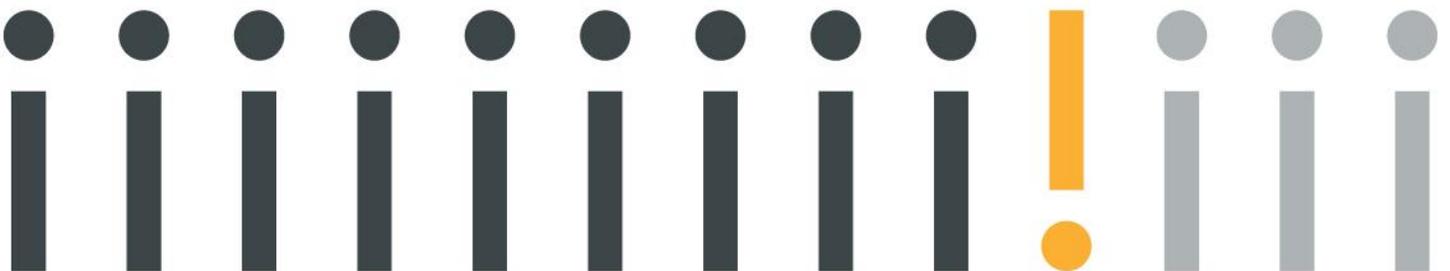

Engaging the News Media to
Influence Attitudes, Norms and Behaviours
and Reduce the Rates of Domestic Violence



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Acknowledgements

Shift gratefully acknowledges our various funders. We would like to especially thank the Government of Alberta for supporting this project.

Suggested Citation

Wells, L., Koziy, L., & Ferguson, J. (2012). *Engaging the news media to influence attitudes, norms and behaviours and reduce the rates of domestic violence*. Calgary, AB: The University of Calgary, Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence.

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2012 Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence

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1.0 Introduction

Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence was initiated by the Brenda Strafford Chair in the Prevention of Domestic Violence, in the Faculty of Social Work, at the University of Calgary. Shift is aimed at significantly reducing domestic violence in Alberta using a primary prevention approach to stop first-time victimization and perpetration. In short, primary prevention means taking action to build resilience and prevent problems before they occur.

The purpose of Shift is to enhance the capacity of policy makers, systems leaders, clinicians, service providers and the community at large, to significantly reduce the rates of domestic violence in Alberta. We are committed to making our research accessible and working collaboratively with a diverse range of stakeholders, to inform and influence current and future domestic violence prevention efforts, through the perspective of primary prevention.

This document is the first step in a larger exploration of how best to engage the Canadian media to influence societal attitudes, norms and behaviours around the prevention of domestic violence. It is assumed by the researcher that the vast majority of the public receives information regarding social issues and world affairs through news media channels. Further, it is assumed that the Canadian news media inappropriately reports on instances of domestic violence, thereby skewing the opinion and influencing attitudes of the general public and policy makers.

The hypothesis is if news media professionals were better educated about domestic violence and how to appropriately report on instances of domestic violence, and legislation encouraged the media to report on domestic violence in a particular way, public opinion and attitudes would be influenced.

Testing these assumptions and reviewing existing research to extract evidence to support or debunk the assumptions will help Shift engage strategies to further the project's goal to end domestic violence.

As such, this research project aims to accomplish the following:

1. An overview of how Canadians receive their news information;
2. An overview of how the media portrays domestic violence; and
3. A scan of Section 2(b) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms ("freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression") to identify opportunities to update the legislation in alignment with domestic violence prevention.

2.0 Methods

This project employed secondary research to inform its content. This method was chosen in favour of a mixed method approach given the need to review a large amount of content spanning several countries and using a wide variety of search terms.

To gather the information contained in this report, several online resources and academic databases were used including: a review of various websites, books, peer-reviewed journals, research papers, presentations, handbooks/guides, newspapers, legislation and theses.

Search terms used to find the necessary data include: *media, news, press, journalists, journalism, reporters, reporting, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, television, newspapers, radio, online, abuse, violence against women, femicide, homicide, murder, portrayal, covering* and *coverage*. Search terms were used both independently and in combination to garner the best results.

Limitations that affected the research and/or findings in this report include: research conducted within time constraints, the method of research (e.g., solely secondary) as a result of the time constraints, and the literature itself, which may or may not be as robust as the researchers would have liked.

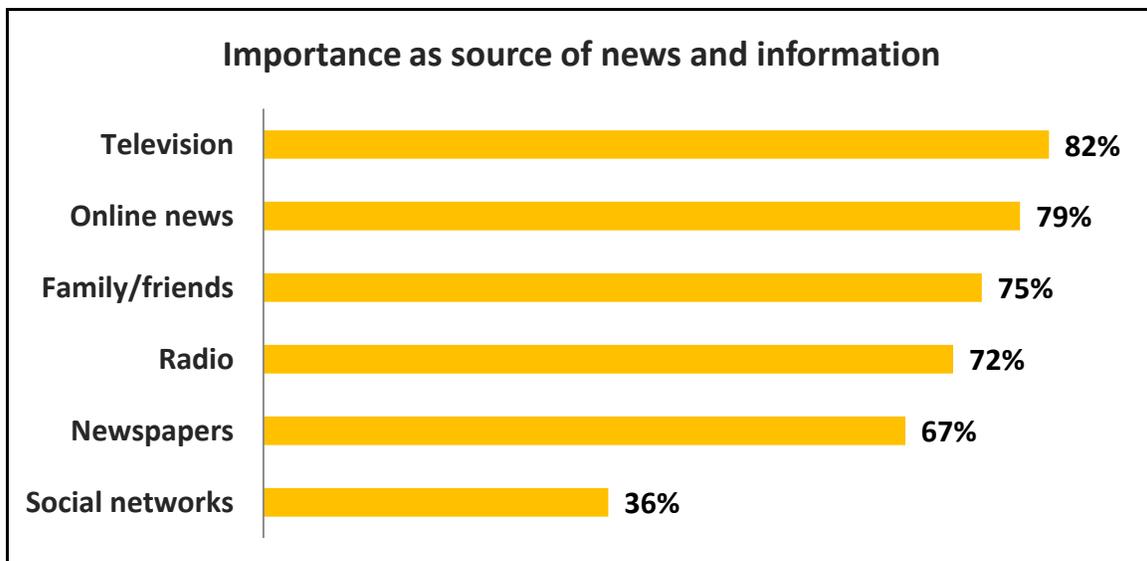
3.0 Findings and Implications

3.1 How Canadians Receive News Information

The assumption is that the vast majority of the public receives information regarding social issues – including domestic violence – and world affairs through news media channels. Testing this assumption by learning how Canadians receive their news is an important part of understanding how best to engage the media to help influence attitudes, norms and behaviours while garnering an appreciation of the platforms that have the widest reach and provide the greatest impact for change.

In April 2011, the Canadian Media Research Consortium (CMRC) published its findings of an online survey investigating how Canadians receive their news. While social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter) has grown significantly over the past several years as a way for people to receive news, more established sources of news (i.e., television, online news sources) remain the most valued sources of news with four out of five of Canadians citing both TV and the Internet as important news sources (see Figure 1) (Hermida, Logan, Fletcher, & Korell, 2011).

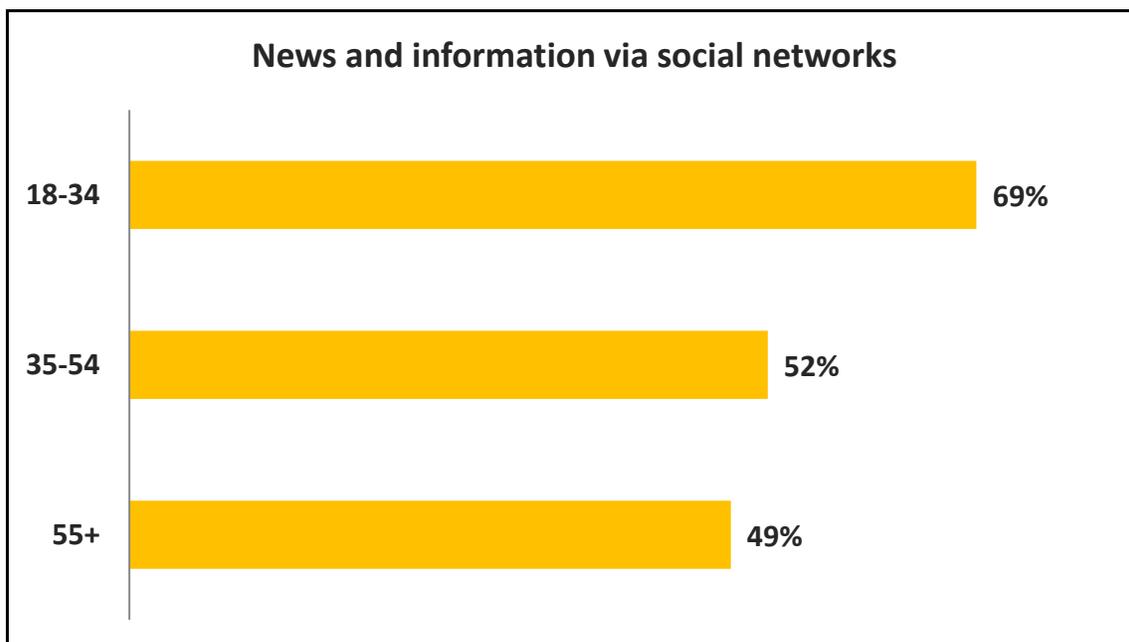
Figure 1



Although social networks rank the lowest in terms of importance, their prevalence as a source of news cannot be underestimated, especially when it comes to influencing the norms and behaviours of younger Canadians. The CMRC study found that more than two-thirds (69 per cent) of Canadians who visit social networking sites use them to keep up with the news (see Figure 2). That equates to more than 10 million Canadians (Hermida et al., 2011).

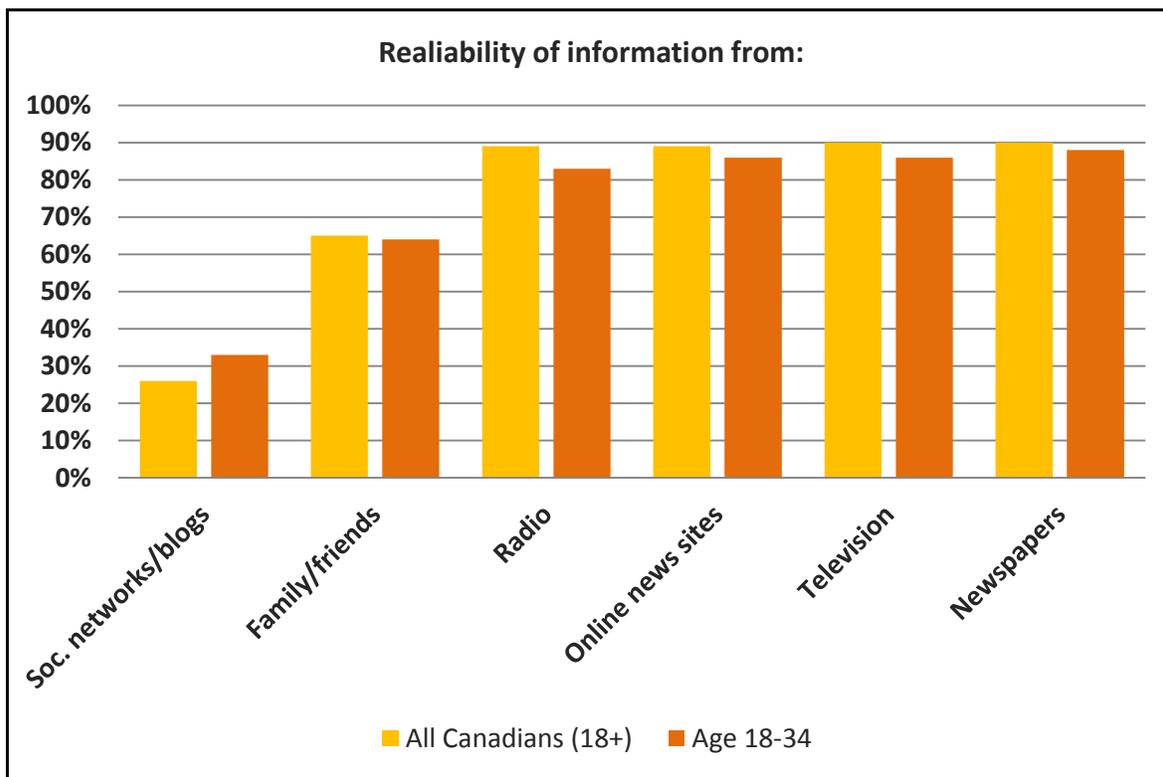
The survey also shows how Canadians of all ages use social networking sites as “personalized news streams” with news selected and filtered by family, friends and acquaintances. Similar findings emerged in a 2011 study conducted in the U.S., highlighting how sharing news has become a way to connect socially (Sessions, Goulet, Purcell, & Rainie, 2011).

Figure 1



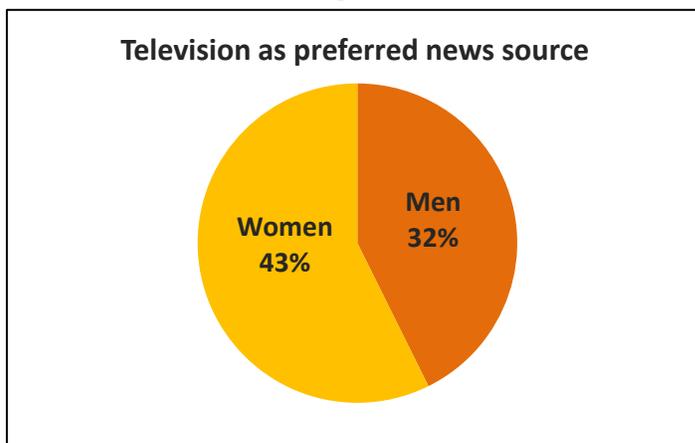
It is interesting to note, however, that while the prevalence of social networking as a way to distribute news has increased, Canadians tend to put more trust in the traditional sources of news (see Figure 3) (Fletcher, Logan, Hermida, & Korell 2011). Nearly nine out of 10 Canadians consider the information provided by traditional news media to be reliable and trustworthy, while only one in four believes information from social networks is reliable. The number increases to 33 per cent for Canadians aged 18 to 34 years old (Hermida et al., 2011).

Figure 2



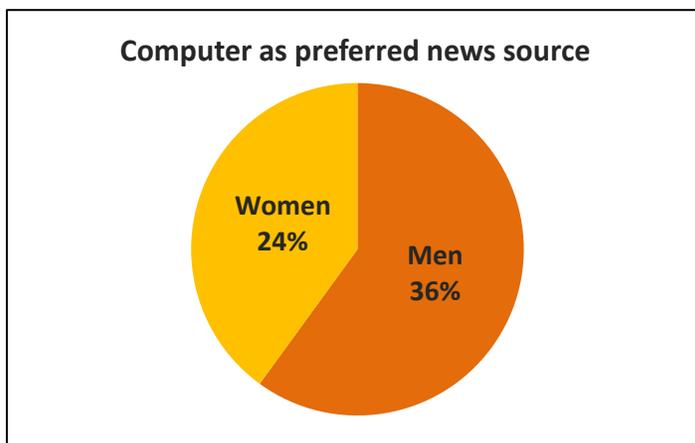
Another study, this one conducted by Toronto’s PMB Print Measurement Bureau in 2011, went as far as to outline social media users’ psychographics, describing them as “ambitious educated socialists” who support same sex relationships and alternate lifestyles, agree that universal healthcare should be a government priority and are against privatizing healthcare (PMB, 2011, p. 2).

Figure 4



Further, it appears that gender plays a part in how Canadians prefer to access their news and information (Korell, Fletcher, Hermida, & Logan, 2011). Forty-three per cent of women prefer watching television to get their news and information, compared to 32 per cent of male respondents (see Figure 4).

Figure 5



Meanwhile, men are more comfortable with computers, with more than one in three (36 per cent) men preferring to access their news and information via computer, compared with 24 per cent of women (see Figure 5).

While television is the preferred method for Canadians to receive their news information, followed closely by online news coverage, the fact that radio and newspapers near the bottom of preferred methods may not mean that the information they produce isn't being read. The fact that so many Canadians receive their news online presents an opportunity – already seized by many – for traditional producers of news to provide their information online, provided they have websites attractive enough to draw in the consumer and sufficient ad revenue to support the cost of those sites (Canadian Media Research Consortium, 2011).

3.2 How the Media Portrays Domestic Violence

Given that the majority of the Canadian population is exposed, through various sources, to news media daily, what is being portrayed in that coverage has a significant effect on how the population perceives domestic violence. Research indicates that people use the media to not only define cultural content, but also to interpret social problems (Berns, 2004). News both reflects and shapes social norms and public opinion, which in turn influences policy makers. In her book *Framing the Victim: Domestic Violence, Media and Social Problems*, Nancy Berns (2004) argues that not only does the media shape the way people think about social problems, for many, the media is how they experience social problems.

Berns (2004) is not alone in her exploration of how the media portrays domestic violence. Much research has been conducted into the frequency and content of domestic violence news coverage, including cases involving murder and murder-suicide. While it is generally felt that coverage of domestic violence has improved over the past 30 years, more often than not, the coverage falls short (Chris, 2010).

Typical pitfalls of domestic violence coverage include:

- Treating cases in isolation while failing to examine or acknowledge the broader social context;
- Blaming the victim;
- Excusing or praising the perpetrator;
- Relying heavily on official sources (i.e., police) instead of domestic violence experts and/or prevention advocates;
- Sensationalizing the case;
- Minimizing the violence; and
- Selective/inconsistent coverage.

The above list, while not exhaustive, highlights some of the more common ways domestic violence is portrayed in the news. As noted above, one of the most prevalent themes present in domestic violence coverage is failing to provide a larger context for the violence that is being reported. A 2008 American study that analyzed a nationally representative sample of newspaper coverage of domestic violence over a two year period, highlighted the importance of this context in the stories published (Carlyle, Slater, & Chakroff, 2008). In it, researchers found that domestic violence coverage tends to be heavily skewed toward episodic framing in which a specific instance of domestic violence is portrayed, rather than to a thematic frame, which provides a social context

for the domestic violence incident (Carlyle et al., 2008). The authors suggest that this type of one-off coverage has as significant impact on how readership perceives domestic violence – as a private, individual matter as opposed to a larger issue that requires a community-wide effort. “If news continues to report on violence primarily through crime stories isolated from their social context, the chance for widespread support for public [...] solutions to violence will be diminished” (p. 173).

The researchers go on to highlight the risks of another common pitfall: limited and/or sensationalized coverage. The inclination to cover only the most severe of cases (i.e., those ending in death) means the reality of emotional and verbal abuse is underrepresented, potentially leading the public to believe that these types of abuse are not included in the definition of domestic violence (Carlyle et al., 2008). Alternatively, the researchers argue, the heavy emphasis on domestic violence involving murder or murder-suicide does discourage some victims from seeking help because newspaper coverage reinforces the belief that leaving an abusive relationship will lead to them being killed.

Further, many of the articles the authors studied by Carlyle et al. (2008) were framed in such a way that portrayed the victim as the one responsible for ending the violent relationship, while the social factors perpetuating violence were largely – but not entirely – ignored. A handful of newspapers articles that were highlighted in the authors’ work did explore the larger societal context of domestic violence, leading the authors to believe that reporters do have the ability to provide valuable coverage addressing the issue from a societal perspective.

Another trend in domestic violence news coverage was revealed in another 2008 study, this one focusing on domestic violence fatalities covered by Utah-based newspapers. The research showed that reporters relied heavily on official sources, such as police, for their information about domestic violence and that these sources often failed to provide contextualization to the stories (Bullock, 2008). The author attributed the paucity of detail and context to the inherent nature of journalism. “As suggested by media logic, using an incident-based focus and information from easily accessible official sources can help journalists produce a steady supply of articles, fill space and meet deadlines” (Bullock, 2008, p. 16)

Despite this industry-wide need to produce news quickly and efficiently, the author did discover that the newspapers served an important surveillance function and, when provided with a “peg” (a timely event or occurrence on which to base a story), such as a spate of domestic violence murders in the readership area, several newspapers took that opportunity to delve further into the issue. This was particularly true for stories in which the reporter had more space to explore the wider implications:

In practical terms, domestic violence is just one of many socially important issues journalists are expected to cover while operating within the constraints of day-to-day operations. Thus, the importance of the space the Utah newspapers devoted to this topic should not be minimized. (Bullock, 2008, p. 16)

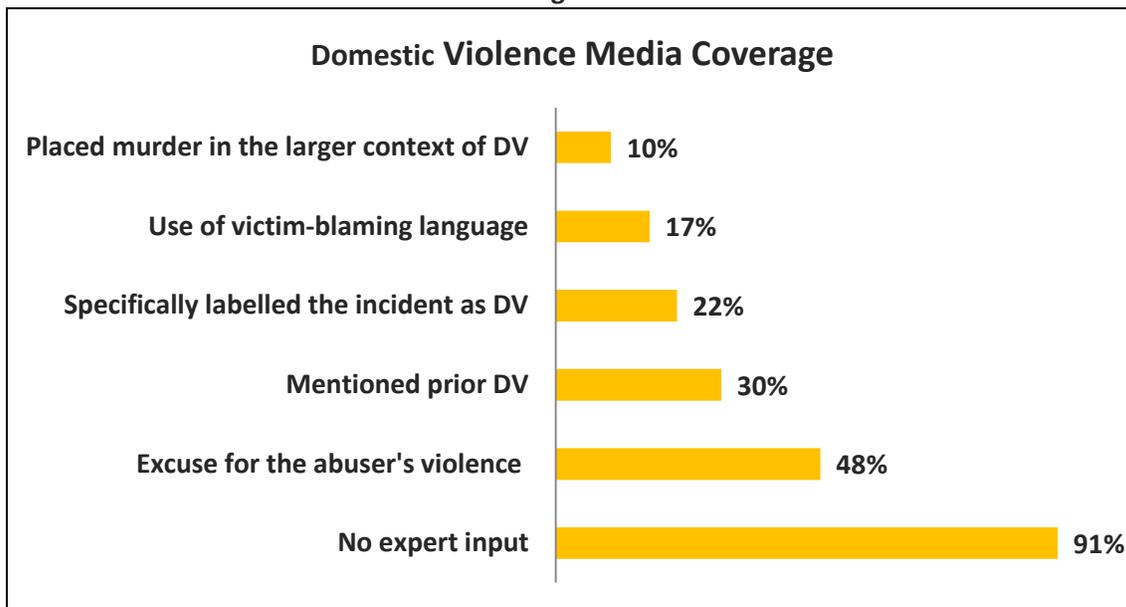
The bad news is that, when given the chance, reporters in large part failed to fully utilize different, non-official sources that could help the reader make sense of a complex social issue. Relying on official sources puts undue emphasis on police and the court system, possibly implying that the issue is already being addressed while enforcing the authority of these institutions (Bullock, 2008). The author suggests that this runs the risk of not only treating the cases as individual in nature, but as the province of the police and court system, not something that is a preventable social issue with solutions found in other social or policy-making institutions.

The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence saw similar themes in its analysis of domestic violence coverage in the media (Starr, 2008). In 2008, the coalition updated its 2002 media guide, *Covering Domestic Violence*, which not only provides tips, but also an overview of domestic violence, statistics and past media coverage of the issue. The guide highlights two studies conducted into media portrayal of domestic violence: the University of Washington School of Communications and the Boston College Media Research Action Project, in collaboration with the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Generally, the studies found that stories about domestic violence ending in murder were poorly covered due to a failure to identify the fatality as an act of domestic violence. Further, the stories again failed to provide a larger context or quote to experts who could help further the understanding of the issue (Starr, 2008).

The studies summarized by Starr (2008) found certain trends (See Figure 7) throughout the articles, including reinforcing myths by using language that appeared to excuse the violence (i.e., “rejection, rage may have led to murder”) or suggesting the victim was to blame for her situation (i.e., quoting a relative who noted that the victim “had a habit of getting involved with men who abused her”) (p. 4). Some articles highlighted cultural or class differences, related to a murder (i.e., “Cambodian man kills wife”), suggesting that domestic violence is confined to only particular segments of the population (p. 4).

However, researchers did find *“that when domestic violence experts were quoted, they were able to contextualize the murder, while offering valuable information regarding community response and prevention”* (Starr, 2008, p. 5).

Figure 7



In addition to highlighting the reporting gaps prevalent in domestic violence news media coverage, it is also important to note the potential that exists within the media as a vehicle for positive change. As suggested in the above research, the media does have the ability to provide sound coverage of domestic violence if given the right knowledge, sources and opportunities. In the late 1990s, The Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence worked with journalists to develop a best practices handbook on news coverage of domestic violence murders (Ryan, Anastario, & DaCunha, 2006).

A 2006 study compared print coverage of domestic violence murders before the handbook was developed and after the development of the handbook. Significant changes occurred post-handbook, including increased labeling of domestic violence in cases where the victim was murdered and twice the number of advocates being used as sources in the stories (Ryan et al., 2006). This led to domestic violence murders being framed not as unpredictable private tragedies but rather as social problems warranting public intervention – underscoring the value of building relationship with the media with an eye to partnerships that focus on providing tangible strategies and tools (Ryan et al., 2006).

3.3 Freedom of the Press

Among the rights and freedoms outlined in Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) is Section 2(b), the "freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication". While many believe this to be the cornerstone of a functioning democracy (Magnet, 2002), conflict does exist between what is perceived to be the media's rights and victims' rights.

Existing within this conflict is the coverage of domestic violence, which raises the question of whether opportunities exist to update this section of the Charter in a way that may foster domestic violence prevention, or a better understanding of the issue among members of the media. Most Canadian provinces and territories "have developed legislation pertaining to victims' rights and how they should be treated by the justice system. While this legislation does not specifically apply to media personnel, it may act as a guideline as to how victims should be treated when contacted by the media" (see Section 3.3.1) (Victims of Violence, 2008, para. 5).

A 2007 case between the CBC and a judge in the Northwest Territories highlighted the above-mentioned conflict as well as the strong reaction those in the media have to a perceived curtailing of their rights and freedoms (Jones, 2007). The case involved a CBC broadcaster charged with assault after hitting his wife. The broadcaster was given a conditional discharge, one condition of which required the man to dedicate one of his radio broadcasts to the issue of domestic violence. The sentencing spurred the CBC to review its legal options and prompted strong opinions from the media community. The following was posted on J-Source.ca, a project of The Canadian Journalism Foundation in collaboration with leading journalism schools and organizations across Canada: "Apart from any merit – and the sheer originality – of the sentence, it's an astonishing overreach. Really, you'd think someone trained in the law would have an inkling about press rights and the long, hard-fought principle of non-interference" (Jones, 2007, para. 1).

The "Freedom of the Press" legislation, however, is not without its restrictions for the media. Publication bans are a good example of how the law protects a person's right to a fair trial, and journalists are bound by privacy laws that aim to protect a victim's identity, especially those of children (Victims of Violence, 2008). But it appears, for the most part, the courts are reticent to alter the freedom, as illustrated below:

The Supreme Court of Canada has consistently emphasized the fundamental nature of this freedom, stating in *Edmonton Journal v. Alberta (Attorney-General)* that, given the importance of freedom of expression in a free and democratic society, and the absolute manner in which this freedom is guaranteed by section 2(b), the freedom should be restricted only in the clearest of circumstances. (Douglas & Dunsmuir, 1998, Part B, Section 2, para. 1)

...the Supreme Court has decided that an Alberta statute that limits the publication of information arising from court proceedings in matrimonial disputes is an unconstitutional limitation on freedom of expression. The court in the *Edmonton Journal* case noted the fundamental importance of the right to freedom of expression, and the historic importance of open courts in a democratic society. It decided that the provincial objectives of ensuring privacy and access to a fair trial for persons wishing to litigate matrimonial matters were sufficiently important to bring section 1 into play, but that the restrictions in the legislation were excessive. (Douglas & Dunsmuir, 1998, Part B, Section 2c, para. 5)

3.3.1 Victims' Rights and the Justice System

As noted in the previous section, most Canadian provinces and territories have developed legislation pertaining to victims' rights and how victims should be treated by the justice system. While the federal government is responsible for creating the law, the provinces are charged with administering it (Department of Justice, 2011). As such, "much of the contact victims have with the criminal justice system is determined by the provinces" (Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime, 2010, p. 11).

In 1996, Alberta passed the Victims of Crime Act (2000), however the Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime notes that most provinces' and territories' legislation, such as Alberta's, does not give victims true 'rights' but merely contains statements of what victims 'should' have (Canadian Resource Centre for Victims Rights, 2006):

Most of the legislation is non-committal and does not provide a complaint mechanism for victims. The language of the legislation uses terms such as "victims should have access to..." or "Subject to limits..." It does not truly entrench the right of victims to receive services or be guaranteed a certain type of treatment. In 1999, several victims tried to sue the Ontario government because they argued their rights were violated under the Bill of Rights, but the court ruled the bill gave them no enforceable rights. (Canadian Resource Centre for Victims, 2006, p. 5)

In 2000, Manitoba passed what the Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime (2006) asserts is “one of the most comprehensive pieces of victims' rights legislation in the country” (p. 5). The legislation strengthens the rights of victims and provides a complaints mechanism for victims if their rights are violated (Canadian Resource Centre for Victims Rights, 2006).

Determining whether the act is applicable to the media and its coverage of domestic violence requires an examination of the 12 guiding principles found in Alberta’s Victims of Crime Act (2000). The most salient principle is: “the privacy of victims should be considered and respected to the greatest extent possible” (S. 2(1)b). This is similar to one found in the Alberta Press Council’s Code of Practice, which states that “publishing material or making inquiries about the private lives of individuals without their consent is not acceptable unless these are in the public interest overriding the right of privacy” (Alberta Press Council, 2006, para. 3) and the Canadian Association of Journalists Ethics Guidelines, which says that

...we do not manipulate people who are thrust into the spotlight because they are victims of crime or are associated with a tragedy. Nor do we do voyeuristic stories about them. When we contact them, we are sensitive to their situations, and report only information in which the public has a legitimate interest. (Canadian Association of Journalists, 2011, p. 2)

The other 11 principles found in the Alberta Victims of Crime Act (2000) – with the exception of one other – are not easily transferable to journalists and their coverage of domestic violence as they largely relate to the justice system or services provided by the province. The only other principle applicable to journalists would be “victims should be treated with courtesy, compassion and respect” (S. 2(1)a), a version of which, once again, can be found in the media’s own guiding principles and codes of practice.

Beyond legislation, the Government of Alberta has produced several handbooks offering guidelines regarding how to address victims of domestic violence or helping victims to navigate the justice system. Among these is the *Domestic Violence Handbook: for Police and Crown Prosecutors in Alberta* which aims to provide a guide for effective response to domestic violence by the criminal justice system (Government of Alberta, 2008). Some information found within this handbook, such as a definition of domestic violence, could be used to inform a document that specifically targets journalists.

4.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This document is the first step in a larger exploration of how best to engage the Canadian media to influence societal attitudes, norms and behaviours around the prevention of domestic violence. Through the research found in this document, two assumptions were tested. It was assumed that:

1. The vast majority of the public receives information regarding social issues and world affairs through news media channels; and
2. The Canadian news media inappropriately reports on instances of domestic violence, thereby skewing the opinion and influencing attitudes of the general public and policy makers.

The research supported the above assumptions, demonstrating that the public does receive information regarding social issues through news media channels, and that instances of domestic violence are inappropriately reported on through Canadian news media.

The hypothesis which states, “If news media professionals were better educated about domestic violence and how to appropriately report on instances of domestic violence, public opinion and attitudes would be influenced”, as outlined at the beginning of this report, was only partially substantiated. The research does suggest that when news media professionals are educated about domestic violence and the appropriate ways of reporting, they often refer to the incident as a social issue and will quote the opinions or comments from field experts. However, there was a lack of research demonstrating that public opinions and attitudes are positively changed as a result. Further research in this area would be required to establish the outcomes of such education and the impact on public opinions and attitudes towards domestic violence. The second hypothesis which states, “If legislation encouraged the media to report on domestic violence in a particular way, public opinion and attitudes would be influenced”, was unsubstantiated.

Three research questions were explored as a way to test the above assumptions and to help Shift engage strategies to further the project’s goal to end domestic violence. The research questions aimed to provide:

1. An overview of how Canadians receive their news information;
2. An overview of how the media portrays domestic violence; and
3. A scan of Section 2(b) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (“freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression”) to identify opportunities to update the legislation in alignment with domestic violence prevention.

It was discovered that while the majority of Canadians receives their news information via television, followed closely by online news sources, the prevalence of social networking as a means of sharing and receiving news is growing, especially among Canadians aged 18 to 34 years old. Additionally, it has yet to be quantified how many Canadians turn specifically to the websites of traditional news sources for their news, but that content from those sources is being accessed online as well as via the original source.

Further, the report highlighted some of the gaps in domestic violence news media coverage, most notably the number of stories treating cases in isolation while failing to examine or acknowledge the broader societal context, relying heavily on official sources (e.g., police) instead of domestic violence experts and/or prevention advocates, and selective or inconsistent coverage. It is important to note, however, the willingness to change displayed by members of the media when they were further educated on the issue (i.e., through a handbook and domestic violence prevention experts) (Ryan et al., 2006).

Finally, Section 2(b) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) was examined with an eye to opportunities to alter the legislation in favour of promoting better domestic violence coverage within the media.

The findings in this report have prompted the following recommendations:

1. Since the majority of Canadians rely on television and online sources for news information (television~82% and online~79%), future engagement with news media needs to focus primarily on these two sources. Radio and print media should also be included as engagement targets, as they too are important sources for news information (radio~72% and newspaper~67%).
2. Although social media ranks high as the source for information with 18 – 34 year olds, only one in four Canadians believe information from social networks is reliable; the vast majority of Canadians still rely on traditional news media sources for their information. While social media networks may not be as trustworthy as traditional news media sources, they are critical mechanisms for the distribution of information. Information on social media is ‘filtered’ and often forwarded using Twitter (‘tweets’) by family, friends and acquaintances, demonstrating that sharing news has become a way to connect socially. In future, Shift and domestic violence prevention strategies need to leverage social media channels for the distribution of information.

3. Formally engage news media professionals (journalists, reporters, editors, publishers) in a primary research project to explore the following:
 - a. The impact that news media has on shaping public attitudes and, ultimately influencing behaviours;
 - b. The media's interpretation of domestic violence coverage;
 - c. The potential of using news media to reduce rates and the severity of domestic violence, by framing individual stories within the larger context (e.g., avoid victim-blaming language);
 - d. Relationship building and partnerships.
4. Develop an online tool kit for journalists, including: an information overview of domestic violence; examples of how to frame a story within the context of a larger, social issue; current statistics; a contact list of field experts (e.g., clinicians, police, justice).
5. Develop a media kit specifically for experts in the area of domestic violence, to support the following objectives:
 - a. Increase experts knowledge of how best to work with and engage the media;
 - b. Ensure media stories include information about how to access help (for perpetrators, victims and bystanders);
 - c. Increase the media's understanding of complex social issues.
6. Conduct a thorough legal investigation of both federal and provincial applications of the Victims of Crime Act, to explore opportunities to strengthen the rights of domestic violence victims and support appropriate representation of victims through news media coverage.

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VIOLENCE
BEFORE IT STARTS**



Initiated by The Brenda Strafford Chair in the Prevention of Domestic Violence