

# Public Trust and Regulatory Governance as Represented Through the Media

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Media coverage of politics often comments on the decline of the public's trust in government institutions. There is a notion that public trust of government is steadily decreasing. Many factors contribute to this reduced trust, including: unhappiness with government performance, negativity of election campaigns, distrust of traditional political parties, scandalous behavior of government officials (unethical, incompetent or corrupt conduct) and the changing role of the media.<sup>1</sup> The media is said to be "more interpretive in its reporting and critical of politicians and government"<sup>2</sup> and thus, politicians and government are subject to criticism on a daily basis. The use of "the eight-second spot, the quotable quote, the sound bite and live television in the House of Commons"<sup>3</sup> has assisted in turning politics into a public spectacle. The framing of political coverage in these negative tones stimulates public cynicism which leads to distrust in government.

Past studies have suggested that increased public confidence in government institutions, particularly regulatory agencies, results in increased public comfort with the work of those agencies.<sup>4</sup> This is particularly important for regulators of new technologies such as agricultural or health biotechnology. In order for the public to accept new technologies, a high level of public comfort is needed. Where regulatory processes are transparent and the public is informed of new research and developments in the regulatory process, public comfort (and public trust) increases. When there is a lack of trust in the government generally, and in regulatory systems specifically, producer and consumer utilization of new developments in biotechnology may decrease.

There is no doubt that the media exerts some influence on the interactions between the public and government institutions. However it is unclear whether the media shapes public opinion, or if media coverage is a mere reflection of the public's opinion.

This study examines the level of public trust/confidence in regulatory agencies through public opinion data from 1990 to the present. We collected and compiled data in three separate categories: politicians, the civil/public service and regulatory agencies.

We found that politicians have the lowest levels of public trust, ranging from 18% to 46%. The civil/public Service has much higher levels of public trust, ranging from 47% to 72%. Finally, regulatory agencies (in this case Health Canada, Environment Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency) all maintained high levels of public trust, approximately 70% for every year surveyed.<sup>5</sup>

The second part of this study examines newspaper coverage of Canadian regulatory agencies for agricultural and health biotechnology. We conducted a qualitative analysis of media coverage over a 10-year period (1995 – 2005), examining the main themes/voices in the articles, the framing of article, the discussion of risks or benefits and the assessments of tone. Using newspaper databases, we searched for articles concerning 'regulation/regulatory/regulate' and five regulatory agencies: Health Canada, Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Environment Canada, Industry Canada and Natural Resources Canada. We focused on articles that dis-



cussed or commented on the regulatory activities of the agencies; articles that merely mentioned the regulatory agency were eliminated.

The results of the qualitative analysis have not yet been analyzed. However, we have made some general observations. The majority of articles call for increased government control and transparency, while few articles inform the public on regulatory agency compliance and cooperation. Furthermore, during times of scandals or crisis, the media coverage of regulatory agencies involved becomes increasingly critical. Finally, when discussing biotechnology or new technologies generally, newspapers often distort the issue by using language that may evoke fear in the reader (e.g. Frankenfood).

This study is only the first part of a three-part study; we will examine public opinion data and conduct a qualitative analysis of media coverage of similar regulatory agencies in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Once the results of the qualitative analysis have been analyzed, the connection between public trust/confidence and regulatory agencies will become more apparent. We hope these results will assist regulators and the press in understanding how media representations influence public confidence and trust in the regulatory system.

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1. Canadian Centre for Management Development, *Public Confidence in Government, and Government Service Delivery* by Harvey Sims (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, 2001) at 3-5.
2. *Ibid.* at 5.
3. *Ibid.*
4. George Gaskell *et al*, "Worlds apart? The reception of genetically modified foods in Europe and the US" (1999) 285 *Science* 384.
5. Survey data available for 1999, 2000 and 2001 only.

