7. From media wave to media tsunami

The ‘Charter of Values’ debate in Quebec, 2012-2014

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Abstract
This chapter examines the ‘media tsunami’ hypothesis, which posits that the media, in dealing with an emergent social issue in a relatively short period of time, amplify the importance of the issue through successive waves of press coverage that gain intensity and magnitude over time, manufacturing social crises. The chapter investigates the introduction of a new Charter on secular values by the Parti Québécois (PQ) during the election campaign of 2012. In 2014, the PQ lost the elections. All content on the debate published by thirteen Québec daily newspapers was analysed. The results show that massive and successive waves of media coverage manifested during the eighteen-month period, but also that this tsunami was a politically rather than media fuelled event.

Keywords: media tsunami, Quebec, immigration, Charter of Values, Charter of Quebec Values, Parti Québécois, media hype, media amplification

From March 2006 to December 2007, the province of Quebec experienced a contentious public debate on diversity. The ‘crisis’ was fuelled by what we have identified elsewhere as a ‘media tsunami’ (Giasson, Brin & Sauvageau, 2010a, 2010b) during which news outlets actively reported on numerous cases of reasonable accommodation practices or administrative agreements in public services granted in the Greater Montreal region to citizens with an immigrant background. The ‘media tsunami’ hypothesis, an expanded version of Vasterman’s (2005) media hype theory, poses that the media, through successive waves of press coverage, each gaining in intensity and magnitude in a relatively short period of time, amplifies the importance of an emergent issue and can manufacture social ‘crises’. Following an extensive
content analysis of the press coverage of the reasonable accommodation debate, we found that the news media did engineer a textbook case of ‘media tsunami’ in Quebec on this emergent and divisive social issue. Through this extensive coverage, the media brought these instances of accommodation to the public’s attention. Furthermore, these analyses also showed that, in their coverage of polls and their general framing of the mood of public opinion towards practices of reasonable accommodations in the public service, newspapers focused mostly on the malaise in the population towards immigration and religious diversity, rather than on its openness to diversity and to the positive social outcomes of immigration. In doing so, the media further anchored the widely held impression that a serious social crisis was unfolding and that a wide gap in tolerance existed between Francophone Quebeckers, recent immigrants living in Quebec, and other Canadians.

This chapter builds on our previous analyses of the reasonable accommodation ‘media tsunami’ to investigate the next public debate the province experienced on the issue of diversity following the arrival to power of the Parti Québécois (PQ) in 2012. A year into their minority mandate, the party introduced in September of 2013 a bill defining a ‘Charter of Values’ for Quebec. It was presented as a definitive way to end conflicting reasonable accommodation practices in the public service, which, according to the Parti Québécois, was an ongoing problem that the previous Liberal government had failed to address since the 2006-2007 crisis. The proposed Charter forbade all civil servants and employees of public institutions from wearing any ‘ostentatious’ religious symbol at their place of work. Although the proposal met with high approval ratings in the population, it was hotly contested by the Liberal opposition as well as by other groups, namely because of its apparent singling out of Muslim women’s headscarves. In April 2014, the Parti Québécois lost the election it had called and was replaced by a new majority Liberal government, which followed through on its campaign promise to kill the Charter project. To this day, the issue of accommodating religious diversity in Quebec while maintaining religious neutrality of the state does not appear to have been resolved.

The chapter examines whether another media tsunami was created by the press in Quebec during the debate over the Charter of Values. Our ‘media tsunami’ hypothesis posits that the media amplified the issue through successive waves of press coverage gaining in intensity and magnitude over time. For this purpose, we turn our attention to the period of August 2012 to April 2014, when the issue of the creation of a Charter was brought into and debated within the public sphere in Quebec.
Theoretical framework: From media waves to the media tsunami

According to Vasterman, media hypes are observed when a specific event receives such sudden and intense media coverage that the ‘media do stimulate, amplify and magnify’ (2005: 513) the original news item on the issue. All media will cover the story, regardless of its intrinsic societal importance. Based on this initial story, a dominant frame of the event is defined and becomes vastly shared by all media outlets, regardless of the medium (radio, television, print, digital), which leads to homogeneity in news coverage.

This key event provokes, in turn, a consonant news wave: ‘there is a clear starting point for the news wave, an event that receives more attention than comparable events, for whatever reason’ (Ibid.: 516). During this period, one may observe a sudden increase of coverage of comparable cases and an important increase of reports of related subjects. These particular practices lead to a situation where ‘media are making the news instead of reporting events’ (Ibid.).

During a media hype, news reporting becomes self-referential and cumulative; each journalist building on the competitor’s scoop, developing an ongoing story based on new information, exclusive interviews, opinions, and debates regarding similar and comparable events. One of the features of the media hype is that it concerns not only the type of events selected for coverage, but also (and we can add, mostly) their framing. Following the trigger event, an archetypal image (or theme) will slowly impose itself, will be constantly referred to in all stories, and will end up being reported as a strong, repetitive (and sometimes, threatening) illustration of the issue.

One of the main consequences of this type of coverage is that it creates an impression of amplification of certain social issues, leading to a perceived social crisis. During a media hype, public discourse – as presented through the media – will also be very homogeneous, following the framing of the trigger event. There will be little room for critique or dissenting opinions. After a certain period of time, the decline of the media wave occurs, a decline that may be explained either by news saturation, lack of sources, or simply because other events have taken centre stage. According to Vasterman, however, one can expect the resurgence of more news waves regarding the same subject shortly afterwards, because of the public’s awareness and sensitivity to the issue. This leads to the idea that the media hype model could be expanded by integrating these successive waves of media coverage in the analysis, which we refer to as a ‘media tsunami’.

Tsunamis are natural disasters, a series of gigantic waves that successively hit coastal areas as a result of the displacement of underwater tectonic
plates. These movements are the result of violent shocks caused by volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, landslides, or other disturbances above or below the ocean. Tsunamis are composed of a series of waves, each interrupted by a period of relative lull, that grow in strength and magnitude in the shallow water. Since the first wave leads the way to the others, the most devastating effects of tsunami occur when the secondary waves hit the coast. Led by the surf of the first wave, the secondary waves are usually stronger in magnitude (strike force) and amplitude (wave height) than the initial wave, therefore causing more significant damage.

Based on this metaphor, and on our remarks regarding Vasterman’s media hype model, we consider that four conditions must be present to conclude to a potential ‘media tsunami’:

1) The presence of a trigger event (or key event) that will initiate the first wave (the seismic shock);
2) A first wave of coverage associated with the key event that frames the issue and introduces it into the public sphere;
3) A relative period of calm (lull) that allows the audience to integrate the news framing (the surf and shock absorption);
4) The arrival of successive waves of coverage, all bigger than the first one.

Media tsunamis share characteristics with media hypes: a trigger event reduced by the press to an archetypal image; a general and simultaneous coverage of the event (and of related stories) by all media outlets; a massive coverage that spreads the archetypal image previously defined; a scramble to search for similar cases; the generalization of particular cases and stories (as if the problem described was ‘naturally’ extended to all society); and extensive coverage of the reactions to the ‘crisis.’ The difference here is that the media tsunami takes into account the importance of the successive waves of coverage to understand why and how an event may be forced by the media onto the public, in such a way that it contributes to the impression of an amplification of a social issue, problem or even crisis.

This is not to say that social discomfort toward the issue does not exist prior to the media tsunami. To the contrary, this extension of the media hype model recognizes this previous unease or misunderstanding of certain situations as a favourable condition for the development of a media tsunami. For example, Sides and Citrin conclude that social discomfort toward immigration in Europe is due in part to misperceptions of the proportion of immigrants, as well as ‘symbolic attitudes about the nation (identités)’ (2007: 477). In fact, the media tsunami hypothesis argues that by driving attention to a specific subject and by producing massive and uniform coverage of an emerging issue
in a short period of time, the media may contribute to creating the impression that a major societal crisis is unfolding. Of course, social crises are often triggered by preconditions such as fear, prejudice, or ignorance. However, we believe that the media can play a role in that process by the way they report events. In their intensive and extensive coverage of certain issues, the media use, mobilize, and catalyse those prejudices and fears, soon becoming the driving force of the crisis. Hence, the media tsunami becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: it contributes to create the crisis it purports to describe.

Methods

In order to investigate the potential manifestation of a media tsunami in the Quebec media about the creation of a Charter of secular values, we analysed the content of a random sample of articles taken from press coverage of the issue published in thirteen daily newspapers, both in French and English, from 14 August 2012 to 7 April 2014. We initially collected all the news items (news reports, commentaries including columns, analyses, editorials, op-eds, and letters to the editor) published in those dailies using a combination of the search words 'Charter', 'Values', and 'Secular*' in the Eureka database. This initial search generated a corpus of 6,326 news items on the issue. From this population of texts, we then randomly selected 1,955 articles (thirty per cent of all documents) for our content analysis. Of these documents, we rejected 573 news items that contained the search words but were not actually about the proposed Charter, leaving a final sample of 1,382 stories dealing directly with the topic.

Two reasons justify our decision to focus our analysis on print news. Firstly, in Quebec and Canada, television and radio are not required to keep public and accessible archives of their news reports and broadcasts. This situation complicates the constitution of coherent and exhaustive corpuses of their newscasts. Some archives may be accessible temporarily online, but the entire body of news items remains inaccessible. Further, transcripts of television and radio newscasts are not all readily accessible to researchers. Thus, only transcripts of newscasts from the national public broadcaster, CBC-Radio-Canada, are entirely accessible in digital databases for consultation. Private broadcasters are not mandated by law to provide these documents to the public. This limited availability to broadcast news items therefore dictated that we limit our analysis to print news, which was entirely accessible through public databases. Secondly, during the reasonable accommodation debate of 2006-2007 in Quebec, all major news
organizations, including newspapers, launched into an intensive and competitive race for scoops and exclusives. They engaged important resources in developing in-depth reports and features devoted to covering the issue extensively. This trend was less apparent in broadcast media coverage, which seemed to have followed the intensive treatment that print media was largely driving. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the conclusions from our analysis should be specifically associated to print media in Quebec, not its entire media industry.

The period covered by the study is book-ended by two key moments marking the introduction and development of the issue of the Charter of Values in public debate. Firstly, on 14 August 2012, during a campaign event in the second week of a hotly contested provincial election, PQ leader Pauline Marois promised that, if her party was elected, the provincial government would present a bill to create a Charter on secularism in Quebec. Secondly, on 7 April 2014, following a difficult electoral campaign in which the incumbent government largely promoted its proposed Charter, the PQ lost power to the Liberal Party of Quebec (LPQ), which later killed the project. Our analysis focuses on media coverage dedicated to the issue of the PQ’s proposed Charter on secular values, later renamed on the day of its official presentation on 9 September 2013, as the Charter of Quebec Values.

News items were coded manually by a team of three coders using a coding scheme containing seventeen variables. A series of three pre-tests were carried to ensure intercoder reliability. Following each pre-test, disagreement in coding was discussed; ultimately, the level of intercoder agreement reached 89.6%. The date, the type of news items, the centrality of the issue in the item as well as the main theme covered in association with the issue were among the variables coded in order to get a better sense of how the issue was framed in the coverage and of the evolution of the strength and magnitude of the potential different waves of coverage. The unit of analysis is the news item in its entirety.

Results

Our chronological analysis of the print media coverage on the issue of the Charter of Quebec values, combined with our content analysis of the main themes that frame this coverage, allow us to confirm the manifestation of a media tsunami. As Figure 7.1 reveals, an initial event – the seismic shock – generates successive waves of intense coverage through time, with each wave more important than the initial one.
This initial shock happened on 14 August 2012, when Pauline Marois promised during her electoral campaign that she would implement a charter on secular values if her party won the election. During the following two months, the first wave of coverage on the project (comprising 176 news reports) hit the province. Then, from October 2012 to April 2013, the coverage of the issue died down, which is a key component of the tsunami model (the lull between the waves). During this quiet, receding period, news coverage focused on other political issues such as the Marois government’s summit on higher education and its management of the budget deficit. During this six-month period, only sixty-seven articles related to the Charter project were published. The item remained on the media agenda, but did not receive intensive coverage. Then, in May 2013, the second major wave of the tsunami hit, with 126 articles. However, it is the third wave that generated by far the most coverage. This massive surf happened following the introduction of the bill in the Quebec National Assembly, from September to December 2013, and comprised 3,385 news items on the issue. The magnitude of this wave represents a proportion of coverage that we had not yet witnessed in any of our previous analyses of media amplification of diversity and religious accommodation in Quebec. The fourth and fifth waves of January (754 articles) and March 2014 (728 news items), though weaker than the third, are nevertheless massively larger than the initial one of August 2012. The aggregate data does indeed confirm the theoretical model of the media tsunami.
As both media hype and media tsunami hypotheses state, the trigger element in the model – in this case, Marois’ electoral announcement of a projected Charter on secularism – prepares public debate and brings attention to issues associated to identity politics or accommodation of diversity, which will become central frames in the following waves of coverage. Furthermore, our data reveal that commentaries and hard news articles were published in relatively similar proportions throughout most of the period of coverage on the issue, which may indicate the media’s active involvement in creating, feeding and amplifying the importance of the question in the political debate. This is a central component of both models of media amplification.

Another central element of both models is the presence of an archetypal image that summarizes the issue and eventually completely dominates news coverage during the amplification process. In our previous analyses of the reasonable accommodation issue, this archetype was the kirpan, a ceremonial dagger Sikh men carry under their clothes for religious purposes. In the Charter of Values tsunami, the dominant image changes from one wave of coverage to the next. Public discussion over the Charter of Values project quickly centred on a secondary issue, which was the presence of a large crucifix above the throne of the President of the National Assembly, Quebec’s provincial legislature. When Pauline Marois announced her promise to create a Charter on secularism, she was accompanied by a star candidate, Djemila Benhabib, an outspoken pro-secularism activist of Algerian descent, well known for her very critical positions against radical Islam. She had been an advocate for the institution of a Charter on secularism, but also for the removal of the crucifix from the legislature building.

The place of the crucifix in the National Assembly then became a central focus in the news coverage of the Charter issue, mainly because Pauline Marois disagreed with her star secularist candidate on this question. Marois believed that the Christian symbol should remain, to remind Quebeckers of their Roman Catholic heritage, different from the historically largely protestant Anglo-Canadian community, something she therefore defended as being part of Québécois identity. This position was supported by numerous nationalist Quebeckers who did not see a contradiction between the presence of a Christian religious symbol in the National Assembly and the dispositions contained in a future Charter that would limit individual religious expression in public service and public institutions. Therefore, in the initial phases of coverage, the crucifix became the archetypal object associated by some to national French Québécois identity and history, a symbol of cultural resistance towards the ‘Other’.
However, in the successive waves of massive coverage following the quiet period of October 2012 to March 2013, the archetypical crucifix is replaced by the Charter itself. During this second portion of the tsunami, the archetypal image that will be largely repeated in public discourses (the politicians’ as well as the media’s), could be described as the ‘holy trinity’ of religious head coverings: the Sikh turban, the Muslim hijab, and the Jewish kippa. Yet, this religious trio seems to have been brought into the news following the important framing associated previously to the crucifix. They all are strong cultural and religious symbols that do prime explicitly the difference between the French Québécois majority associated with the crucifix and (some) religious minorities present in Quebec, reduced stereotypically to elements of clothing. The initial phase of coverage of the Charter, following the election campaign of August 2012, will therefore impose a polarizing frame opposing culturally the ‘Us’ of Québécois of Catholic heritage to the ‘Them’ of members of religious minorities. We believe this frame was fuelled by the initial public discussion on the presence of the crucifix, a fundamentally religious symbol, in political institutions of contemporary Quebec. It evolved later in a conversation including the archetypal symbols of those Quebecers of different religions trying to integrate into Quebec society.

A long period of reduced coverage followed the initial shock wave of August 2012. The question of the Charter, which is being developed by the government in cabinet meetings and within the newly formed ministry of Democratic Institutions and Citizen Participation (Lebel 2016), somewhat recedes from news coverage. Over this six-month period, the few articles dedicated to the issue will address it indirectly, in coverage of other social questions associated to diversity and identity, notably processes of immigration integration, secularism and the religious neutrality of the State, or fears expressed by the minority of English-speaking Quebecers regarding the Charter project. The sparse news coverage mostly mentions the Charter when highlighting the apparent difficulties a minority PQ government will face in trying to pass this piece of legislation in the National Assembly.

In May 2013, a second wave of coverage was launched when the minister in charge of the Charter, Bernard Drainville, announced that parliamentary debate on the proposed legislation would be postponed to the fall parliamentary session. During this period, numerous news items mentioned the past crisis of reasonable accommodation and depicted the upcoming Charter as a possible solution to end the administrative practices in public services that caused so many polarizing reactions in 2006 and 2007. Additional coverage was also dedicated to the question of secularism and religious neutrality of the state, a theme introduced by the press during the preceding quiet
period. Finally, this second wave saw an increase in commentary and op-ed coverage, with fifty-two per cent of all news items dedicated to the question of Charter being written from a critical or analytical point of view.

The most impressive wave of coverage hit Quebec from September to December of 2013, with 3,385 news items published in the thirteen dailies. The period began with the official presentation by Premier Marois and Minister Drainville on 9 September of the first draft of the bill to be introduced in the National Assembly. The data gathered from our sample of news items reveal that fifty-six per cent of articles are hard news and forty-four per cent op-ed pieces. Numerous articles focused on explaining the dispositions of the Charter and the scope of its application. News organizations also relayed the positions and opinions of socio-political actors and organizations regarding the Charter project, hence ‘creating’, ‘producing’, or ‘driving’ novel news content derived from the presentation of the Charter itself.

The important magnitude of this wave might be explained by the fact that the Charter of Values finally came to fruition. From a vague idea presented as an election promise, it was officialized and became concrete with the presentation of the first draft of the bill. At this stage, the public was already aware of the project because the previous media waves had introduced negative and positive frames towards the idea of a Charter. However, this new massive wave was fuelled by an actual political event, the official presentation of the dispositions and rules to be enacted by the Charter and outlined in the bill. The combination of these two factors (a ‘non-event’ that has already been framed by the media and a real political event) might explain why the issue reached such a high level of coverage.

Our initial media tsunami model stated that waves would gain in force and magnitude from one to the next. This is not precisely the situation we witness in the present case study. However, the fourth and fifth waves of coverage on the chapter are still much stronger that the initial one. Hence, the last phase of this media tsunami may have been less important than the massive third wave that hit in the fall of 2013, but it is still an extremely powerful period of news coverage with 754 news items in January 2014 and 728 articles published in May 2014. The fourth massive surf corresponds to the coverage dedicated to the public hearings in parliamentary committee on the Charter project. The consultation was initiated by the government to provide citizens and organizations with a forum to share their opinions on the project. Our data indicate that sixty-five per cent of articles were factual in nature during the fourth wave. Once again, coverage was massively focused on presenting the points of views and positions defended by the participants to the government consultation.
The final wave coincides with coverage of the election called by Premier Marois on 5 March 2014. Her party tried to prime the Charter as the ballot issue. During the next thirty-five days, coverage of the topic focused largely on the decision of the minority PQ government to call the election to get the majority of seats it needed to get the Charter passed in the National Assembly. In other words, the Charter was not discussed so much as an issue in itself, but rather as an electoral strategy. Coverage in this period seems again to be largely factual, with seventy-five per cent of items in our random sample being hard news in content. Coverage mentions the Charter as an electoral issue of importance for the PQ, but also refers to numerous polls gauging public support during the campaign for the proposed Charter.

Discussion

Our analysis of the different waves of coverage dedicated to the project of a Charter on secularism reveals another example of a media tsunami on an issue of national identity and diversity in Quebec. However, in this case, the tsunami was driven initially by the electoral agenda of a political party. Contrary to the reasonable accommodation debate of 2006-2007, which had largely been the creation of the media, this new episode in contemporary identity politics was driven by politicians, largely for electoral gains. Throughout the process, the PQ was the catalyst for the tsunami: each wave was associated with the coverage of an announcement or event the party willingly, and strategically, initiated.

However, as Figure 7.2 indicates, coverage went well beyond those scripted partisan events and proposals. The vast majority of news items coded for this project (ninety per cent) did not have the Charter as their central focus. They referred to it contextually as one component of other broader social themes. In doing so, the media used the issue of the Charter to produce news, which confirms our theoretical model. Only ten per cent of the coded content focused precisely on the dispositions of the Charter project and its implementation. Rather, we found that coverage focused dominantly on three broader themes:

1. The Charter as an electoral instrument (233 items, 11%)
2. Opposition to the Charter (167 items, 9%)
3. Management of socio-cultural diversity in Quebec (163 items, 8%).

The tsunami may have been driven by partisan events and politicians’ actions, but these numbers indicate that the media quickly put them
aside to generate coverage on other related socio-political issues and the reactions they generated in civil society. The PQ’s project of a Charter of Values was but one element in a much broader conversation on diversity and identity in province. Of course, one can argue that the coverage of the debate was quite heterogeneous because the media presented different points of view regarding the Charter. Some news articles framed the Charter as legitimate, but others depicted it as a dangerous political fabrication instrumentalized by a populist formation for electoral gain. However, we think that the coverage of this issue remained very homogeneous in terms of the density and the magnitude of articles observed throughout all media outlets. Although the traditional media hype hypothesis poses that there is little coverage dedicated to dissent during a media wave, we believe that, in this instance, the vast amount of news items covering issues indirectly related to the Charter may have created an amplified and erroneous public impression that Quebec was experimenting yet another social crisis over diversity and identity. In other words, those massive news waves, reporting events, opinions and incidents often affiliated but rarely directly related to the Charter contributed primarily to the impression that a social crisis regarding the management of cultural and religious diversity was actually happening in Quebec. Hence, throughout this massive media coverage, the actual Charter project is not just depicted as an issue on its own, but rather as the solution to an important ongoing ‘problem’ of reasonable accommodation practices.
As we have stated in our previous analyses of the reasonable accommodation debate:

In fact, what the media tsunami model reveals, is that the media can contribute, by bringing public attention on an emergent issue through a massive and homogeneous coverage over a short period of time, to generate in a population the impression that major social crisis is developing. Prior social conditions such as apprehensions, prejudice or ignorance may also contribute to the creation of social crises. However, through their coverage of events, media outlets can trigger these conditions and become catalysts and drivers of these crises (translated from Giasson, Brin & Sauvageau 2010a: 439).

**Conclusion**

Our analysis of the news coverage dedicated by all thirteen Quebec dailies to the Parti Québécois project of a Charter on secular values confirms the media tsunami hypothesis. Five waves of coverage were identified from August 2012 to April 2014, and as the model predicts, each wave that followed the initial shock was larger than the first. Coverage was concentrated and massive across all media organizations.

Considering this characterization of how the Charter story played out in the media, what are the social consequences of such a phenomenon? In his model of media hypes, Vasterman (2005: 509-510) outlines four negative repercussions of media amplification for the quality and diversity of information available to citizens. Firstly, he notes that the coverage dedicated to an issue is disproportionate in comparison to its actual relevance and newsworthiness. The media therefore focuses an undue attention to certain issues and create an inflated coverage that is not supported by actual events. Secondly, the amplified coverage of an event ends up not being dedicated to facts and current events, but rather to a parallel reality made of similar past cases and reactions to coverage. In doing so, the media feed and create the event themselves and stop covering factual situations. Something we witness also in this study by the large coverage dedicated to indirect issues the media associated to the Charter. The third problem Vasterman relates to media amplification is the disconnection between the massive proportion of coverage given to incidents reported in the news and the actual number of incidents happening in real life. Hence, any event of a similar nature to a reported incident is given ample media attention, which contributes
to the public impression that an important social problem is developing. Finally, the ultimate consequence, resulting from the previous three, is that media amplification artificially manufactures social crises: ‘The media themselves play a central role in the development of the event, the issue, the social problem or the scandal, because they create this massive news wave, which has all kinds of consequences for the social actors involved’ (Vasterman, 2005: 510).

These four social consequences of media amplification become even more problematic when considering media effects on public opinion formation. Since the 1960s, numerous studies have established important media effects on public opinion (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Iyengar & Kinder, 1988; Patterson, 1993; Entman, 2004). According to Zaller (1992, 2003), citizens neither have the time, the competence, nor the means to keep informed of public issues being debated and to evaluate the quality of the information they may be exposed to. According to Zaller’s burglar alarm model, citizens will therefore surf the wave and turn their attention to the events that make the most noise in the media. Their critical assessment of issues – and of the news coverage of events – is limited and they will therefore assimilate the dominant elite discourses presented to them by the press. Zaller reminds his readers of the importance for citizens to have access to diverse news sources that provides in-depth analysis of events to limit the domination of elites. However, the media also depend on elite sources to gather information. In conjunction with the sense of false reality created by media amplification, the quality of information that citizens get access to is definitely far from ideal. In his critique of Zaller’s model, Bennett poses that media amplification is actually the journalistic norm, thus presenting a deformed image of reality to the public: ‘The news, in fact, is sounding burglar alarms all the time’ (2003: 131). If the media is sounding the alarm constantly by amplifying coverage, how can citizens recognize important issues and turn their limited attention to them? Furthermore, if the press depicts events according to a single, uniform frame and by marginalizing minority opinions, the public will have difficulty evaluating properly how events unfold and making enlightened decisions. In the event of a media hype or a media tsunami, citizens are faced with a truncated image of reality. Therefore, the news media, the societal watchdog, does not present them with useful, true, verified and diversified information (Vasterman, 2005: 525-526).

In Quebec, from August 2012 to April 2014, the province’s daily newspapers generated a media tsunami when covering the PQ’s proposed Charter of secular values. They produced a homogeneous coverage mostly focused on the archetypal images of turbans, hijabs, and kippot worn in public services,
which represented the menace of immigration on the French-speaking (and of Catholic descent) Quebec majority. They mostly covered the Charter project indirectly with a broader focus on issues of diversity management and of national identity. They also framed the Charter as either a solution to the reasonable accommodation ‘problem’ or as an electoral instrument for the Parti Québécois. Commentary from columnists and pundits were abundant, but the coverage mostly presented the reactions and opinions of citizens, political actors, and organizations on the project.

Our analysis helped identify the coverage components related to the project of a Charter of secular values. However, we did not study the impact of the media tsunami on the formation of public opinion regarding the proposed Charter. Still, based on Vasterman’s conclusions, one could argue that Quebec’s daily newspapers may have contributed to the public perception on this emergent issue, often remote from the daily lives of the average Quebecker, especially outside the Montreal area where the province’s immigrant population is largely concentrated. Following the previous media tsunami over reasonable accommodation practices in 2006-2007, which had clearly raised a crisis of perception over the issue of cultural diversity in the province, this new episode of media amplification presented Quebeckers yet again with the impression that there was indeed a significant problem with diversity that the Charter could alleviate.

Using for the second time a case study associated with an issue of diversity and identity, we confirm our media tsunami hypothesis. But what are the variables that contribute to the manifestation of this sort of media amplification process? Why are journalists turning their attention so massively and uniformly towards specific social issues? According to Vasterman (2005; Vasterman et al., 2005), the nature of events does not explain why media hypes are triggered. As other cases studied in this volume indicate, some amplification concerns mundane incidents such as isolated cases of violence while other hypes focus on exceptional events, such as natural disasters or pandemics. However, building on conclusions from previous studies on priming and agenda-setting effects of the media (Entman, 2004; Iyengar & Kinder, 1988; Soroka, 2002, 2006) or on gatekeeping and news selection procedures (White, 1950; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Shoemaker et al., 2001; Cassidy, 2006), we believe on the contrary that media amplification processes, such as media tsunamis, will be triggered by extraordinary events and issues breaking from the daily experience of reporters and their publics, and that appear to question – some would say endanger – institutions, social order or basic needs in the population, such as physical security or integrity.
Both the issues of reasonable accommodation and of the Charter of secular values, that were largely framed by the press in Quebec as issues of diversity and identity, fall in this category of ‘threatening’ social issues. Prior studies on media waves were carried on cases of violence (Fishman, 1978; Brosius & Eps, 1995; Vasterman, 2005) and of sanitary crises, terrorism acts or natural disasters (Vasterman et al., 2005). These events and issues are all directly related to those primary needs of individuals and may trigger very strong emotional and psychological reactions. In his controversial 2007 article, Robert Putnam stated that diversity and cultural pluralism in post-industrial democracies presented challenges to social solidarity by stimulating mistrust in both host and immigrant populations. This climate of social malaise could also be considered as a priming condition to media amplification. It may become especially salient in culturally homogeneous societies such as Quebec, where the majority of the population shares a common heritage, yet remains a minority group within the larger North American geopolitical ensemble. Therefore, the issues of reasonable accommodation and of the project of a Charter of secular values were not only confronting the French majority in Quebec to issues of diversity and immigration integration. They may have also stimulated historic fears of cultural endangerment related to its minority status and the survival of a French society in North America.

By lifting the veil on the coverage dedicated to the project of a Charter of secular values in Quebec, this study contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics of media amplification. However, we believe further analyses of other instances of media tsunamis could help advance knowledge on the nature of incidents, events and issues that contribute to the manifestation of this model of journalistic coverage.

Notes

1. We studied news items published in all thirteen daily newspapers in Quebec. Six are owned by Groupe Capitales Médias (Le Soleil, Le Quotidien, Le Nouvelliste, La Voix de l’Est, La Tribune et Le Droit) and are published in major urban centres outside of Montréal. La Presse is owned by Gesca and is published in Montréal, the largest city in the province. Three are owned by Québecor Media (Le Journal de Montréal, Le Journal de Québec as well as the free daily 24h, distributed in public transit in Montréal). Montréal’s English daily The Gazette is owned by Postmedia. Le Devoir is an independent daily produced in Montréal and distributed across the province. Finally, Métro, is a free daily provided to commuters in the greater Montreal area and is owned by Transcontinental.
2. Although it may be difficult to identify all of the variables explaining the
PQ’s electoral defeat of 2014, many commentators and political analysts did
not relate it to the Charter of secular values. Some have rather pointed to
the perspective of a potential third referendum on Quebec’s independence
– a possibility when this political party forms government – that would have
scared voters away from the PQ (see Bock-Côté, 2014; Noël, 2014; Pelletier,
2014).

3. It could be argued that the previous public debate over reasonable accom-
modation, and especially the intense media coverage that was dedicated to
it, could have contributed just as equally to bringing public attention to this
question of diversity.

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