media that individuals use and factors that may influence these choices. Finally, the article concludes with a comparison of Canadians whose media consumption consists of only

television to Canadians who have a different diet, and asks how this influences their non-voting political activity.

Canadians are very likely to have a daily diet of news, especially seniors

In 2003, the vast majority of Canadians (89%) followed news and current affairs frequently, that is, daily or several times a week (Table 1). However, seniors aged 65 and over were more likely to follow the news on a frequent basis than young adults aged 19 to 24 (95% versus 79%). It is unclear why this difference exists but previous research points to differences in the amount of time that can be devoted to following the news, as well as to generational differences.³

Other important characteristics distinguish those who follow the news and current affairs frequently from those who do not. Men, people who are married, workers employed as professionals or managers, and those with higher incomes were more frequent users.

The immigrant status of Canadians and the region or city where they live have little influence on whether or not they follow news on a frequent basis. However, the language most often spoken at home does make

a difference. Canadians for whom French is their language of preference were most likely to follow the news at least several days a week.

Television is the staple food of the frequent user’s media diet

So, most Canadians follow the news on a frequent basis but what is their media “diet” composed of?⁴ In this section, we look only at frequent users to see if their news consumption is composed of different media types or is a monodiet that lacks variety.

Frequent users almost always got some of their news from television, with 91% indicating that TV was a news source for them (Chart 1). Television can be thought of as the staple food of news consumption, but certain groups used it more than others. These groups included Canadians age 45 or older, women, people who live in a married or common-law relationship, those who have household incomes below \$60,000 per year and people living in Quebec. These patterns closely follow overall television viewing patterns in Canada and mirror the findings of previous work on the kinds of television programs watched by Canadians⁵ (Table 2).

Almost as substantial an element in their daily news consumption

Table 1 Seniors, men, those who are not married and those with higher incomes are frequent followers of news and current affairs

	% who follow the news daily/weekly		% who follow the news daily/weekly
All respondents 19 years and older who follow the news frequently	89		
Demographic characteristics		Immigration and language	
Age		Born in Canada	
19 to 24	79	Yes	89
25 to 44	87*	No	90
45 to 64	93*	Language used at home	
65 and older	95*	English	89
Gender		French	91*
Women	88*	Other	87*
Men	91	Place of residence	
Marital status		Region	
Married/common-law	91*	Atlantic	88*
Other	86	Quebec	91*
Work and education		Ontario	90
Highest level of education		Prairies	88*
No postsecondary	87*	BC	88*
Some postsecondary	91	Urban/rural area	
Occupation type		Montreal	91*
Professional/manager	93*	Toronto	92*
Other occupations	88	Vancouver	89*
Household income		Other CMA ¹	89*
Less than \$29,999	87	CA ²	88*
\$30,000 to \$59,999	89*	Rural	87
\$60,000 and more	92*		
Not stated	87		

1. Census metropolitan area.

2. Census agglomeration.

* Significantly different than reference group shown in italics at $p < 0.05$.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

was print journalism, with 70% of frequent users reporting that the newspaper was one of their sources for gathering information on news and current affairs. People with a higher consumption of newspapers included those 45 years and older, men, people with postsecondary education, individuals with household incomes above \$60,000 per year, and those Canadians in a professional or management occupation.

The third most common news media source was radio, which is where 53% of frequent users reported that they got some of their daily news. Seniors consumed radio at a much

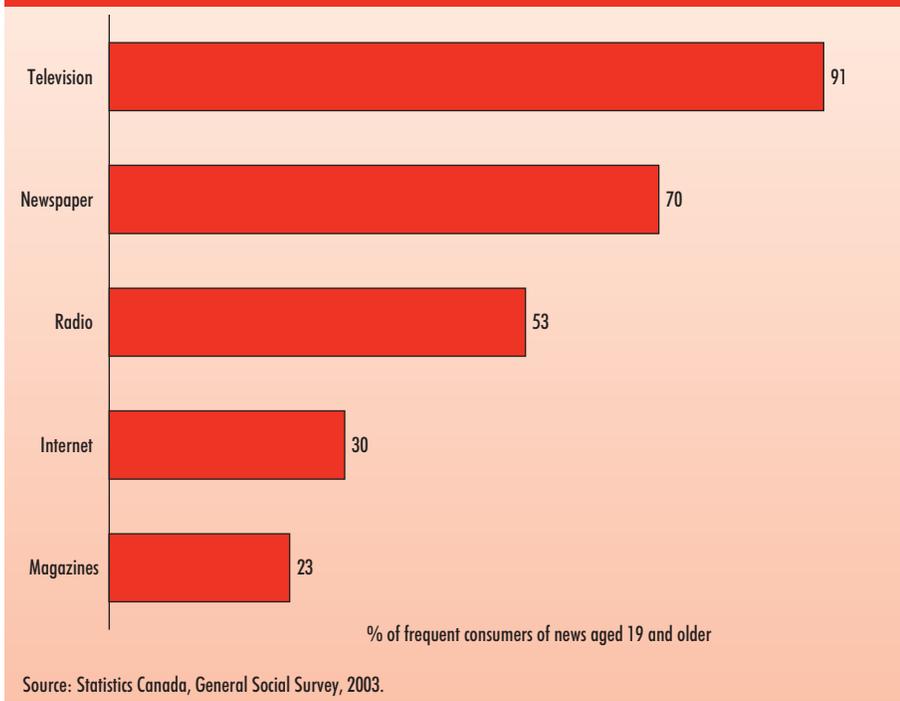
higher rate than other Canadians, at 83%. Other groups showing higher use of radio as a news source included those who are married or living common-law, individuals with some postsecondary education, Canadians in a professional or management occupation, those who speak English most often at home, and Canadians living outside Quebec.

Internet part of the media diet, especially among younger Canadians

In 2003, 30% of Canadians who followed the news frequently reported using the Internet to do so. This is not

surprising, since other studies have shown that accessing online news services is one of the most common things to do on the Internet.⁶ (Readers should note that these results are based on use in 2003 and that Internet use patterns have changed considerably since then.)

Amongst Canadians who followed the news on a frequent basis, using the Internet was most common among 19- to 24-year-olds (42%) and least common among seniors (9%). Women were less likely than men to use the Internet as a news source; likewise, those with some postsecondary education used it much more often



users consulted 2.7 media sources to meet their news requirements. Those 45 to 64 years of age used more sources than other age groups; men used more sources than women. Those with postsecondary education tended to select a wider variety of sources than those with a high school diploma or less.

One of the most varied media diets is found among those whose occupation is professional or manager. In this group, the average number of media sources used was 3.0, which is significantly higher than that of other occupational categories (2.6). This trend was also reflected in the finding that those Canadians whose household income is more than \$60,000 per year consumed a wider variety of news media than any other income group.

Language preference also influences the number of sources from which Canadians gather their daily news. Frequent users who speak English at home had the most varied sources, followed by those who speak a language other than English or French. Those who speak French in the home had the least varied media consumption.

Not surprisingly, given the influence of language on source variety, region of the country also influences media selection. Frequent users in Quebec and the Atlantic provinces chose fewer sources than their counterparts in other regions of Canada. Of those Canadians living in the three major census metropolitan areas (CMAs), those living in Montréal showed the lowest average number of media sources. Similarly, those living in rural areas had the least varied media consumption when compared to those in more urban centres.

These results suggest that the variety of media frequent news users consume may be directly related to the size of the media marketplace. In order for the news diet to be varied, it is essential that media in many forms and in one's language of preference be readily available and personally accessible. Thus, when the selection

than those without. Professionals and managers were twice as likely as other occupational groups to include the Internet as part of their daily news diet, perhaps because people in these types of jobs tend to use the Internet at work. Canadians with higher incomes also used Internet news more frequently than those in lower income groups. (Some of these differences may have lessened as the Internet has become accessible to more Canadians.)

One key finding is that frequent news users born outside Canada were more likely to use the Internet as a news source. The Internet can provide news about other areas of the world in a more in-depth manner than might be possible with the more conventional sources of print and broadcast news. Immigrants may also use the Internet more commonly as a news source due to the availability of news in their language of preference.

The value of the Internet as a multilingual medium is somewhat supported by the differences

observed in Internet use as a news source depending on the language that is most commonly spoken at home. Those who speak a language other than English or French at home were more likely to be users of Internet news than those who speak one of the two official languages. In 2003, those who speak French were the least likely language group to use the Internet as a news source. This may be related to Internet access rather than language, as Quebec had lower levels of Internet use for all purposes than other areas in Canada at that time.⁷

Canadians like to sample news from multiple media sources

Canadians who follow the news daily or several times a week tend to get their information from more than one media source. Only 17 % of those who followed the news frequently used a single source (usually television). The vast majority (72%) consumed from two to four sources of news. About 10% used all five types of media to get their news. On average, frequent news

Table 2 Frequent users rely on television but usually consume more than one source of news

	% of frequent users					Average number of sources used
	Television	Radio	Newspaper	Magazines	Internet	
All respondents 19 years and older who follow the news frequently	91	53	70	23	30	2.67
Demographic characteristics						
Age						
<i>19 to 24</i>	86	41	66	20	42	2.55
25 to 44	89*	54*	67*	21*	38*	2.70*
45 to 64	92*	57*	73*	25*	27*	2.73*
65 and older	95*	83*	74*	24*	9*	2.55
Gender						
Women	92	52	68*	22	24*	2.58*
Men	90	54	73	24	36	2.76
Marital status						
Married common-law	91*	56*	72*	23*	30	2.71*
Other	89	49	68	21	30	2.58
Work and education						
Highest level of education						
No postsecondary	93	48	61	18	20	2.40
Some postsecondary	89	57	73	26	39	2.81
Occupation type						
Professional/manager	91*	60*	75*	30*	48*	3.04*
Other occupations	88	52	69	21	24	2.58
Household income						
Less than \$29,999	93*	48*	61*	18*	20*	2.40*
\$30,000 to \$59,999	91*	53*	68*	21*	27*	2.59*
\$60,000 and more	87*	59*	76*	28*	41*	2.92*
Not Stated	92*	49	69*	19*	21*	2.50*
Immigration and language						
Born in Canada						
Yes	91	54	71*	23	28*	2.67
No	90	52	67	20	36	2.68
Language used at home						
English	89	57	75	25	32	2.79
French	94*	44*	61*	19*	21*	2.39*
Other	90*	49*	62*	18*	34*	2.53*
Place of residence						
Region						
Atlantic	91*	58*	67*	17*	24*	2.57*
Quebec	94*	46*	62*	19*	23*	2.44*
Ontario	89	55	74	24	34	2.75
Prairies	90	56*	74	24	29*	2.73*
BC	89	57*	75*	27*	36*	2.81*
Urban/rural area						
Montréal	93	48*	63	21*	29*	2.53*
Toronto	90*	55*	73*	24*	39*	2.80*
Vancouver	88*	57*	74*	25*	39*	2.83*
Other CMA ¹	89*	54	73*	24*	32*	2.73*
CA ²	92	53	74*	23*	26*	2.67*
Rural	92	54	64	20	19	2.48

1. Census metropolitan area.

2. Census agglomeration.

* Significantly different than reference group shown in italics at p < 0.05.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

offered is more limited, the tendency will be to turn to television as it is the staple that is almost universally available.

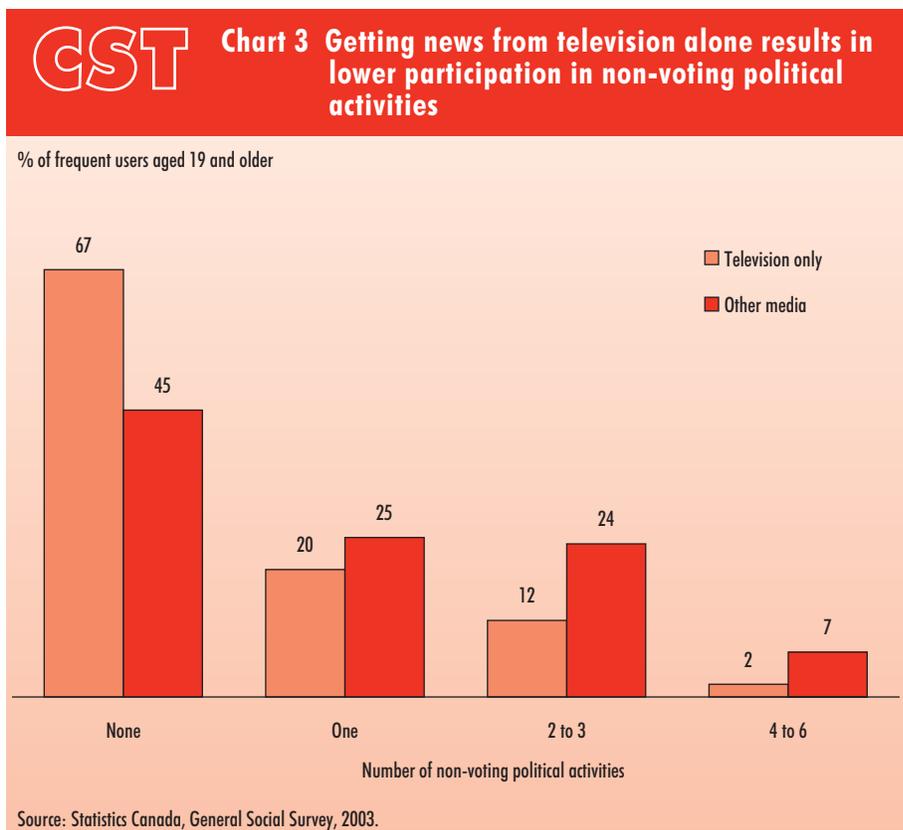
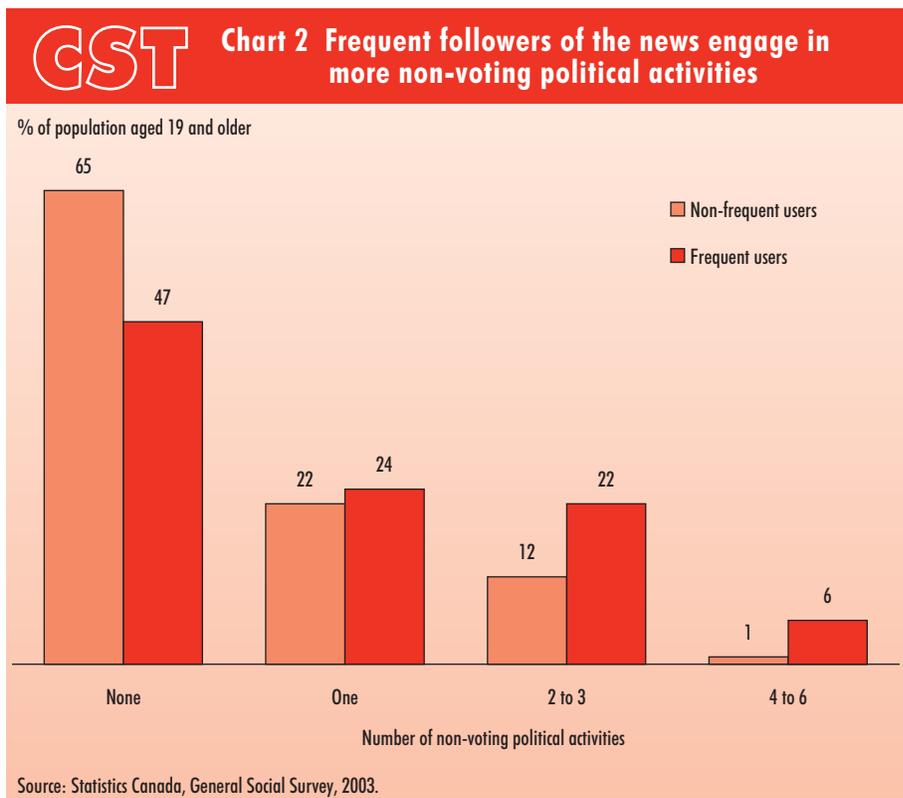
Frequent users who speak English and live in more urban areas are less reliant on television only

Making television their sole choice to follow news and current affairs was more common among younger adults, women, those who are single, those with no postsecondary education and those in lower income brackets.

Choosing television alone from the media sources available was also more common amongst those who use a language other than English as their language of preference. This is also reflected when considering geographic location. Higher percentages of frequent news user who live in Montréal or more rural areas selected television as their sole choice of media source. This reflects patterns of overall television viewing in Canada.⁸

Frequent users are more likely to engage in non-voting political activities

Frequent users of the news tended to be more involved in non-voting political activities such as attending public meetings; searching for information on a political issue; volunteering for a political party; expressing their views by contacting a newspaper or politician; signing a petition; or participating in a march or demonstration (Chart 2). The difference was particularly pronounced when considering those who did not participate in any activities and those who participated in four or more. This finding lends support to previous research that suggests that following the news and current affairs is related to being a more politically engaged citizen.⁹ Moreover, these same studies argue that individuals who use media that require them to read and engage more actively with the material being presented have higher levels of civic



GST What you should know about this study

The 2003 General Social Survey (GSS) on social engagement surveyed about 25,000 Canadians aged 15 and older living in private households in the 10 provinces. It was developed to explore the measurement of social capital and develop a better understanding of how social networks and norms of trust and reciprocity contribute to individual and social outcomes. For this purpose, the survey collected information on a wide range of activities, such as social contacts with family, friends and neighbours; involvement in organizations, political activities and volunteer work; and the informal care they provide or receive. It also explored the values and attitudes and the level of trust in people and in public institutions. Overall, the survey provided comprehensive information on the many ways that Canadians engage in civic and social life.

This article looks at respondents 19 years and older in order to include only those individuals who have reached the age of majority for political participation. Voting patterns of respondents are not considered because eligibility to vote (i.e. citizenship) was not collected by the survey.

Frequent users: Individuals who follow the news and current affairs at least several times a week.

News media/media diet: The sources Canadians use to access the news and current affairs (television, newspaper, radio, magazines, Internet).

engagement and more knowledge of current affairs than those who use television as their primary or only source of news.¹⁰

And certainly, the GSS data show that the media one selects does influence participation in non-voting political activities. Those frequent users who chose only television tended to participate in fewer non-voting political activities (Chart 3). In fact, in terms of their involvement, those who used television as their only source of news closely mirrored those who did not follow the news at all. This finding supports previous U.S. research that shows lower rates of political participation are associated with using TV as the only source of news.¹¹

Summary

Most Canadians follow news and current affairs at least several times a week. Few Canadians use a single media source for their news. However, the variety of the media sources consumed does seem to be related to access. It appears that variety is dependent on having sufficient access to media in many forms and in one's preferred language. Canadians living in rural areas and those who speak French most often at home find access more difficult than other frequent news consumers. When access to additional sources of media is blocked—for whatever reason—it appears that people turn to television for news and current affairs information.

The level of political engagement Canadians report is also influenced by their frequency of news consumption and the choices they make from the media sources available to them. Frequent followers of the news participate in more political activities, but relying only on television results in a pattern of political activity that closely mirrors those who do not follow news at all. Those who follow news frequently in a variety of media sources seem more likely to be politically engaged Canadians.

GST

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