

# Changing the Game Changes the Frame: The Media's Use of Lesbian Stereotypes in Leadership versus Election Campaigns

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## Abstract

*This study uses content analysis and interviews to examine how the media reported the candidacy and campaign of Allison Brewer, the openly lesbian leader of the New Brunswick New Democratic Party. The “news values” that govern political reporting led the media to construct Brewer’s political persona during her leadership campaign using stereotypes of lesbians, activists and women in politics. This stereotypic treatment occurred at a point in her political career when impressions are most important. A year later, during the provincial election campaign her newsworthiness as a “new” or a “contentious” presence in politics had diminished, but had not completely disappeared.*

## Introduction

In September 2005 Allison Brewer was elected leader of the New Brunswick New Democratic Party (NDP). While she ran on a platform emphasizing health care, education, the environment and increased support for social workers (Brewer interview 2006) what caught the media's attention was her personal identity as an out lesbian. Despite the fact that her tenure on the political stage was not long (she stepped down in the fall of 2006 after losing in the September provincial election), her experiences with the media during both the leadership campaign and the general election are of academic interest as they allow us to examine how the media cover relatively unknown political figures who happen to be homosexual.

Few women have managed to break into elite political positions in Canada (Bashevkin 2009) or elsewhere (Tremblay 2008, Paxton and Hughes 2007), and declared lesbians are even more of a rarity in politics. Since 1988, when Burnaby MP Svend Robinson announced his sexual orientation at a news conference, increasing numbers of homosexuals in Canada have tested the waters of mainstream politics. However, the numbers are still small and the vast majority of them have been gay men.<sup>1</sup> At present, the number of declared lesbians elected to senior levels of government can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Many provinces have yet to elect even one openly gay woman to their legislatures. Furthermore, the majority of the gay, lesbian or bisexual politicians who

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have been elected waited until after they had been elected at least once before revealing their sexuality to the public (Camp and Everitt, unpublished paper).<sup>2</sup> Some have argued that delaying these announcements has the strategic benefit of providing these politicians with an opportunity to establish a critical public image and record of achievement, independent of their sexual orientation (Rayside 1998).

In contrast to that established pattern of delayed disclosure, Brewer entered electoral politics as an openly lesbian woman. The fact that she did not have a pre-developed nor widely recognized public persona prior to her leadership campaign meant that her image was particularly vulnerable to the news coverage that she received during this period. First impressions are critically important in a political career – and they are only made once (Fiske et. al. 1987). To this end, this study seeks to address two questions: first, to what degree were stereotypes used by the media in their coverage of Brewer's candidacy as an out lesbian; and second, did this coverage vary under the different political conditions of a leadership campaign and a provincial election? To answer these questions we employ a content analysis of New Brunswick's three English-language daily newspapers together with interviews with Brewer, a key party activist and a former senior editor of one of these newspapers. We focus on the period from her initial foray onto the political stage during the NDP leadership convention to her final involvement during the 2006 provincial election campaign.

We conclude that there were noteworthy differences in Brewer's coverage during these two events. Throughout the low-key NDP leadership race the media constructed a political persona for Brewer using stereotypical conceptions of lesbians, activists, and women in politics, each of these enhancing the unusual – and therefore newsworthy – aspects of the race. This stereotypical framing and categorical description had the effect of limiting Brewer's ability to present herself as a political leader prepared to champion the diverse interests of her party members appeal to the province's voters. This framing continued to be used, albeit to a lesser degree during the higher profile provincial election campaign.

The tendency for the media to reduce its stereotypical coverage to gays and lesbians once they become familiar political presences bodes well for the experience of these minorities in politics. However, the attention to their sexuality at the start of their political careers remains a serious challenge. By treating Brewer as a novelty in her leadership bid, the media was defining her by her difference from the heterosexual norm rather than by her platform and experiences. Such coverage reinforces and legitimized prevailing social structures, creates additional barriers to political equality and deprives gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) candidates of critically important opportunities to express their point of view and demonstrate their competence on a wider range of issues.

## **Leadership campaign to election campaign**

In the fall of 2004 Elizabeth Weir resigned as leader of the New Brunswick New Democratic Party after serving 16 years in the Legislative Assembly. Weir had been considered one of the toughest Members of the Legislative Assembly in the opposition side of the house even though she sat alone. However, her party had never been particularly strong<sup>3</sup> and it lacked the financial resources and infrastructure of the other two parties in the province. When Weir resigned her seat, shortly after the September 25, 2005 Leadership Convention, it was lost to the Liberals in a by-election.

In late May 2005 Allison Brewer was the first candidate to announce her plans to run for the NDP leadership. With her announcement the media introduced Brewer to the public as a first time political candidate who had worked on federal and provincial election campaigns in the past. One story referred to her as "a woman known for her social activism and defence of gay rights" (Morris 2005). In another she was referred to as an advocate of sexual orientation rights and abortion rights and as the person who had set up and managed the Fredericton Morgentaler Abortion Clinic (McLean 2005). Nowhere in her initial coverage did it mention that she had a background in communications or that she had worked in this field for the governments of New Brunswick and Nunavut for 14 years. One story did however mention that she had been a recipient of the Governor General's Award in Commemoration of the Person's Case for her work in the field of human rights and unions.

It was a low key leadership race and while two other candidates, Oscar Doucet and Pam Coates (both heterosexuals) declared their interest in the party's leadership neither received the attention that Brewer did (see Everitt and Camp, 2009). On September 25, 2005 Brewer won the leadership race with 62 per cent of the party vote. Her victory at the convention marks the first time in North America that a lesbian politician has ever won the leadership of a mainstream political party.

In her acceptance speech, she announced that she would "make her presence felt" on the political stage. She mapped out her main policy objectives, focusing on the need to address the province's demoralized civil service and its hard-pressed social programs. However, despite her promises Brewer had little success in drawing the public's attention to her concerns. Both Elizabeth Weir and George Little, who had led the party before her, were regularly sought out by the media to comment on a range of issues. The media virtually ignored Brewer in the months after the leadership. She was rarely asked by the media to comment on anything – except the 'social issues' in which she was the default commentator as a woman and as a lesbian. In the months following her election as leader, and without a seat in the Legislative Assembly, she became virtually invisible in New Brunswick's newspapers.

By early summer of 2006 her media profile began to rise once again in the flood of speculative stories about a provincial election, considered a high probability for the fall. As was expected however, when the election was finally held on September 18, 2006 all of the NDP candidates were wiped out; their popular support was cut nearly in half—from 9.7 per cent of the popular vote in the 2003 election to 5.1 percent in 2006. While Brewer did better than her party receiving 17% of the vote, she, not unexpectedly, still failed to win her own seat in a newly created Fredericton riding in a race against a popular former Liberal cabinet minister.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to determine the degree to which Brewer's sexuality influenced the public's evaluation of her as a candidate, it is clear that her sexual orientation was of considerable interest to the media in both her leadership campaign and the election campaign (albeit less so). This attention to this aspect of her personality made her task of defining and describing herself to the public more difficult than might be the case for the average politician and also had implications for her leadership and the manner in which she conducted herself in public. As a result, the campaign experiences of Allison Brewer, NDP leader in New Brunswick, help us to understand the challenges facing lesbian candidates seeking political office. Furthermore, the differences in her leadership and campaign coverage provide insights into how this coverage is affected by the different media incentives of a leadership and election campaign.

## News values and political journalism

The choice of how to cover a story is frequently driven by an economic imperative on the part of the media to draw a reader's interest to its stories and thereby sell papers (Herman and Chomsky 1988). To ensure their financial survival, newspapers must select and present stories with the strongest appeal to their potential audience. The news values<sup>4</sup> of journalism are therefore often calibrated to the expectations and interests of the consumer. The unusualness of an event or issue is a significant factor in the assessment of its overall worth *as news*. A large readership serves two purposes: it increases subscription and news stand revenues, while enlarging the potential audience for advertisers. The larger the audience, the more the newspapers can charge for advertising space.

However, to simply attribute coverage to financial considerations ignores the power struggles that occur when marginalized groups challenge social hierarchies. By succumbing to these financial incentives and depicting a politician's sexual orientation as something of interest, the news media continue to define political norms and reproduce exclusionary values. News values that are aimed at increasing circulation and pumping up advertising revenues have historically caused considerable damage to the interests of non-typical politicians such as women (Vavrus, 2002). Depicting women who seek elected office as oddities and drawing disproportionate attention to their appearance, sexuality and marital status has traditionally interfered with their attempts to establish

credibility and to participate in political discourse on an equal footing with men (Vavrus 2002, Scharrer 2002, Rinehart 1992).

Portraying Brewer in a manner that provokes the greatest public response is also likely to result from the media's sense of their role as generators of public discussion and debate (Cumming and McKercher 1994, Lippmann 1922). This is a role that conflicts with the public desire for news coverage that is accurate, fair, balanced and motivated by a desire to uncover the truth as both goals require journalists to make choices about the facts that they use in their coverage of a story. This is the point that Walter Lippmann (1922) was trying to address when he argued that a news story can be factual, yet at the same time it can create a false, misleading, or unproven impression because it draws upon stereotypical notions which may have little or no relation to the truth. Certainly, in Brewer's coverage, the terms in which she was described were factually correct – she is a lesbian, she has been a pro-choice advocate, and she was, on occasion, an activist – but we would argue that the final impression created by the repetitive use of these labels, and the relative lack of other descriptive information, was that she was a candidate from the radical fringes with an overbearing interest in the 'gay agenda.' In fact, this was not the case. These were not driving issues in her campaigns and her political methods as a candidate were markedly non-confrontational.

In her campaign for the NDP leadership, Allison Brewer had two features that were of ongoing interest to the New Brunswick media: she was a woman and she was gay. While women have made significant advances in breaking down the barriers to full participation, they are still perceived as 'others' in the political process, a fact that, we argue, is reflected in, and perpetuated by, the kind of media coverage they receive. Research demonstrates that men are presented as the natural, or default participants, whereas reporting on female candidates tends to reflect stereotypic, gendered assumptions about their character traits and policy interests (Gidengil and Everitt 2003, Kahn and Goldenberg 1991, Gingras 1995, Vavrus 2002) as well as their appearance, marital status and family responsibilities (Robinson and Saint-Jean 1991; Ross and Sreberny 2000). Thus, it is who they are, rather than what they actually do, that frequently sets the tone of media coverage about female candidates. Furthermore, at the outset of their political careers, women can often expect coverage based on their being a departure from the status quo; however, this attention is usually not sustained. There is abundant research to demonstrate that once this initial interest has passed the media generally under-report the activities of women who pursue an electoral office (Everitt 2003, Gidengil and Everitt 2003; Scharrer, 2002; Kahn and Goldenberg 1991).

The few studies of gay and lesbian politicians show that while those who are openly homosexual are rarely subjected to blatantly hostile news reporting (Everitt and Camp 2009, Rayside 1998, Golebiowska 2002), like women, they too are frequently presented in a distinct manner, accentuating their otherness, limiting the perception of their abilities and interests and pushing them to the corners of political discourse (Golebiowska 2002; George 2002; Everitt and Camp 2009). Lesbians, we would argue, are a doubly marginalized minority in politics. They are 'others' because they are women – and because they are homosexuals. It could be said they need to penetrate two layers of stereotypical assumptions and beliefs in order to participate freely and successfully in the political domain.

As Cynthia Lont (1995) has argued, the manner in which minorities are represented in newspapers, magazines, and radio and television programs has an undeniable impact on the way in which the public at large thinks about them and their place in the community. Until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, racial minorities in North America were routinely subjected to distinctly marginalizing labels in their media coverage. Terms such as 'Negro Politician' and 'Colored Athlete' were commonplace in the pages of daily newspapers (Halberstam, 1998). But such racially derived designations have long since fallen out of common use and professional journalistic associations, such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, condemn their use in any story that does not specifically deal with the subject of race, or a race-related issue (CBC, 2001).

Despite a greater attempt by journalists to use more neutral language, the designation of homosexuals is an ongoing practice in the mainstream press, which still uses terms such as homosexual, gay and lesbian to describe individuals who are actors in stories that have no direct relation to sexuality or so-called gay issues. While it is now illegal in Canada to discriminate against individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation deeply held views and stereotypes about sexuality are not easily removed.

Stereotypes are perceptual short-cuts in the process of impression formation (Jussim et al. 1995, Sandfort 2005, Fiske et al. 1987). They are convenient as they avoid all the trouble of collecting and processing new, individualizing information about the person being considered (Chang and Hitchon 2004). However, this manner of impression formation is often built on a foundation of false, exaggerated and misleading assumptions. While not all stereotypes are negative, they have a tendency to limit any further inquiry into the actual nature of the person being evaluated (Fiske, et al 1987, Golebiowska and Thomsen, 1999). There is complete agreement in the academic literature that homosexual stereotypes can be particularly nasty, or hateful (Golebiowska and Thomsen 1999, Herrick and Thomas 2001, LaMar and Kite 1998, Simon 1998, Viss and Burn 2001).

In covering political events, the media are particularly susceptible to choosing labels which may be based on fact, but which none-the-less result in stereotypic depictions of people in the news. By evoking these stereotypes they create a quick and easily processed impression for readers or viewers who want to get 'the story' fast. In headlines especially, newspapers often attempt to sum up an issue or a person with one or two 'trigger words' and this form of categorical labeling can be especially effective in creating a public persona for a politician. Once a label has been applied, it has a tendency to stick.

By framing an individual in a particular way the media draws the public's attention to particular aspects of that individual's personality and shifts it away from others (Iyengar 1991). In other words, while the media may not tell the public what to think about a politician, by emphasizing certain qualities more than others it can have an important impact on what aspects of that person's character are most influential in the reader's evaluations of that politician. Thus if the media continually draw attention to a politician's sexual orientation, this fact has the potential to become more important in voters' assessments of that politician than might otherwise have been the case. Coverage that focuses on the candidate's sexual orientation is likely to trigger what social cognition theorists have termed "in-group/out-group" responses (Tajfel and Turner 2004). These responses can lead to the application of stereotypical assessments to the "non-traditional" political candidate (Wyer and Srull 1980), the assumption that all members of an "out-group" possess these qualities and characteristics (Linville, et al. 1989; Tajfel 1970). Furthermore, these stereotypical qualities may be exaggerated and applied to the "out-group" member even if he or she does not exhibit those characteristics (Taylor 1981).

There is some evidence that this undue use of stereotypes is actually what occurs and that the media will focus on a candidate's sexual orientation if it appears to have more news value than the person's policy interests or what they have to contribute to the discussion of campaign issues (Golebiowska 2002). This is especially true in long-shot campaigns or lower-level political races, where homosexuals who are relatively new to mainstream politics often get their start (Golebiowska 2002). Given the minimal media attention paid to the salient aspects of the candidates' character, it is difficult for these candidates to create a public image that transcends the inherent political limitations of their sexual orientation. If, in their limited coverage the candidate is described as gay, or if that message is sent in an encoded form by discussing their involvement in gay rights activities, the literature suggests that this fact will resonate more loudly with voters than his or her other characteristics. The argument is that the power of the homosexual label invokes a stereotypical and easily processed impression. Thus, the scarcity of information about individual candidates in these races makes it especially important which facts are used. In news coverage – a single word or phrase may activate perceptions well beyond what is actually said (Golebiowska, 2002). It is for this reason that gay candidates have been advised to delay coming out of the closet until after the electorate has had time to collect other attribute-based information (Golebiowska and Thomsen 1999, Golebiowska 2002). Indeed, there seems to be some evidence that individuals who run as "out" candidates before they have developed a strong public persona are less successful than those who have solidified their image either through winning elections before coming out or through previous high profile public and community experience (George 2002; Camp and Everitt unpublished paper).

The literature has revealed another damaging characteristic in news coverage of homosexuals in politics. As has been the case for women, the media tends to depict homosexuals as part of a singular movement, or ideology, notwithstanding their party affiliations (Golebiowska 2002; George 2002). In Golebiowska's (2002), research, gay candidates stated that one of their biggest challenges was fighting the perception that they were single-issue politicians, driven by their devotion to the so-called 'gay agenda' (Golebiowska 2002). No matter what the

candidate may have said in his or her campaign literature, it was often implied in their media coverage that their paramount concern was fighting for matters of specific importance to the gay community.

As we will show, these patterns were certainly prevalent in the media coverage of Allison Brewer during her tenure as NDP leader. Not only did Brewer's coverage repeatedly draw attention to her sexual orientation, it did so by presenting her as having an activist agenda and downplaying her political experience and accomplishments and her other policy interests. The media found her most newsworthy when speaking on issues such as gay marriage and abortion. When it came to the more mainstream issues of the day, such as the economy, education and health care, Brewer discovered the press had little interest in what she had to say. Indeed, she was subjected to a particularly confining form of stereotypical representation in the media, one that pushed her from the mainstream, accentuated her 'otherness' and made it difficult for her to engage in public discourse on a full range of issues.

## Methodology

This project uses content analysis to examine Brewer's media coverage from May 2005, when she expressed an interest in the leadership of the NDP, to November 2006, when she resigned as head of the party. The source of this coverage is the three daily newspapers in New Brunswick: *The Daily Gleaner*, based in Fredericton, the *Telegraph Journal*, based in Saint John, and the *Times and Transcript of Moncton*, all of which are published by Brunswick News. These dailies have no direct competition – though to some degree they compete with each other – and they are, by default, the leading newspaper sources of information in New Brunswick. The study does not include coverage of Brewer in the French-language media, which in Brewer's own assessment, paid little attention to her because she could not speak French and her party had no detectable support in the predominately francophone ridings of the province.

The analysis focuses on two different periods in Brewer's political career – the 'leadership cycle' and the 'election cycle.' We refer to the period between May 14, 2005, when Brewer announced her run for the NDP leadership, through to the end of September as the 'leadership cycle' because Brewer's media coverage during this period was driven by the leadership convention and its immediate aftermath. This was the time in which her political identity was being forged.<sup>5</sup> After the convention she practically dropped from the media's radar. In fact, Brewer received almost no newspaper coverage during the first four months of 2006.

The second period in her career began with the lead-up to the New Brunswick provincial election campaign in the late spring and summer of 2006 and concluded with her resignation as party leader in December 2006. This period was a time of intense political activity in New Brunswick when all of the parties were preparing for the anticipated provincial election. Because the media were preoccupied by more newsworthy stories about how parties were preparing for the election or who may or may not win they paid less attention to Brewer's sexuality during the election campaign period than during the leadership campaign. However, we argue that by the time the election was called, the damage was already done. Brewer was an already relatively known commodity, whose identity had been consolidated by the earlier reporting on her political activities.

The study collected all news reports in which Brewer was mentioned by name or by title.<sup>6</sup> A total of 21 stories were written about Brewer during the leadership cycle and 52 stories were included in the analysis for the election cycle. This analysis is based upon an inventory of words and phrases used to define the candidate, her past accomplishments, and her political goals and ambitions – anything that would contribute to the formation of an impression of her character or to the assessment of her viability as a political leader. The descriptive words used included both language that tends to create or reinforce a stereotype or identity within a conceptual frame and words or phrases that define individual characteristics or attributes. To illustrate, terms such as 'lesbian,' 'feminist,' and 'reproductive-choice advocate' are categorical definitions of Brewer. Adjectives such as 'outspoken' and 'radical' fall into this domain as well. However, attribute-based descriptions of the candidate, such as 'worked in an abortion clinic' and 'is a former civil servant' are examples of particular attributes of the candidate, which may lend themselves to the formation of a stereotype but which are not, in themselves, stereotypical descriptions.

We also separated the reporting of simple facts from the interpretive aspects of Brewer's news coverage to determine how much of her news reporting was aimed at relating specific information about the things she did and said, and how much was meant to explain or mediate her actions or identity. Of particular interest to this study were the specific biographical details embedded in the media coverage of Brewer's candidacy. The research catalogued all of this information to see how many details of her life were revealed and which ones were given the most prominence. We then compared Brewer's coverage during the "leadership cycle" and the "campaign cycle" to assess the degree to which the coverage differed.

This analysis is strengthened by information gathered in unstructured interviews conducted during the summer of 2006 with Brewer herself and with Charles Fournier a former NDP president and candidate in the 2006 election. It is also based on an interview with Mark Tunney, former news editor of the *Telegraph Journal*. Tunney was the news editor of the *Telegraph Journal* during much of Brewer's first year as NDP leader and was in charge of making the editorial decisions concerning her coverage. His perspective on Brewer and the meaning of her leadership illuminates some of the journalistic thinking that molded the news reports about her candidacy.

## **The framing of Allison Brewer: Leadership selection to resignation**

In media terms, the campaign for the leadership of the NDP was a low-information affair, with New Brunswick's newspapers and radio and television stations showing only minimal interest. As Mark Tunney said, the newspaper considered the leadership race to be newsworthy, though of significantly less interest than would be generated by a contest in either the Conservative or the Liberal parties (Tunney 2006). In fact, the NDP leadership race received relatively little coverage, only making the front pages of the provincial papers the day after the new leader was chosen. Tunney said he instructed his political reporters to look for aspects of the campaign that could spark public interest as it was obvious that the party was not going to attract a 'star power' candidate (Tunney 2006).

The only story of the campaign that appeared to have any clear news value was the fact that a lesbian was running for, and would later win, the leadership campaign. It should be noted that it was the media, not Brewer who made her sexual orientation the story. While Brewer never hid the fact that she was a lesbian, it was never a part of her campaign strategy during either the leadership or election campaign to present herself as a "gay candidate". She was a candidate who just happened to be a lesbian. Likewise, she was a candidate who supported choice, and was not one who was actively running with an ardent pro-choice platform.

From the day she announced her leadership bid to the day after the convention four months later, the three English-language newspapers in New Brunswick published a total of 21 stories about her. (Everitt and Camp 2009). None-the-less there was little opportunity for NDP supporters and the public at large to form a detailed impression of Brewer and even less of an impression of the other two heterosexual candidates, Oscar Doucet, a factory worker from Acadieville, and Pam Coates, described as a 'poverty activist' from Saint John.

The situation was much different during the New Brunswick election campaign of 2006. By this time Brewer had been party leader for just under a year. Election campaigns are highly newsworthy events and journalists do not have to struggle to find interesting hooks for their stories. Brewer's identity as a lesbian and /or as an abortion activist had become part of public record and the media did not have to continually draw attention to it in their stories about her. Instead, as leader of the third placed party in the province, they referenced her only in passing, giving her only about one third of the coverage that they gave to either Bernard Lord, leader of the Conservative Party or Shawn Graham, leader of the Liberals. Ironically they relied on slightly fewer stereotypical descriptors in her coverage during the election than they did during the leadership campaign.

In the stories included in the 'leadership cycle' the media applied 78 descriptive labels that fell into roughly 9 different categories (see Table 1). There were often slight variations in many of these descriptive phrases, but they had essentially the same meaning. For example, "former director of abortion clinic" and "former manager of abortion clinic" were considered to be equivalent for the purposes of this study. On average, each story during the 'leadership cycle' contained three schematic labels. In comparison, of the 51 stories which featured the NDP leader

during the 'election cycle', 36 descriptive labels were used falling into 9 different categories, some of which differed from those used in the 'leadership cycle'. Almost half of the stories in the election period were free of stereotypical framing.

**Table 1 – Descriptors in Brewer's News Coverage**

Descriptor	Leadership Cycle (May-December 2005)		Election Cycle (May – November 2006)	
	Number of References	Percentage of Total Coverage	Number of References	Percentage of Total Coverage
Sexual orientation (lesbian, defender of gay rights, history of gay activism)	22	28%	5	15%
Activism (human rights, feminist, disability rights, social issues)	21	27%	14	39 %
Abortion activism	19	24%	4	11%
Political rookie	5	6%	5	15%
Winner of Governor General's Award	4	5%	4	11%
Mother of 3	3	4%	1	3%
Life-long supporter of the NDP	2	3%		
Government advisor	1	1%		
Journalist/Worked in Communications	1	1%	1	3%
Grew up in Fredericton			1	3%
NB's most controversial leader			1	3%
<b>Total Number</b>	<b>78</b>		<b>36</b>	

While there was less stereotypical framing of Brewer in the 'campaign cycle' than in the 'leadership cycle,' it was still present. For example, while Brewer had experience as a journalist and as a civil servant, and had received a Governor General's Award in Commemoration of the Persons Case, it is clear from the categories laid out in Table 1 that it was her identity as a lesbian and an abortion rights activist that captured the media's interest during both the leadership and the election campaign. In both periods, her experience in the public service in New Brunswick and Nunavut were given far less attention than her sexual orientation and 'activist' background: 28 per cent of the descriptors applied to her during the leadership cycle made explicit or implicit references to her sexuality; this was the case for only 15 per cent of the descriptors during the election cycle. The media also employed more subtle ways of expressing her otherness, with their frequent references to her commitment to 'human rights' and 'social rights'. Twenty-seven per cent of the descriptors used in the leadership stories highlighted her activism on issues of human rights, feminism disability rights, or social issues. An additional 24 per cent focused specifically on her activism on the issue of abortion. During the election campaign there were fewer references to her activism on the abortion issue (11 %), but even more to her efforts on other issues (39 %).

Brewer tried to project herself as a person with strong family ties, who could understand the concerns of average parents in New Brunswick. She brought her children to campaign events and stressed the idea that she was a mother and could relate to the problems and concerns of a typical New Brunswick family (Brewer, interview, 2006). However, the media showed little interest in this facet of her identity. The fact that she was the mother of three grown children was mentioned only three times (4%) in her leadership coverage and once in her campaign coverage (3%).



The themes of activism and outspokenness are apparent in many of these newspaper labels and descriptions, but there is a peculiar lack of consistency in what might be considered the basic biographical facts of the candidate. For example, in spite of Brewer's long-time involvement with the NDP and her experience in profoundly political issues such as human rights and reproductive choice, she was still referred to as a "rookie" in politics. Six per cent of her descriptors during the leadership cycle suggested a lack of experience and this was re-emphasized (15%) during the election cycle. This depiction is consistent with much of the research on female candidates in Canada and the United States. The application of the term 'rookie' reflects a general tendency to systematically reduce the value attached to activities that are also stereotypically female (Gidengil and Everitt 2003, Gidengil and Everitt 1999, Chang and Hitchon 2004). Political experience, it is typically related to political experience in neutral or male-gendered political domains. In other words, a lifetime of fighting for women's rights does not earn the same credibility for a political candidate as would, for example, a few years spent working on stereotypically male activities such as economic development, national defence or tax reform. As a result, in her media coverage, Brewer is oddly presented as being both a veteran and a novice in public sphere. This study would argue that these contradictory assessments are grounded in a gendered perspective on politics and political activity: Brewer is a veteran in the stereotypically female domain, and a novice in the male domain. The gender bias is unmistakable.

In terms of her activism, the media focused on her "human rights" lobbying and virtually ignored her union involvement, her work for people with intellectual disabilities and her long volunteer record with social and political organizations, including the provincial and federal NDP. In the process of drawing attention to her advocacy work, the newspapers frequently framed her brand of politics in activist terms – an outspoken advocate with not-too-distant echoes of radicalism and feminist stereotyping. It was clear she was not a candidate who would be expected to operate within the usual margins of provincial politics in New Brunswick. Considering this coverage, voters might wonder how any politician who is an activist on one or two issues (particularly if they are not issues that resonate with a relatively conservative voting public) would have any time for, or interest in, other matters such as the economy, health care or the environment.

It would be unreasonable to assume that average citizen in New Brunswick reads all of the newspaper coverage of the New Democratic Party leader. Depending on which stories they encounter, and how much of each story they actually read, voters could construct many different versions of Brewer's persona, and form many different impressions of her as a candidate. But based on the dominance of the gay-activist schema in the labels the media used to describe her, there was ample basis for the public to see her as a stereotypically radical, placard-waving lesbian, entering mainstream politics; a novice trying to fill the shoes of one of the province's most celebrated political critics, Elizabeth Weir. Acknowledging the categorical framing of her media persona, one newspaper began a profile of Brewer with this ironic statement, "Yes, she's an "openly" "lesbian" "activist." And no, she's not "Elizabeth" "Weir" (Rawlines, Telegraph-Journal, Sept. 29, 2005). The story portrayed Brewer as a "fresh face" on the political scene, before turning to the more controversial aspects of her life story, in particular her advocacy for reproductive choice. There is little doubt that this coverage had an impact on her ability to project herself as a strong leader and political candidate. As Charles Fournier, a former party president of the New Brunswick NDP and a candidate in the riding of Nepisiguit in the 2006 provincial election said:

From the beginning her sexual orientation was controversial. The media framed her as a 'lesbian activist' and that was made the central issue. And I've found that as a leader, she's constantly had to fight against that public perception of her being limited to that and that's really distracted her from going about the orders of being a party leader and attempting to rally people with all the important issues. Why don't we hear her talking about health care? Or economic development, which in this province, means bringing in another call centre (Fournier, interview 2006).

Given the apparent news value in the word *lesbian*, it is surprising it was used so infrequently in the news stories about Brewer. Instead she was referred to as a gay activist or gay party leader. Even, then while the term activist was used to describe her stand on gay rights and abortion, it was the abortion issue that received the most direct coverage. Her background as a pro-choice advocate was explicitly noted in 12 of the stories (19 references). Her

activities on behalf of lesbians and gays were more carefully presented, often referred to as human and social rights activism. Her sexual orientation was stated openly in only three of the articles in the leadership cycle and these all occurred in the immediate post-convention coverage. Up until the leadership convention the media demonstrated a distinct reluctance to use the word lesbian to describe Brewer, even in stories that clearly intended to reveal her sexual orientation. Rather than describing her directly as a lesbian, these reports implicitly conveyed the information that she was gay by making references to her interest in gay marriage and human rights. This tendency may be grounded in the media's recognition that while categorical labeling might not be socially acceptable, information that someone was a lesbian is newsworthy enough to convey.

However, this changed on the day after the convention when two of the three English newspapers in the province ran front page stories which referred to Brewer's sexuality in their headlines and all three newspapers reported on her sexuality in the accompanying stories. This was the day that most people would be reading about the outcome of the leadership convention so the explicit use of the word lesbian would have had greater impact than at other points during the campaign. The *Telegraph Journal* went the furthest using the headline "NDP chooses lesbian activist as new leader" (Kaufeld 2005). It was Tunney who approved the headline, acknowledging that it was written to attract public attention.

To my mind, a headline should just grab people and say 'read this.' And if we had something like 'Brewer wins NDP' we wouldn't get the story across and most people wouldn't read it. Where the headline (we used) might get people asking, 'what's this all about?' – and they'll read the story and judge for themselves" (Tunney, interview, 2006).

Had Brewer been a straight male candidate, with no activist background one might speculate that the headline would have indeed been of the less sensational variety: *Brewer wins Leadership*. Tunney argued that from an ethical standpoint, the headline passed the most important test. It is truthful since Brewer is both a lesbian, and in his estimation, an activist. Furthermore he argued that neither word is, in itself, offensive or derogatory. However, as Lippman argued, even factual stories can create misleading impressions if certain facts are over-emphasized and others downplayed (1922). By combining these two words the paper went beyond just conveying the notion that this election was just a breakthrough for GLB politicians. It seemed to suggest that Brewer had an issue agenda and an otherness that was distinct from other politicians and which was extremely limiting for a politician seeking to demonstrate that she could represent a wide range of people. While Tunney understood that the headline had the potential to create misperceptions and generate a degree of negativity among certain voters, he was content with the broader message of the headline: that Brewer was something new and different on New Brunswick's political scene, someone different.

It is worthy of note that after this initial coverage, the word *lesbian* was not repeated in the stories about Brewer. While Tunney would not admit that using it was a mistake, he never used it again, nor was it used by any of the other news editors in the provincial papers. As noted earlier only 5 explicit references to Brewer's sexuality were used during the election campaign representing just less than 15 per cent of her overall descriptors. This was almost half the attention her orientation received during the leadership cycle.

Brewer was well aware of the manner in which she was being represented in the media and actively tried to avoid presenting herself in any way that would invoke the media to draw upon stereotypes. She brought her children to campaign events and she wore conservative-looking clothes: she never wore jeans, dressing in a way that would work against the activation of the lesbian stereotype. As she said:

"It was really important for me, during the leadership campaign, to make sure I was surrounded by men. I got this really, sort of conservative-looking older guy to follow me around and he was great. It was important for me to make sure the optics worked. I've never been so strategic. I actually chose someone, based on their sexual orientation, to play a certain role in the campaign." (Brewer, interview, 2006)

She also repeatedly told reporters that her agenda was not limited to reproductive choice and gay rights focusing instead on more spending for health care and education. She supported tighter environmental laws and the hiring of more social workers to assist troubled families and she also voiced her commitment to pay equity. On the day she entered the leadership race, she told a news conference:

I'm not a two-issue person. I've worked for people with disabilities; I've been strong in my union. I've worked on issues of violence against women in the feminist movement, and in my job. Once people start talking about the things I do beyond these two issues, I don't think it will be a problem. (Telegraph Journal, May 25, 2005, A3)

However, in spite of her efforts, the stereotypic themes associated with her gender and orientation were dominant in her newspaper coverage. In a story in *The Daily Gleaner* at the start of the election campaign, Brewer made this observation:

"We have a really, really hard time making our presence felt," she says. "We don't get the media attention we deserve and without that, it's really hard to capture the imagination of the public." (Morris *The Daily Gleaner*, August 19, 2006)

Immediately following those two sentences, the newspaper inadvertently pointed to one of the reasons Brewer was having such trouble reaching mainstream voters - the media's apparent fixation on her 'controversial' identity. The news story continued:

*Brewer is, in many ways, New Brunswick's most controversial leader. She is the province's first openly gay leader, and she has made a name for herself as a defender of gay rights. (The Daily Gleaner, August 19, 2006)*

In a small relatively rural province where the NDP has struggled even to win the blue collared vote such a characterization is lethal. New Brunswick has traditionally been a socially conservative province with Catholics making up 54 percent of the population and Baptists, the second largest religious denomination, comprising another 11 percent. By emphasizing her sexual orientation and pro-abortion activism the media did nothing to give the impression that Brewer was a "normal" politician.

Tunney believed the *Telegraph Journal* and the other New Brunswick newspapers handled the Brewer story the way any responsible media organization would. They presented Allison Brewer in her most newsworthy form: that of being an openly lesbian woman seeking a mainstream political office. While he said he looks forward to a time when this fact is no longer worthy of mention in the news media, for the time being, it is news when an openly lesbian woman with an activist past wins the leadership of a mainstream political party. Tunney's comments point to the challenges that lesbians, and gays for that matter face, from the media when choosing to enter into the political sphere. Their identities are reduced to their most newsworthy quality – the fact that they are homosexuals and therefore novelties in the eyes of the media.

While this approach sustained the media through much of the leadership campaign, there was a measurable change in their reporting a year later when Premier Bernard Lord called an election. In this 'hard news' context, the media coverage of Brewer came closer to the treatment typically accorded to other female leaders of minor parties in Canada – they mostly ignored her. When she was included in election news stories, it was generally toward the end, or "three paragraphs from the bottom," (Brewer, interview, 2006). Furthermore, as is typical for many women in politics, lesbian or otherwise, much of Brewer's coverage followed the narrative template of the 'long shot' candidate (Gingras 1995, Huddy and Terkildsen 1993, Kahn 1996, Vavrus 2002). As one newspaper story noted, she was the undisputed "underdog" when measured against the two other party leaders. One story, published just days before Premier Bernard Lord called for the vote, described Brewer as a starry-eyed candidate with high ideas – and little knowledge of how the political game was actually played.

In other words, she hasn't much hope of success in the rough and tumble world of New Brunswick politics, with its entrenched old boys' networks and party patronage systems. (Morris The Daily Gleaner, Aug. 19, 2006)

This characterization of politics would lead one to believe that women were too idealistic, too innocent or too spineless to be successful players in the 'rough and tumble' world of politics. From this perspective, politics is a game best played by battle-hardened men, steeped in the wisdom of the back room and the back alley. In this respect, Brewer's coverage conforms to the findings of previous studies, which documented the projection of masculine values and imagery into the political process, with the implication that women do not belong in this distinctly unfeminine domain (Gidengil and Everitt 1999, 2003).

Also notable in the election cycle, however, was the decline in the stereotypical framing and categorical description that had defined Brewer's coverage during the NDP leadership campaign. Less than a week into the election campaign, The *Daily Gleaner* published a profile of the NDP leader. It was the first in-depth report on her that did not state, or even allude to, her sexual orientation. The story simply identified her as the party leader and later mentioned that she grew up in Fredericton, where she was running as a local candidate. A second feature that made the story different from the bulk of Brewer's previous coverage was the fact that it allowed her to speak on a variety of issues of potential interest to mainstream voters, including energy policy, post-secondary education, government spending, youth employment and seniors' health care. In short, it was a story one might expect about a typical politician running in a typical New Brunswick election.

The other two English-language newspapers in New Brunswick also moved in this direction after the election writ was issued. The traits that had generated so much attention in Brewer's earlier coverage were, from this point forward, used less frequently in news stories about her although they were still present. Certainly it was no longer necessary to sketch her public persona every time she appeared in a news story as most of the public already knew who, or at least what, she was.

This study would suggest that the news dynamics of a province-wide election campaign resulted in greater value being attached to Brewer's comments on mainstream issues, as voters were now in the process of acquiring comparative data about the candidates. While stories based on novelty add spice to campaign coverage, the mainstream media usually feel an obligation to reflect the different points of view of the leaders of all significant parties, even those whose chances of victory are predictably slim. It is encouraging to note that Brewer had several opportunities during her election cycle coverage to express views on issues unrelated to her being a 'lesbian activist.' She spoke about New Brunswick's troubled family services, the problem of unemployment, rising insurance costs, legal aid, public health and environmental protection. In other words, she was finally given a chance to join the discussion in which the other party leaders were engaged. However, it should be noted, her participation was flavoured with references to her 'political inexperience' and the overwhelming likelihood that she would lose on election day.

## Discussion

It is obvious that Allison Brewer's experience as leader of the New Brunswick NDP has opened another door for openly homosexual candidates to participate in mainstream politics. Furthermore, her "election cycle" coverage in the New Brunswick newspapers suggests that the media became less blatant in its stereotypical depiction as she became more familiar. However, we are not sanguine about these results. While there was a decline in the use of stereotypical descriptors, direct or encoded references to her sexuality were never fully eliminated from her newspaper coverage. They were embedded throughout including in critiques of her performance during the leaders debate:

Brewer, the province's first openly gay leader, was also criticized for reading answers during one of the leaders' debates, which made her look stiff and awkward. (Daily Gleaner, Sept. 19, 2006).

The impulse to apply such labels when there is no discernable connection to the matter at hand is a clear reflection of the media's preoccupation with her sexuality, even when it has no bearing on what she is trying to say or do as a political leader. Her sexuality is a matter of interest, no matter what the context.

We would also argue that Brewer's orientation had become a matter of public record and that a decrease in references to it did not undo the impressions made by her earlier coverage. There is abundant research to conclude that once an impression has been made, it is stubborn to remove. Brewer's introduction to the voters of New Brunswick was cast in frames of gender, sexual orientation and activism – with the synthesis of the three being especially potent in triggering a public assessment based on stereotypic expectations in a province like New Brunswick. By making her identity a newsworthy story in itself, the media missed the opportunity to explore deeper questions concerning her leadership and the ideas she wanted to bring to the political discourse of the province. Brewer's sexual orientation, which she considered to be of little significance or consequence in the context of this political campaign (Brewer, interview, 2006), became the dominant signifier of her public life. She was the lesbian leader, not the leader who happened to be lesbian. No other politician in the leadership race for the NDP (Everitt and Camp 2009), or in the subsequent provincial election campaign was identified by sexual orientation. This fact alone had the potential for a different public evaluation of her, as she was the only politician who was open to this kind of exposure, or labeling. With the newspapers emphasizing this aspect of her life, one can certainly assume the receivers of this information would, at the very least, need to contemplate her sexuality to some degree when they formed an impression of her. Other politicians are spared this kind of evaluation.

Today, more lesbians and gays feel empowered to declare their sexuality - and to do so at a younger age. They are also becoming more politically involved. However, unlike earlier generations of gay politicians who hid their sexuality until they had firmly established a political reputation, a strategic delay in announcing their orientation is not an option for these new politicians such as Allison Brewer. This means that their identity as lesbians or gays will be part of the information that the media feel obliged to focus on in their efforts to present the public with "newsworthy" stories whether the candidates wish to make it an issue or not. This has serious implications for these individuals as candidates.

Based on the experience of other marginalized groups seeking participation in mainstream politics, openly homosexual candidates will likely get their first political opportunities in lower-level races, or with parties that stand little or no chance of electoral success. Given the lesser news value of long-shot candidates, they can expect to encounter the kind of low-information coverage that Brewer received, which repeatedly frames them as being different, while giving them little opportunity to speak on issues beyond the boundaries of those associated with their stereotype. Furthermore, their commitment to gay rights – genuine as it may be – will inevitably to invoke the label of activism, a brand of political activity which in itself may offend the sensibilities of the mainstream unless they are located in large urban centres where such issues receive greater public support.

While no politician can expect to mould his or her media profile exactly as he or she wants it, the mainstream media should at least accord gays and lesbians with the same respect they have shown visible minorities in recent years. This means not accentuating their 'otherness' when it has little or no bearing on the issues at hand. As we have seen in our analysis of the newspaper coverage of Allison Brewer's leadership and later election campaign, Brewer did not receive this courtesy. Her initial coverage stressed her differences, the things that made her one of the 'others' in the political domain. Furthermore, her sexual orientation became her political orientation. She was endowed with the lesbian activist agenda, whether she wanted it, or even spoke of it. In effect, she is introduced by the media as a marginal politician, with a limited range of interests, who speaks for "them", not "us". While this message was not as strong in the subsequent election campaign coverage the damage was done, her image had been constructed and her opportunities of being perceived as a "normal" politician limited.

## Endnotes

1. The openly lesbian and gay politicians who have been elected at the federal level are Svend Robinson (NDP), Scott Brison (Lib.), Libby Davies (NDP), Réal Ménard (BQ), Raymond Gravel (BQ), Bill Siksay (NDP), Mario Silva (Lib.) and Rob Oliphant (Lib.). Two senators, Laurier LaPierre (retired) and Nancy Ruth, are also openly gay. At the provincial level, several homosexuals have been elected to their provincial legislatures. In British Columbia they include Lorne Mayencourt (Lib), Ted Nebbeling (Lib), Tim Stevenson (NDP), Spencer Herbert (NDP), Jenn McGinn (NDP) and Mabel Elmore (NDP). Jim Rondeau (NDP) has been elected in Manitoba, Kathleen Wynne (Lib.), George Smitherman (Lib.) and Paul Ferreira (NDP) have been elected in Ontario, and Maurice Richard (Lib) Agnès Maltais (PQ), André Boisclair (PQ), Sylvain Gaudreault (PQ) and André Boulerice (PQ) have been elected in Quebec. Glen Murray of Winnipeg was the first openly gay mayor of a large city. Allison Brewer, the former leader of the New Brunswick NDP failed in her bid to win a seat in the provincial legislature during the 2006 election.
2. At the national level, there are only three Canadian exceptions to that rule. Bill Siskay, the MP from Vancouver was the first homosexual to win his first seat in Parliament while being openly gay. Later, Raymond Gravel a BQ MP from south western Quebec won his seat in a by-election. Rob Oliphant a Liberal MP won in the 2008 election.
3. A Corporate Research Associates poll taken one month before the NDP convention in September 2005 put the party's popular support at 14 per cent. The survey was based on a sample of 803 New Brunswickers, with results accurate to within  $\pm 3.5$  percentage points, 95 out of 100 times.
4. News values are those qualities that guide decisions on what is considered to be important or newsworthy in a story. These can include factors such as negativity, immediacy, proximity, novelty, conflict, unexpectedness, and eliteness of the news actors (Bell 1991).
5. For a comparison of Brewer's leadership coverage to the coverage of the other two leadership contender see Everitt and Camp 2009.
6. This information was compiled through Canadian Newspapers FULLTEXT (FP Informart), a division of CanWest Interactive, which is owned by the media conglomeration CanWest Global. It includes all of the newspapers in New Brunswick. The articles are unaltered and unedited, and are represented in the form in which they first appeared in newspapers, magazines and other periodicals. As is often the case with content analysis, only print media was examined due to the difficulty of gathering data from radio or television news broadcasts.

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