

The McMaster Journal of Communication
Vol 12 No 2
2020

The value of agenda-setting in media relations:
Examining how the Business Community Anti-
Poverty Initiative used agenda-setting to
leverage its role as a policy actor in New
Brunswick's 2014 provincial election

Claire Ryan, MCM, APR

McMaster University

Copyright ©
2020 by the author.

The McMaster Journal of Communication is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press
(bepress).

<http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/mjc>

The value of agenda-setting in media relations: Examining how the Business Community Anti- Poverty Initiative used agenda-setting to leverage its role as a policy actor in New Brunswick's 2014 provincial election

Claire Ryan, MCM, APR¹
McMaster University

Abstract

This case study explores how and to what extent the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI), in Saint John, New Brunswick, used agenda-setting in media relations leading up to the 2014 provincial election. Research, including interviews with three people involved with BAPI, a literature review, an analysis of media coverage, and a review of BAPI's strategy, indicated that BAPI proactively engaged the provincial daily print newspaper, the *Telegraph-Journal*, to help influence party platforms and public interest on poverty reduction and ultimately received \$300,000 in provincial funding for its initiatives.

Keywords: media relations, agenda-setting, policy actors, framing, elections

¹ Alum from the Master of Communications Management program at McMaster University. E-mail: lclaireryan@gmail.com

The value of agenda-setting in media relations: Examining how the Business Community Anti- Poverty Initiative used agenda-setting to leverage its role as a policy actor in New Brunswick's 2014 provincial election

Claire Ryan, MCM, APR
McMaster University

Background

Before examining the extent to which the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI) used agenda-setting in media relations to leverage its role as a policy actor in the conversation on poverty reduction, it is important to first set the stage with regards to the socio-economic landscape in which it operates, in Saint John, New Brunswick.

New Brunswick is a province of approximately 750,000 residents and Saint John is the largest city, with a population of approximately 127,000 (Statistics Canada, 2012). In 2014, Saint John had the highest rate of child poverty in the province, with 28% of children under the age of 17 living in poverty, which is higher than the provincial and national averages (BCAPI, 2014). The impact of poverty reaches far beyond those living below the poverty line. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives estimates that poverty costs the New Brunswick government approximately \$500,000,000 each year (MacEwen & Saulnier, 2011).

BCAPI is a non-profit, charitable organization that was established by Saint John business leaders in 1997 as “a catalyst for change, leveraging the skills, resources, and influence of its members and partners to help change the outcomes for those living in a cycle of poverty” (BCAPI, History section, para. 3). BAPI has one full-time staff coordinator and volunteers who sit on a leadership team that includes some of New Brunswick's most successful and high-profile business leaders.

BCAPI coordinates a number of initiatives that focus on breaking the cycle of poverty, closing the education gap, and providing affordable housing (BCAPI, 2014). It has three areas of focus: “adequate and comprehensive early childhood education and care; programs that

successfully drive high school completion; ensuring adequate, quality, comprehensive and sustainable after school programs” (Deloitte, 2011, p. 1).

The profile and influence of BCAPI’s executive and leadership team positions the organization to act as a policy actor and to use agenda-setting in its media outreach to bring increased awareness to issues surrounding the high percentage of poverty to the broader community and all three levels of government (Deloitte, 2001). According to BCAPI, “the level of BCAPI engagement of local business leaders in the issues has caused other cities, governments and non-profits from across Canada to pay attention” (BCAPI, History section, para. 7). To this end, in the *Report on Future Roles and Areas of Focus* (Deloitte, 2011) it was recommended that “BCAPI play three important roles: influencer, informer and facilitator” (p. 4). Further, the report articulated that, in the role of influencer, BCAPI could “act as a catalyst; influence use of integrated, comprehensive models; influence government policy; influence attitudinal change” (p.4).

To this end, in advance of New Brunswick’s 2014 provincial election, BCAPI (2014) developed a *Pre-election Poverty & Education Awareness Strategy* to:

Shape the pre-election conversation by launching a sustained awareness campaign which is designed to keep the issues of poverty and the education gap top of mind among officials, candidates, and the general public by leveraging *Key Opinion Leaders* and the *Media* ...with a goal to “ensure elected officials and other party candidates make *Poverty Reduction Through Closing the Education Achievement Gap* a party platform priority” [italics in original] (p. 1).

Coombs and Holladay (2012) discuss how corporations have taken cues from various activists’ movements over the years. In the case of BCAPI, the leadership team, which represents private and public companies in technology, manufacturing, energy, and others, are lending their corporate credibility to “activist actions designed to seek societal change” (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 347). In particular, BCAPI relies on agenda-setting by having members of its executive and leadership team act as advocates and spokespeople in the media as a means to influence public opinion and build awareness. In doing so, BCAPI is also able to frame the agenda to support its objectives.

The methodology for examining the value of media relations for BCAPI was informed by the literature review below, which looks at some of the theories and concepts in media relations.

Literature Review

Media Relations and Information Subsidies

Media relations is a part of the public relations function for most practitioners and public relations departments within organizations. Its history extends nearly as long as the practice of public relations itself, and it remains a role that is most commonly associated with the practice. Modern media relations can be traced to the rise in publicity and the role of one-way press agent in the last century (Zoch & Molleda, 2006). This case study will examine how a non-profit, which relies largely on a volunteer communications committee to carry out its public relations

function, developed and executed a media relations campaign to help it meet its communications objectives.

Zoch & Molleda (2006) define media relations as:

An active process in which the public relations practitioner has, at the least, a modicum of control over the message she wishes to reach the public, it's[sic] timing, the source of that information, and the effect on the media agenda of the issue presented. (p. 280).

The role of the public relations practitioner in media relations can take many forms, but one central theme is the creation and distribution of information subsidies, which are "prepackaged information to promote an organization's viewpoint on issues, and to communicate aspects of interest within those issues, to internal and external publics" (Zoch & Molleda, 2006, p. 284). When information subsidies are proactively available, they can easily become part of a journalist's newsgathering process, but there are implications to both the organization providing the information subsidy and the media outlets that receive it. In particular, information subsidies can impact the amount of time and energy required of the media to report on an issue, which is especially pertinent when acknowledging that, in some newsrooms, resources are being stretched in attempts to accommodate the increased demand for news content (Zoch & Molleda, 2006). Organizations and public relations practitioners working on their behalf can use information subsidies to help build relationships in the newsroom, which can subsequently impact an organization's ability to influence the agenda. According to Zoch and Molleda (2006):

Researchers have found that when sources of information (in this case public relations practitioners), reporters, and editors cultivate personal relationships with a high level of interpersonal contact based on similar approaches to news values, professional standards, and education level, the impact of those sources on the agenda-building process is greater. (p. 290).

Agenda-Setting in Media Relations

There is a large body of scholarly research on agenda-setting, much of which builds on the theory that was first outlined by McCombs and Shaw in their 1972 study, *The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media*. The study examined the interactions between the media agenda and the public agenda during the 1968 American presidential campaign. It focused on media coverage and voter perspectives in the town of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and hypothesized that "the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes towards the political issue" (p. 177). McCombs and Shaw (1972) explain that the use of the term, salience, reflects the psychological aspects associated with looking at how a person's perspectives or behaviours may be influenced. Issues find their way onto the political agenda in any number of ways, but oftentimes the media will play a role in facilitating the evolution of an issue to the extent that it influences public policy.

According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), "most of what people know comes to them 'second' or 'third' hand from the mass media or other people" (p. 176), thus the theory of agenda-setting helps to explain how people form their perspectives. The theory highlights the centrality of the media's role in deciding what aspects are most salient to cover, and its corresponding impact on the audience and the evolution of the public agenda.

The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media study yielded findings that have gone on to shape the research on agenda-setting, but there is also value in the methodology they used to arrive at their conclusions. McCombs and Shaw (1972) collected and analyzed data through questionnaires distributed to voters in Chapel Hill, which they cross-referenced against the media coverage of major news items from nine media outlets. They found that “the media appear to have exerted a considerable impact on voters’ judgments of what they considered the major issues of the campaign” (p. 180).

Since then, agenda-setting is generally understood to be “the transfer of issue salience from the news media to the public agenda” (McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 2014, p. 787). This explanation appears across the literature on agenda-setting that has been created since McCombs and Shaw’s original study in 1972. These scholars also continued to conduct research and build upon this theory in the decades that followed as more modern mediums of communication have become available and considered mainstream.

People now have a wealth of choice about when, how, and where they consume their news, and options now exist for those consumers to tailor the way they learn about the world. Nearly 50 years after this study in Chapel Hill, McCombs et al. (2014) reflected on how the theory of agenda-setting has evolved and the directions that scholars who are currently researching the issue have taken. Over the decades, agenda-setting has become a much more fully formed theory of communication with different facets. While the body of agenda-setting research has grown considerably, its core concepts continue to be “an object agenda, attribute agenda, and the transfer of salience between pairs of agendas” (McCombs et al., 2014, p. 783) though the operational definitions of each vary across the literature.

It is worth noting that although there is a great deal of research available and the definition above is generally accepted by scholars, the body of literature on agenda-setting is complex, and spans disciplines and professions, including: communications, journalism, psychology, and social sciences, and includes many contradictory theories and hypothesis.

In terms of how an agenda is set, one must consider the number of decisions that are made along the way when an issue is communicated to the public via the media. How an issue eventually becomes news reported by the media is only one facet on the agenda-setting continuum. Further, the processes by which agendas are set have changed with the evolution of the media landscape since the concept was originally introduced. McCombs has continued to study agenda-setting and now describes it to be “a series of levels or phases” (Zoch & Molleda, 2006, p. 288). Reporters and editors have an important role in deciding what to report on and how to communicate the story, but they are often working with information first provided to them by other actors, which can at times be traced back to how an organization or public relations practitioner engages in media relations (Zoch & Molleda, 2006).

Corbett and Mori developed a dynamic model for agenda-setting in their 1999 study, *Medicine, Media, and Celebrities: New Coverage of Breast Cancer, 1960-1995*, that is in line with McCombs’ perspective on the phased approach of agenda-setting. Zoch and Molleda (2006) summarize the Circular Relationship Theory model into four phases: “issues arise in society, interest groups become involved and take positions regarding those issues, interest groups influence the news media and the public, the news media’s coverage influences the public,

interest groups, and politicians” (p. 289). This model is a lens through which to consider how BCAPI’s pre-election media relations strategy used agenda-setting to advance its cause.

Further, Corbett and Mori (1999) see the media as “an integrated part of the overall social system, dependent on the cooperation of other institutions within for news” (p. 229). BCAPI fits well within this framework as it was established as a mechanism for the business community to address the issue of poverty in Saint John, N.B. Between the initiatives it oversees and the prominent profile of many of the people involved, BCAPI is able to influence both the news media and the public. Through its media relations activities in advance of the 2014 election, BCAPI attempted to influence the agenda on poverty reduction through the media.

Framing

Subsequent to the evolution of the agenda-setting theory there has also been a significant body of research developed around the concept of framing. The media frame, as described by Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, and Ghanem (1991), is “the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (p. 3). McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (1997) explain it as an extension of agenda-setting, also considered by some as “second-level agenda-setting” (Scheufele, 1999, p. 103). According to Eissler, Russell, and Jones (2014):

Thus, media create and frame public perceptions regarding social problems, and the political agenda space is built on those realities, which are again perpetuated by the media agenda. This cyclical relationship highlights the inextricable place media have in the agenda-setting process. (p. S78).

There has been a surge in the area of framing in the last two decades as they can be applied in many different ways. In the case of BCAPI’s pre-election strategy, poverty was framed as an economic issue that carries costly long-term consequences and requires significant investment in early interventions to be addressed. According to Zoch and Molleda (2006), “framing a message involves an active decision about the information to include or exclude, to emphasize or elaborate on, to evaluate or interpret” (p. 291). There are countless frames through which one could look at poverty; in choosing the economic impact, BCAPI was then able to use that as the central theme across all of the information subsidies that were subsequently created.

Framing can influence the outcomes of agenda-setting in that the individual or outlet that distributes the message also plays a role in determining what the most salient points will be, which then influences the agenda. The initial frames are often presented by policy actors, who are described by Adsanger and Smiley (1998) as “entities – such as government agencies, large corporations, elite professional organizations, and even citizen-activists – who are outside the media, but, because of their size and influence, also possess the ability to intervene in the production of news” (as cited in Zoch & Molleda, 2006, p. 283).

In terms of understanding how frames affect the media, Scheufele (1999) breaks framing into three subsections: frame building, frame setting, and the individual level “consequences” of framing (p. 307). Frame building refers to the factors that influence media frames; Scheufele lists five factors of influence: “social norms and values, organizational pressures and constraints, pressures of interest groups, journalistic routines, and ideological or political orientations of

journalists” (p. 307). Frame setting occurs when a public issue moves through the media to the audience, though the relationship between the two is dependent on the issue at hand, and the degree to which they are salient to the audience. The individual-level consequences of framing are the reactions or responses of the individuals who are consumers of the news, which can “potentially influence the motivation for individuals to support these movements or to form consensus” (p. 308). In this context, frames are considered to be an extension of agenda-setting that defines which attributes of an issue are eventually included in the news coverage (Scheuefele, 1999).

When it comes to a social issue that is as broad as poverty and poverty reduction, there can be any number of approaches the news media can take to frame the issue, including decisions on how and to what extent to include the perspectives of certain policy actors. According to McCombs and Shaw (1993), “The news can document the scope of social problems, critique alternative proposals for coping with problems, or focus on the tactical efforts of activities and government officials to cope with problems” (p. 62). Public relations practitioners have a role to play in this process, as they are often responsible for providing or withholding information, suggesting sources, or providing additional resources that may help shape the news story and could ultimately influence how the public thinks about the issue.

The Role of Policy Actors in Media Relations

The value of media relations as a means for communicating with stakeholders and influencing public policy is especially relevant for non-profit organizations and in particular, those that lack the financial or human resources for formalized public relations support (Motion & Weaver, 2006). This is the scenario at BCAPI, even though many members of its executive and leadership team represent companies that do have a dedicated public relations function (BCAPI, 2014, Executive section). The size and prominence of the organizations that are represented around the BCAPI table, coupled with the public profile of many of its executives, suggests that members of the executive and leadership team could already have their relationships with local media which can also be interpreted as possible additional access points to advance BCAPI’s objectives and positions.

Earned media can be a powerful way to disseminate a message, generate interest and awareness, and build support for an issue. According to Kiouisis, Popescu, and Mitrook (2004) “public relations activities and programs can contribute to the salience of business news and its subsequent influence on public opinion” (p. 150). BCAPI uses media relations as a tool to communicate its message to the public on the economic impact of multi-generational poverty, and, in doing so, ensure that the issue of poverty reduction remains a part of public policy discourse in New Brunswick. In rolling out its pre-election media campaign, BCAPI used both agenda-setting and framing as it executed a media relations campaign to push political parties to address poverty reduction in their election platforms.

Method

This case study explored how media relations fit into BCAPI’s broader public relations strategy, how it uses agenda-setting in media relations, and to what extent it leveraged its role as a policy actor in New Brunswick during the 2014 provincial election. The case study was guided by three research questions.

RQ1: How and to what extent is media relations a part of a broader public relations strategy for BCAPI?

This question aimed to understand how media relations, and BCAPI's pre-election strategy in particular, fit into a broader strategy for how the organization can fill the roles of influencers, informers, and facilitators (Deloitte, 2011) on issues of poverty reduction in Saint John and New Brunswick.

RQ2: How and to what extent does the influence of its leadership team affect BCAPI's ability to proactively engage in agenda-setting through its pre-election media strategy?

This question aimed to understand how the individuals who as part of BCAPI's leadership team, were able to lend their personal profile and credibility to the implementation of this strategy. This question explored to what degree members of the leadership team were involved in the strategy development and execution, and how much their involvement affected the outcomes.

RQ3: How and to what extent did BCAPI's pre-election media strategy enable the organization to influence the policy agendas for political parties in New Brunswick during the 2014 provincial election?

This question explored how or to what extent BCAPI was able to achieve the outcomes set out in the pre-election strategy, and specifically whether or not poverty reduction was addressed in the provincial party platforms, or if any subsequent changes to funding or policy have been implemented since the election in September 2014.

Data Collection

This study used three data collection procedures: interviews, documentation, and archival material. The documentation will include strategies and content developed by BCAPI's executive and the communications committee, proposals and reports provided to BCAPI by external partners and consultants, content developed to support the organization's media relation efforts, and news coverage from the *Telegraph-Journal* for the six months leading up to and immediately following the provincial election, which occurred on September 22, 2014. This data was used to "corroborate and augment evidence from other sources" (Yin, 2014, p. 107).

Archival records included the election platforms for the New Brunswick Liberal Party, the Progressive Conservative Party of New Brunswick, and the New Brunswick New Democratic Party; reports and public information from the Government of New Brunswick related to its poverty reduction strategies and funding announcements; and information from Statistics Canada and economic development organizations. This will help illustrate the socio-economic environment in which BCAPI operates and may offer clues on conditions within that environment that may have been conducive or constructive to BCAPI's pre-election media campaign. Lastly, interviews were conducted with three people who have been involved with BCAPI in three different capacities:

1. Monica Chaperlin, BCAPI's staff coordinator and only staff member.

2. Sheri Somerville, member of the executive and communications chair.
3. Gary Lawson, member of the leadership team and past chairman.

Interview Questions

1. How would you describe BCAPI's approach to communicating with stakeholders and the public?
2. Who is responsible for the development and execution of communications strategies and/or media relations?
3. To what degree is media relations part of BCAPI's broader communications strategy?
4. To what degree does BCAPI work with other non-profit organizations in the poverty-reduction space to coordinate communications efforts?
5. How would you describe BCAPI's role as a policy actor in the dialogue on poverty reduction in Saint John?
6. Does BCAPI typically develop communications strategies during election periods? For municipal, provincial, federal, or all?
7. How does BCAPI evaluate the success of media relations within its broader communications strategy?
8. How would you describe the role BCAPI plays in public policy related to poverty reduction at the provincial level?
9. To what extent does BCAPI's leadership provide input on the organization's overall communication strategy?
10. To what extent does the leadership team participate in defining how BCAPI will set the agenda on poverty reduction discourse through proactive media relations?
11. To what extent was the BCAPI leadership team involved in the direction of the pre-election media relations strategy?
12. Were any additional resources used to provide counsel on the strategy or develop content?
13. To what extent was the editorial team at the *Telegraph-Journal* proactively engaged in or made aware of or engaged in BCAPI's media strategy?
14. Please describe the approach BCAPI took in developing its pre-election media strategy.
15. What, if any, was the response from local candidates with regards to BCAPI's earned media in the *Telegraph-Journal* leading up to the election?
16. Would you describe your pre-election media strategy as successful? How or why?
17. How and to what extent did the results of this strategy affect BCAPI's approach to media relations in the 2015 federal election?
18. How and to what extent did the outcomes of this strategy impact BCAPI's overall communications objectives?

Data Analysis Techniques

This case study relied on the theoretical framework of agenda-setting, and the concept of framing in particular. The agenda-setting theory examines the way people engage with news through the media, and the way news media affects political life and political participation (Zoch & Molleda, 2006). This case study analyzed the data collected to examine this theory in the context of how a non-profit organization was able to frame the economic consequences of poverty to leverage its role as a policy actor during an election period. The findings are compared to McCombs and Weavers' (1972) early assertions about agenda-setting as well as

McCombs' later viewpoint of agenda-setting "as a series of levels or phases" (Zoch & Molleda, 2006, p. 288) to validate the principles of agenda-setting within BCAPI's pre-election strategy (Yin, 2014).

Results

The qualitative data captured in the interviews addressed how BCAPI saw itself as a policy actor with regards to poverty reduction, its approach to media relations, and its use of agenda-setting in advance of the 2014 provincial election. Documentation, in particular BCAPI's pre-election media strategy and its position paper on closing the education achievement gap, as well as provincial party election platforms and a review of media coverage, added quantifiable details to help determine how and to what extent BCAPI set the agenda on poverty reduction through media relations.

RQ1: How and to what extent is media relations a part of a broader public relations strategy for BCAPI?

BCAPI was founded in 1997, but until recently the organization did not have an organizational approach or intention for using public relations to build its profile or communicate to stakeholders. If anything, the effort was on keeping the organization out of the public eye, despite the profile of the individuals and companies involved. As Gary Lawson recalled, "When we first started, we tried not to communicate at all. We didn't want anyone having expectations about BCAPI or what it could achieve so we stayed away from any media attention."

Over time, the executive began to recognize that there was value in bringing increased attention to issues of poverty and began to deploy certain public relations tactics to generate awareness around issues related to poverty in Saint John, but not on the organization itself. Monica Chaperlin explained, "Our work has always been behind the scenes as much as possible, helping other groups build capacity and then that's what becomes public. Our intention was always to profile poverty reduction, not the organization BCAPI." However, one of the byproducts of this work was the profile of the organization itself, which also began to expand as it was increasingly connected to programs and initiatives in the community.

One of the reasons that BCAPI initially had reservations about engaging in public or media relations was a self-awareness on the part of the executive that, although they were engaged with the issue, they were not experts in poverty reduction. It is common practice for BCAPI to pass media requests to other people or organizations that are better positioned to speak to a particular issue related to poverty. Shifting attention to others when appropriate continues to be part of BCAPI's broader public relations strategy, which as Sheri Somerville explains, "It's about knowing who you need to put in front of the camera or the microphone to get that message across so it resonates with people. And sometimes our partners are the people to do that".

The role of public relations became more formalized in recent years, when Sheri Somerville joined the executive and was appointed communications chair; since then, BCAPI's approach to public relations has grown year over year. Somerville summarized the current approach as "a combination of proactive outreach and advocacy, and leveraging networks of influence. It's just been a process of baby steps, moving forward and figuring out what you need when you need it."

BCAPI's executive, led by the communications chair, develops an annual communications plan, as well as more specific, short-term strategies to address issues or opportunities as they arise, as was the case with the 2014 provincial election. These plans are developed on a case-by-case basis. The communications chair creates these strategies with input from the executive and works with the staff coordinator and external volunteer resources, as required, to execute them.

Generating interest and awareness in poverty reduction priorities continues to be an important component of BICAPI's public relations activities, and all three interview participants emphasized that media relations was an important tactic to achieve this objective. Gary Lawson described the approach as "employing the media for the purpose of getting people aware of poverty issues and bringing a different voice to the table, that of the business community."

In terms of stakeholders, BICAPI considers its target audience group to be those who, according to Chaperlin, "are leading or can influence poverty reduction: fellow business leaders, government decision-makers, and other stakeholders who are driving key pieces of this work." BICAPI works to influence public policy by developing or supporting effective models and programs, which eventually gain some media recognition because of their success, which supports the work being done behind the scenes in meetings with elected officials and senior bureaucrats. These meetings are also an important pillar of BICAPI's communications approach. Chaperlin explained that:

Business thinking is: when you do the R&D, and it works, then you can sell your ware and people will buy it. But that's not the case necessarily with the government. The more people learn, the more you influence leaders and policy leaders to learn, the more they are able to influence change.

When BICAPI is taking a public position, it uses the media to communicate with stakeholders. The reliance on media as a delivery mechanism is such that two of the three interview participants saw media relations and public relations as one and the same, as the organization does not use its website to share news, nor does it have any presence on social media. Lawson used the phrase "employing the media" to explain how BICAPI communicates its message, and often it is the high profiles of the business leaders involved that help secure coverage and reach stakeholders. Somerville explained BICAPI's relationship with media relations:

It's absolutely critical, and one of the primary tenants of what we do. People still use the newspaper as a primary source of media...we know that it works, and we focus on getting stuff out in the news, making it public, making poverty [reduction] a part of the public conversation at points in time.

The other key pillar of BICAPI's public relations activities is face-to-face meetings with its key stakeholders, which are opportunities to reinforce the importance of its poverty reduction priorities. Public relations planning is managed largely by the communications chair and staff coordinator, but all members of the executive and leadership team are engaged in stakeholder meetings. Lawson explained, "They are obviously the foot in the door for when we want to meet with somebody – there are senior players there, who, when they knock on doors, they get answered." Chaperlin explained it further, specific to BICAPI's work during the election

campaign, stating, “There are key people within the leadership who have relationships with politicians or parties, so you used the internal engine where you can. If somebody can make a call and a meeting can be set up, that’s great.”

Though BCAPI relies heavily on media relations, whether the organization is speaking to an issue or directing a request to a partner, there is no process in place to measure the success of the media relations as it relates to its poverty reduction priorities. BCAPI views positive media coverage as a byproduct of achieving good results in terms of the interventions it supports, versus a result in and of itself. Chaperlin stated:

I think our reputation is built on what we accomplish, and so a story or a media thing is maybe a nice addition when people read it...but we haven’t measured the media piece, because it goes back to the fact that BCAPI’s not really concerned with what people think of BCAPI, we’re concerned with what people are thinking and doing about poverty reduction.

The lack of evaluation processes is also connected to the fact that BCAPI is a non-profit organization with limited capacity and resources. Somerville stated, “It’s not a bad thing, it’s a budget thing; it boils down to fiscal possibilities and what’s possible for them [BCAPI] to take on.”

RQ2: How and to what extent does the influence of its leadership team affect BCAPI’s ability to proactively engage in agenda-setting through its pre-election media strategy?

BCAPI describes itself as a catalyst, and the term was mentioned in each of the three interviews. The organization does not view itself as the public face of poverty, or even as a direct service provider, but as a group doing some of the groundwork that is ultimately helpful to other organizations, including fundraising, liaising with government and research.

The 2014 provincial election was the first time BCAPI proactively developed a communications plan specifically focused on an election. The *Pre-election Poverty and Education Awareness Strategy* aimed to:

Shape the pre-election conversation by launching a sustained awareness campaign which is designed to keep the issues of poverty and the education gap top of mind among officials, candidates, and the general public by leveraging key opinion leaders and the media” (BCAPI, 2014, p. 1)

Tactics included stakeholder meetings with party leaders and like-minded community organizations, developing supporting materials (a position paper and presentation slide deck), and a media campaign consisting of “a series of op-eds/commentaries penned by BCAPI and business leaders of influence from throughout the city” (BCAPI, 2014, p. 1).

Similar to its other communications strategies, BCAPI’s executive provided input on the pre-election strategy while it was in development, and it was then presented to the leadership team. It is worthwhile to note that there is a degree of overlap between these two groups, as most of the individuals on the leadership team are past members of the executive, and many continue to be active in BCAPI initiatives.

The goal of BCAPI's pre-election strategy was to "ensure elected officials and other party candidates make *Poverty Reduction Through Closing the Education Achievement Gap* a party platform priority" [italics in original] (BCAPI, 2014, p. 1).

Within the media relations component of this strategy, BCAPI planned a series of op-eds and commentaries that "frames a specific position and is aligned with the interests of *Key Opinion Leader/Leader of Influence*" [italics in original] (BCAPI, 2014, p. 2.). BCAPI engaged the *Telegraph-Journal* before the series launched. Chaperlin explained the approach:

First, we approached the *Telegraph-Journal* about the idea and then I worked with the editors to frame out how the stories would unfold – when they would run and how far apart they would be. Then the editorial board invited the writers to meet with them before the stories actually came out publicly.

BCAPI then engaged two volunteers to write the commentaries, with input and editorial direction from the individuals whose names would appear on the byline. Between August 21, 2014, and September 14, 2014, six op-eds appeared in the *Telegraph-Journal*:

- *Early literacy needs to be championed* - Roxanne Fairweather, President and CEO, Innovatia (August 26, 2014)
- *We cannot afford the cost of poverty* – Tom Gribbons, Vice President, Brand Manager & Associate Portfolio Manager, RBC Wealth, Dominion Securities (August 24, 2014)
- *Closing the gap through education* - Brice Belyea, Board Chair, CANLink Aviation (September 2, 2014)
- *It's about the future of New Brunswick* - Gary Lawson, Partner, Lawson Creamer Lawyers (September 5, 2014)
- *A much-needed community approach* - Paulette Hicks, General Manager, Delta Brunswick (September 9, 2014)
- *Want real prosperity? Intervene really early* - Gerry Pond, Chairman, Mariner Partners Inc. (September 14, 2014)

Proactively engaging the *Telegraph-Journal* was an intentional piece of BCAPI's media relations strategy. Somerville explained the thinking as "knowing the paper would be looking for interesting topics to cover during the election time and leveraging that." Subsequently, these op-eds were only one piece of media coverage on issues of poverty reduction. Other articles and editorials also ran during this period that supported BCAPI's position and brought further profile to its initiatives. Similarly, those business leaders who were participating in the op-ed series were engaged early on and played a large role in their commentaries because, as Somerville stated:

Because they're involved in the planning, they're buying into it, and they're more likely to take action and activate the strategy too. You need those people who are going to put their names on the line and be front and center in the paper to stand behind the messages that they're giving in it, and the strategy behind it, and what we're trying to achieve.

Though BCAPI developed a pre-election education and awareness strategy with the goal of making poverty reduction an election issue, the interview participants were not of the view that BCAPI was in fact a policy actor in terms of influencing government departments or public policy. Rather, as Somerville described, the organization views itself as "a bunch of business

leaders taking a business approach to an everyday problem that the government has to handle.” This is in part because BCAPI’s work is specific to poverty reduction in Saint John, but also because poverty is a complex issue that requires involvement across government departments, as was noted by each of the interview participants.

Where BCAPI has been able to act as a policy actor is in its ability to engage and educate high numbers of people in the community through its association with the business community. The companies that are represented on BCAPI’s executive and on its leadership team include many of the city’s high profile employers, including J.D. Irving, Limited, the University of New Brunswick – Saint John, Bell Aliant, Moosehead Breweries Limited, Mariner Partners, and others (BCAPI, 2014). Chaperlin explained:

I think we’ve made the biggest impact around change within the business organizations who are a part of BCAPI. So if you were to talk about JDI [J.D. Irving, Limited], for example, because Mr. Irving has been a part of this, he’s learned a lot and is invested, and he’s been able to bring the whole business along and it’s something they are really proud of.

BCAPI’s planned approach to setting the agenda through media relations, coupled with the fact that the individuals featured in the commentaries were business leaders and major employers, was helpful to BCAPI as it framed the issue of poverty reduction.

RQ3: How and to what extent did BCAPI’s pre-election media strategy enable the organization to influence the policy agenda for political parties in New Brunswick during the 2014 provincial election?

As outlined in the *Pre-election Poverty & Education Awareness Strategy*, BCAPI initiated a series of stakeholder meetings that took place concurrently with the development and execution of the media relations tactics. These meetings were divided into two categories: (a) meetings with elected officials and senior bureaucrats and (b) meetings with other local stakeholders, the purpose of which were to advise of BCAPI’s intention to roll out a pre-election communications strategy. At the same time, BCAPI distributed a position paper titled *Are We Failing to Prepare Children for Success?* to its broader network. In describing this comprehensive approach, Chaperlin explained, “You want to make sure that all your bases are covered so that people aren’t surprised, and they feel like they’re in the know.”

The position paper was also shared with government officials, specifically the deputy ministers for relevant departments, along with the candidates who were running in greater Saint John. The key meetings were those held with three provincial party leaders: Premier David Alward, leader of the Progress Conservative party; Liberal leader Brian Gallant; and NDP leader Dominic Cardy. These meetings were held in Saint John, and BCAPI’s executive and leadership team were invited to attend as well. All three interview participants felt that these meetings were successful in terms of impact on the party platforms. Somerville stated:

Every single party adjusted its platform and put poverty on their platform where I don’t think it was there before. They got on board fast because they knew it was getting public traction, and where the public goes so will government. At the end of the day if they get a

sense this is something people care about, they're going to make hay about it too if that's going to get them elected.

In describing how the strategy came to be, Somerville connected it to the number of BCAPI programs and, in particular, its Early Learning Centres, which require \$100,000 in provincial funding each year to continue operations. She stated, "It's a constant challenge with BCAPI and other organizations that are fighting for a way to become sustainable. And in this province, sustainability largely will depend on government funding."

In this sense, BCAPI's pre-election strategy did enable the organization to influence the policy agenda for political parties. The Liberals won a majority government in on September 22, 2014, and on October 29, 2014, Premier Brian Gallant announced \$300,000 of provincial funding for three BCAPI projects: The Early Learning Centre, Partners Assisting Local Schools (PALS) and First Steps Housing (Gowan, 2014). BCAPI does not have a formal process for measuring the success of a campaign of this nature, yet all three of the interview participants described the strategy as a success, citing this funding announcement as the benchmark. Somerville described the strategy's success:

The coverage was phenomenal, but really my metric at the end of the day was that we got \$300,000 from the government, which overshot what I thought we'd get. I didn't think we'd get money, I thought we'd get acknowledgment, but for them to take it that one step further shot it over the goal post.

In addition to this funding, there has been progress for BCAPI in terms of its relationship with the provincial government, which Chaperlin credits in part to the effectiveness of the pre-election strategy. She described personal involvement from Premier Gallant, as well as the ministers of Health, Education, and Social Development; she stated, "Those key ministers have been to Saint John often, they know our story, they know who we are, and they're trying to support us." She also mentioned ongoing relationships with deputy ministers and senior bureaucrats from those departments.

The interview participants also felt the strategy was effective in terms of generating public interest on the issue of poverty reduction, which is in turn helpful in keeping it on the government's radar. Lawson stated:

I think it did send the message to the people in the political world that this is an issue that's important to Saint John, and I think that resulted in them listening to us...and that has caused the current government to be committed to trying to eradicate poverty."

Somerville noted that the challenge now is keeping BCAPI's target audience engaged, stating, "The challenge now is continuing to keep it top of mind. We're constantly trying to think of new ways to get ourselves out there and be part of the public discourse."

The success of this strategy has also spurred BCAPI to continue to engage in proactive media relations as a vehicle for communicating with its stakeholders. The communications chair also viewed a spin-off success of the strategy to be that others on the executive and leadership team may be more receptive to participating in future media strategies. She explained, "Media will always be top of mind for us, because it's a primary outlet. We know it works and we have significant executives that we can put out there, and people will listen to them."

Two of the three interview participants also noted that the Member of Parliament for Saint John-Rochesay talked about poverty reduction in his initial remarks to the House of Commons in 2015, which suggested to them that BCAPI's media relations work continued to be effective during the most recent federal election as well.

Discussion

This case study explored the role of media relations in BCAPI's broader public relations strategy; how and to what extent the influence of the leadership team affected BCAPI's ability to proactively engage in agenda-setting in media relations; and how and to what extent BCAPI's pre-election media strategy enabled the organization to influence the policy agenda for political parties during the 2014 provincial election. The research provided insights into how BCAPI used media relations to set an agenda on poverty reduction with their target audiences of decision-makers, elected officials, senior bureaucrats, and partners in the poverty reduction space.

The data gathered in the interview and in reviewing the media coverage suggests that BCAPI did engage in agenda-setting, as "the transfer of issue salience from the news media to the public agenda" (McCombs et al., 2014, p. 787) was evident in BCAPI's pre-election strategy and can be connected to the subsequent funding announcement that occurred shortly after the election.

Further, by meeting with the publisher and editorial board of the *Telegraph-Journal* at the outset, BCAPI used framing to set the tone for news coverage on poverty reduction in addition to the op-eds it was providing to the newspaper. A reporter could take any number of approaches to a story on poverty and poverty reduction, but by providing context and content upfront, BCAPI was giving direction for how the newspaper could provide additional coverage on the issue in addition to—and in support of—the op-ed series BCAPI developed.

The op-eds were also influential in how the organization was able to frame the issue of poverty reduction. In having high-profile business leaders attached to these commentaries, BCAPI framed the issue as one that should be of concern to stakeholders and the public, because of the long-term economic impacts that result in an educational achievement gap and other consequences of intergenerational poverty.

While BCAPI did set the agenda on poverty reduction through media relations, this tactic was deployed at the same time as the members of the executive and leadership team were meeting with provincial party leaders to discuss BCAPI's agenda. Despite BCAPI's position that the organization is a catalyst versus a policy actor, and that the business leaders involved are not experts on poverty reduction, their influence as business leaders helped set the agenda with the editorial board of the *Telegraph-Journal* and access the party leaders for meetings. As Somerville described:

When you've got a leader, who's trying to get himself elected, and you have 10-12 business leaders that run major companies in New Brunswick, you're not going to not listen. When Gerry Pond speaks, people listen. When Mr. Irving speaks, people listen. The key is giving them something to say, and that's exactly what the strategy was.

The influence of the leadership team helped set the agenda in two ways: (a) the profile of the business leaders was used to help line up stakeholder and government meetings that took place in

conjunction with the opinion editorial series, and (b) the business leaders were also in the position to influence others in their respective organizations to get engaged with the issue, increasing awareness of the issue from the bottom up. Gary Lawson summarized how BCAPI framed the issue this way: “The strategy that we had was ‘the only way we’re going to get politicians interested in the subject is if there’s a perception that the voters are interested, so we have to create the perception of the voters being interested. And, at the same time, hopefully, engage the voters on the subject.”

Conclusions and Limitations

This case study sought to determine how and to what extent BCAPI used agenda-setting through media relations to influence public policy during the 2014 provincial election campaign. Interview data revealed that proactive media relations was a key component of BCAPI’s pre-election strategy, and that the organization was very intentional and strategic in its approach to working with the *Telegraph-Journal* and leveraging the profile of its executive members and leadership team to communicate their message.

There were certain limitations to the research, namely that it only looked at one organization and the media coverage from one print publication. Many non-profit organizations and interest groups develop public relations strategies to influence public policy during elections. There would be a benefit to conducting a multi-case study that examined agenda-setting by other organizations working in the poverty reduction space to see if or how their approaches vary. Additionally, as the print media landscape continues to change in Canada, further inquiry into the role of non-profit organizations in providing content and context to editorial boards would be worthwhile.

Other limitations include a limited research and data collection period, as well as a limited number of interviews, as there were other individuals from BCAPI’s executive and leadership team who were involved in the strategy and may have offered additional perspectives. Another limitation was that the *Telegraph-Journal* was not invited to participate in an interview; further study into how the media fit into this strategy would serve as useful research for public relations practitioners seeking to understand how to engage in media relations to further communications objectives.

Despite the limited scope, information gathered from the three interview participants did reveal that though BCAPI’s overall approach to communications is not formalized and continues to evolve, in the case of this election, the organization deployed a strategic approach to media relations to set the agenda on poverty reduction and influence the policy discussion on the issue.

The research did support the original proposition, but other relevant conclusions became apparent over the course of the research: (a) the profile of BCAPI’s executive and leadership was leveraged to set the agenda through media relations, but also to frame the issue of poverty reduction in meetings with stakeholders and government officials; (b) BCAPI was intentional in how it framed the issue of poverty reduction, as the organization met first with the newspaper’s publisher to discuss their strategy, with additional earned media that supported their position as an outcome; (c) media relations is another activity BCAPI can undertake as part of its role as a catalyst to increase public interest in poverty reduction and generate support for programs and initiatives.

References

- Adsager, J., & Smiley, L. (1998). Evaluating the public information: Shaping news coverage of the silicone implant controversy. *Public Relations Review, 24*, 183-201.
- Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative. (n.d.-a). History. Retrieved from <https://www.bcapi.ca/our-history>
- Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative. (n.d.-b). Goals & Priorities. Retrieved from <https://www.bcapi.ca/goals-priorities>
- Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative. (n.d.-c). Poverty Studies. Retrieved from <https://www.bcapi.ca/poverty-studies>
- Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative. (n.d.-d). Executive. Retrieved from <https://www.bcapi.ca/leadership>
- Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative. (April 2014). *Pre-election Poverty & education awareness strategy*. Saint John, NB.
- Cook, F.L., Tyler, T.R., Goetz, E.G., Gordon, M.T., Proress, D., Leff, D.R., & Molotch, H.L. (1983). Media and agenda setting: Effects on the public, interest group leaders, policy makers and policy. *Public Opinion Quarterly 47(1)*, 16-35.
- Coombs, T.W., & Holladay, S.J. (2012). Privileging an activist vs. a corporate view of public relations history in the U.S. *Public Relations Review, 38*, 347-353.
- Corbett, J. B., & Mori, M. (1999). Medicine, Media, and Celebrities: News Coverage of Breast Cancer, 1960-1995. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 76(2)*, 229-249. Retrieved from <http://libaccess.mcmaster.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cms&AN=2338556&site=ehost-live&scope=site>
- Deloitte. (April 2011). *Business community anti-poverty initiative report on future roles and areas of focus*. Retrieved from: <http://bcapi.ca/what-we-do/bcapi-poverty-studies/>
- Eissler, R., Russell, & A., Jones, B.D. (2014). New avenues for the study of agenda setting. *The Policy Studies Journal 42(1)*, s71-s86.
- Gowen, D. (2014, October 24). Province announces \$300,000 grant for anti-poverty initiative. *Telegraph-Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraphjournal.com/telegraph-journal/story/39861714/province-announces-300000-grant>
- Hatfield, R., & O'Connell, J. (2014). A quarter of a century and not much change: 2014 New Brunswick child poverty report card. Human Development Council. [Online]. Available: http://0101.nccdn.net/1_5/340/25a/254/2014-NB-Child-Poverty-Report-Card-English.pdf
- Kingdon, J.W. (1995). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies* (2nd ed.). New York: HarperCollins College.

- Kiouis, S., Popescu, C., & Mitrook, M. (2007). Understanding influence on corporate reputation: An examination of public relations efforts, media coverage, public opinion, and financial performance from an agenda-building and agenda-setting perspective. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 19(2)*, 147-165. doi:10.1080/10627260701290661
- Lecheler, S., & de Vreese, C.H. (2012). News framing and public opinion: A mediation analysis of framing effects on political attitudes. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 89(2)*, 185-204. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1026654495?accountid=12347>
- MacEwen, A., & Saulnier, C. (September 2011). Cost of poverty in New Brunswick. *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/cost-poverty-new-brunswick>
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. *The Public Opinion Quarterly, 36(2)*, 176–187. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2747787>
- McCombs, M.E., & Shaw, D.L. (1993). The Evolution of Agenda-Setting Research: Twenty-Five Years in the Marketplace of Ideas. *Journal of Communications 43(2)*, 58–67. Retrieved from http://resolver.scholarsportal.info/resolve/00219916/v43i0002/58_teartyitmoi.xml
- McCombs, M. E., Shaw, D. L., & Weaver, D. H. (2014). New directions in agenda-setting theory and research. *Mass Communication and Society, 17(6)*, 781-802. doi:10.1080/15205436.2014.964871
- Motion, J., & Weaver, C. K. (2005). The epistemic struggle for credibility: Rethinking media relations. *Journal of Communication Management, 9(3)*, 246-255. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/232934086?accountid=12347>
- Tankard, J., Hendrickson, L., Silberman, J., Bliss, K., & Ghanem, S. (August 1991). Media frames: Approaches to conceptualization and measurement, Paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. *Communication Theory and Methodology Division, Boston, MA*.
- Scheufele, D. (1999). Framing as a theory of media effects. *Journal of Communication, 49(1)*, 103-122. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02784.x
- Statistics Canada. (2012). *Focus on geography series, 2011 Census*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-310-XWE2011004. Ottawa, Ontario. Analytical products, 2011 Census. Last updated October 24, 2012. [Online]. Available: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Facts-pr-eng.cfm?Lang=Eng&GC=13>
- Vibrant Communities Saint John. (August 2014). *A poverty outline for Saint John, NB*. [Online]. Available: http://vibrantcanada.ca/files/a_poverty_outline_for_saint_john_fact_sheets.pdf

- Weaver, D. H. (2007). Thoughts on Agenda Setting, Framing, and Priming. *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), 142-147. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00333.x
- Yin, R.K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Zoch, L.M., & Molleda, J.C. (2006). Building a Theoretical Model of Media Relations Using Framing, Information Subsidies, and Agenda-Building. In Botan, C.H. & Hazleton, V. (Eds). *Public Relations Theory II*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.