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*HRMbyDesign – Media coverage of a planning process*

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PLAN6000 Planning project and seminar  
December 8, 2009



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## HRMbyDesign - Media coverage of a planning process

Tuesday December 8, 2009

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## *Abstract*

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A robust and informed public debate encourages public engagement, which is essential to a successful planning exercise. The media play a vital dual role, reporting on and serving as a forum for, public debate. This paper is a case study of news media coverage of HRMbyDesign, a recently completed urban design study and plan. I analyze the coverage and investigate the forces that shaped it. I collected articles that expressed an attitude towards HRMbyDesign: 221 articles from 12 sources in total. As part of the analysis, I created a matrix of 17 distinct attitudes towards HRMbyDesign, and coded each argument instance. I consulted stakeholders from four groups about their experiences: the HRM planning department, the media, groups critical of HRMbyDesign, and groups supportive of HRMbyDesign. I determine that stakeholders both inside and outside of a planning process can affect the public discourse. This analysis demonstrates the importance of paying attention to media coverage, gives planners an example of the coverage they can expect of their planning process, and illustrates the techniques stakeholders use to affect coverage.



## *Introduction*

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HRMbyDesign is the Regional Centre Urban Design Study initiated by the Halifax Regional Municipality. The study was mandated by the recently completed regional plan. The Regional Centre is designated as the Halifax Peninsula plus the downtown area in the community of Dartmouth defined by the circumferential highway. The HRMbyDesign project began with a request for proposals in January 2006. What followed was an ambitious planning process spanning three years. (HRM, 2009, online).

The goal of HRMbyDesign was to create a comprehensive vision and guidelines that will inform future development in the downtown core. Ambiguous regulations related to development were identified as deterrents to projects of high quality. HRMbyDesign introduced design guidelines and sought to bring clarity and predictability to development processes. These strategies aim to increase the quality of design and development, as well as encourage a vibrant and engaging public realm. (HRM, 2009, online).

Public participation was a large component of the project. Consultation took the shape of public forums. The first forum, focusing on urban design vision and framework, was held September 2006. In December 2006, Forum 2 investigated residential infill case studies. In April 2007, Forum 3 looked at opportunity sites. In September 2007, Forum 4 marked the shift in focus from the entire regional centre to the downtown core of the Halifax Peninsula.

As part of the public participation process, draft versions of these documents were released for public review. The fifth public forum accompanied the release of the first draft of the documents in April 2008.

The study eventually produced four documents: The Downtown Halifax Secondary Municipal Planning Strategy, the Downtown Halifax Land Use By-law and Design Manual, the Barrington Street Heritage Conservation District Revitalization Plan, and the Barrington Street Heritage Conservation District By-law. These documents were adopted by Regional Council on June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

Documents are the typical product of a planning process. Planning documents can be long, filled with jargon, and technical in nature. No matter how well written the documents are, most citizens will not read planning policy, and even fewer will read policy drafts. This represents a hurdle for planners hoping for meaningful public engagement.

The public gets informed through the press. The news media is a mediator between the public and a planning process. This predicament is not unique to planning. Other disciplines, such as the scientific community, grapple with a similar arrangement. Research has shown that most people get their information about environmental issues from the news media (Bengston & Fan, 1999, p. 518). Since planning issues share many characteristics with environmental issues, such as sustainability concerns and public policy initiatives, it is not a big leap to assume that the news media is also the chief source of planning information.

Much can be learned from a detailed analysis of the views, opinions, attitudes, and beliefs expressed in the press. The news media play an important role in shaping public opinion. Most planners will agree that public participation and buy-in are crucial to a successful planning process. Therefore, any contribution to a planner's understanding of how the public sees the planning process will be valuable.

This paper is a case study of the written media coverage of HRMbyDesign. HRMbyDesign makes a great exemplar of a high profile planning process, having been widely reported in local media sources, and recently adopted. I discuss the media's role within a planning process, analyze media coverage of HRMbyDesign, and talk with stakeholders who were part of the process. This investigation demonstrates what issues were important to the public and how the press treated them. Major planning processes are going to get press coverage. Planners should be aware of the media's influence and how the media fosters and reports on the public discourse concerning planning issues.



## *Discussing the news media's role*

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Analyzing the press coverage tells us about the public and about what the press is telling the public. When analyzing the media coverage of the urban sprawl debate, Bengston and his team noted that “The media play a dual role in these debates, serving as a direct forum for public discourse on sprawl (through editorials, letters to the editor, etc.) and reporting on discussions occurring in all other forums” (Bengston, Potts, Fan, & Goetz, 2005, p. 746). Researchers have repeatedly found that media coverage analysis parallels the findings of polls concerning public policy issues (Bengston et al., 2005, p. 474). Bengston and his team look at their analysis of the sprawl debate as much more than just content analysis. It is a “window into the broader social debate and a means to gauge, indirectly, public attitudes and concerns about sprawl” (Bengston et al., 2005, p. 474).

Fan, a researcher who predicts public opinion based on media analysis, reminds us that the importance of media coverage has long been recognized, “as seen in the concept of governmental press censorship, which was invented long ago” (Fan, 1988, p. 3). The news media occupy an important and influential position within a public debate. Their role is to serve as a record and a forum for public debate, and may extend even further. A 1997 study conducted by the American Society of Newspaper Editors found citizens “want newspapers to help them solve problems in their communities and to put energy into identifying solutions as well as problems” (Glasser, 1999, p. xv).

The news media's role in shaping public opinion should be acknowledged by the planning community. Fan's work on public opinion prediction has found that single news stories have little impact on public opinion, but “over the long term, all the effects accumulate and the totality of press messages is capable of being the major influence on opinion. Thus society should realize that individual messages can indeed have minimal effects, but with long-term trends being of great importance (Fan, 1988, p. 3).” For planners engaged in a public process, the implications of the news media on public opinion are great.

## *Method of analysis*

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My method separates into sections: A discourse analysis consisting of a quantitative and qualitative analyses of attitudes expressed in the press, and stakeholder interviews concerning media relations management. The content analysis is separated into two parts. The quantitative section is the starting point. The final phase is the qualitative analysis, examining messages identified in the texts in greater detail.

To perform the quantitative analysis of the content of the news media reports I collected all relevant articles. I chose to study written pieces published between Forum 4 in September 2007, when the process shifted

focus to the downtown core, and the Regional Council vote on June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009. I searched news databases and website archives for articles containing the phrase “HRMbyDesign” or “HRM by Design.” NEWSCAN provided a comprehensive archive of the two local dailies, the Chronicle Herald and the Daily News. The Globe and Mail has their own subscription database. For other media outlets, such as The Coast, a free alternative weekly, and Metro Halifax, a free daily, I searched their websites directly.

In total the database contains 221 unique articles taken from 12 different sources (Table 1).

Source	Articles
Chronicle Herald	118
Daily News	33
Metro Halifax	22
The Coast	17
Allnovascotia.com	10
Nova Scotia Business Journal	8
Business Voice	5
Globe and Mail	3
CBC News	2
Halifax Chamber of Commerce	1
Halifax News Net	1
The Commoner	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>221</i>

*Table 1:* Number of articles published by each source

A systematic way of coding is required to analyze qualitative data. Coding allows me to count the attitudes expressed in the articles. The coding process begins with an argument table categorizing attitudes towards HRMbyDesign expressed in the news media over the study period. Each argument is a view, belief, or attitude that relates to HRMbyDesign. The arguments are themes that came up again and again in the public discourse. Arguments are also grouped into those supportive of HRMbyDesign, and those critical of HRMbyDesign. These arguments are grouped together into thematic categories that ignore positive or negative attitudes towards HRMbyDesign. Creating the argument table was an iterative process, and was updated as the coding process progressed (Table 2).

General category	Supportive (Attitude towards HRMbyDesign)	Critical (Attitude towards HRMbyDesign)
Height		Unacceptable new height limits
Design	Higher quality of urban design	
Heritage	Protection of heritage resources	Unacceptable level of heritage protection
	Acceptable balance between heritage protection and development	
Sustainability	Sustainability: Walkability	Lack of sustainable initiatives
	Sustainability: Densification	
Planning Process	Due process has been followed	Process was flawed
		Too soon, more studies are needed
Development	Old plan is out of date and/or did not work	New plan is unworkable, based on incorrect information
	Plan will encourage new development	Plan will create unaffordable developments
	Create a more predictable, streamlined approval process	Plan will create an undemocratic approval process

*Table 2: HRMbyDesign argument table*

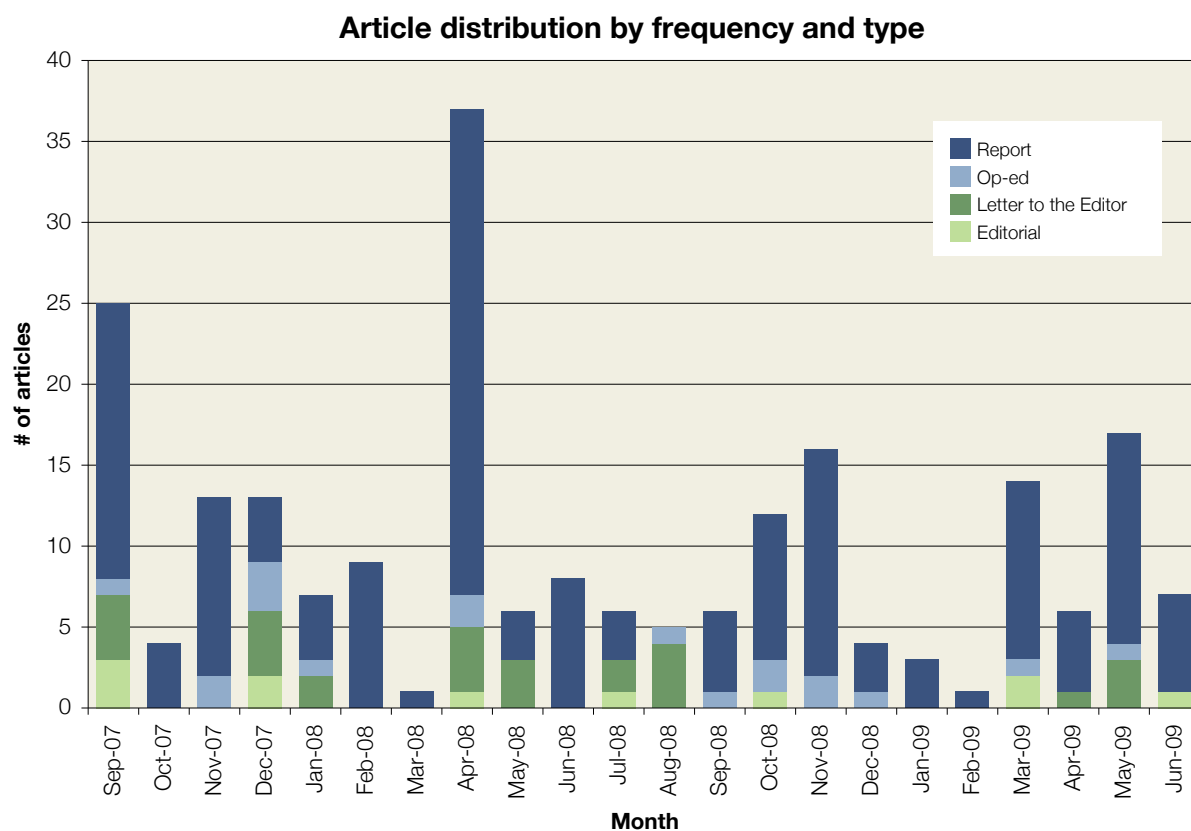
The physical coding was completed using NVIVO 8 qualitative analysis software. As mentioned above, coding rules must be very clear before hand in order to get consistent results. To put it another way, “the coding system must be so objective and so reliable that, once they are trained, individuals from varied backgrounds and orientations will generally agree on its application” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 9). Since I was the only coder, I had to apply my own coding system strictly to all texts.

The interviews are a means to investigate how much interaction took place between stakeholders and the press. Interviewees are questioned about their experiences with the media, what, if any, tactics they employed in an attempt to influence the coverage, and their opinion concerning how important the media is in garnering public support. I do not attempt to prove any correlation between media reporting and public opinion.

Next, the discourse analysis considers the qualitative aspects. The discourse analysis process “aims at

typifying media representations (e.g., communicator motives, ideology)” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 5). This section demonstrates what the media coverage of one issue looked like. Height proved to be a particularly controversial issue. I examine how it was treated through reports, letters to the editor, and editorials by comparing the language and rhetoric used to discuss it.

## Results of analysis



**Figure 1:** Article distribution by frequency and article type

Between September 2007 and June 2009, 221 published articles contained arguments related to HRMbyDesign. This suggests an average of approximately ten articles per month, but the distribution is not so even. When charted chronologically, clear spikes emerge (Figure 1). In April 2008, the first draft of the HRMbyDesign documents were released, as well as reports that suggested downtown office vacancy was shrinking, prompting discussion of development speculation. The increase in press attention during three month period between September and November 2008 coincided with four events: the release of a second draft of the HRMbyDesign documents, the Waterside development project’s contentious proposal for office development in heritage buildings, HRM by Design Bill 181 being debated in the provincial legislature, and

a municipal election. The spike in May 2009 relates to the public hearing, commencing May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

The articles were coded with 17 arguments organized into supportive and critical categories. There are eight arguments critical of HRMbyDesign, and nine supportive of HRMbyDesign.

<b>Source</b>	<b>Supportive</b>	<b>Critical</b>
Chronicle Herald	85	66
Daily News	26	15
Metro Halifax	20	9
The Coast	14	10
Allnovascotia.com	9	2
NSBJ	7	3
Business Voice	5	1
Globe and Mail	3	0
CBC News	2	2
Halifax Chamber of Commerce	1	0
The Commoner	1	1
Halifax News Net	0	0
<i><b>Total</b></i>	<i><b>173</b></i>	<i><b>109</b></i>

*Table 3:* Articles that mention critical and supportive arguments by source

Arguments supportive of HRMbyDesign proved to be much more salient in the news than those critical of HRMbyDesign (Table 3). Out of the 221 total articles, 173 contained at least one argument categorized as supportive.

Of the 109 articles containing arguments critical of HRMbyDesign, concerns about height and heritage were the most prolific. There is a high degree of overlap, as many articles contain more than one argument, and frequently contain arguments on both sides of the debate.

	Argument	Articles containing argument
Supportive of HRMbyDesign	Due process has been followed	68
	Create a more predictable, streamlined approval process	62
	Old plan is out of date and/or did not work	49
	Plan will encourage new development	42
	Protection of heritage resources	39
	Sustainability - Densification	33
	Create higher quality of urban design	27
	Sustainability - Walkability	20
	Acceptable balance between heritage protection and development	12
Critical of HRMbyDesign	Unacceptable new height limits	50
	Unacceptable level of heritage protection	32
	New plan is unworkable and/or based on incorrect information	31
	Process was flawed	20
	Undemocratic new approval process	15
	Lack of sustainable initiatives	13
	Too soon, more studies are needed	8
	Plan will create unaffordable developments	4

**Table 4:** Number of articles per argument

Table 4 shows the number of articles a given argument appeared in. The most prolific arguments in support of HRMbyDesign were: due process was followed, and HRMbyDesign's intention to bring clarity and predictability to the development approval process. Concern about the proposed height limits and heritage protection dominate the critical side of the debate. The chart below ranks arguments in order of prevalence (Figure 2). The arguments illustrated with a blue bar are supportive of HRMbyDesign, while those in the red colour are critical of HRMbyDesign.

## Number of articles per argument

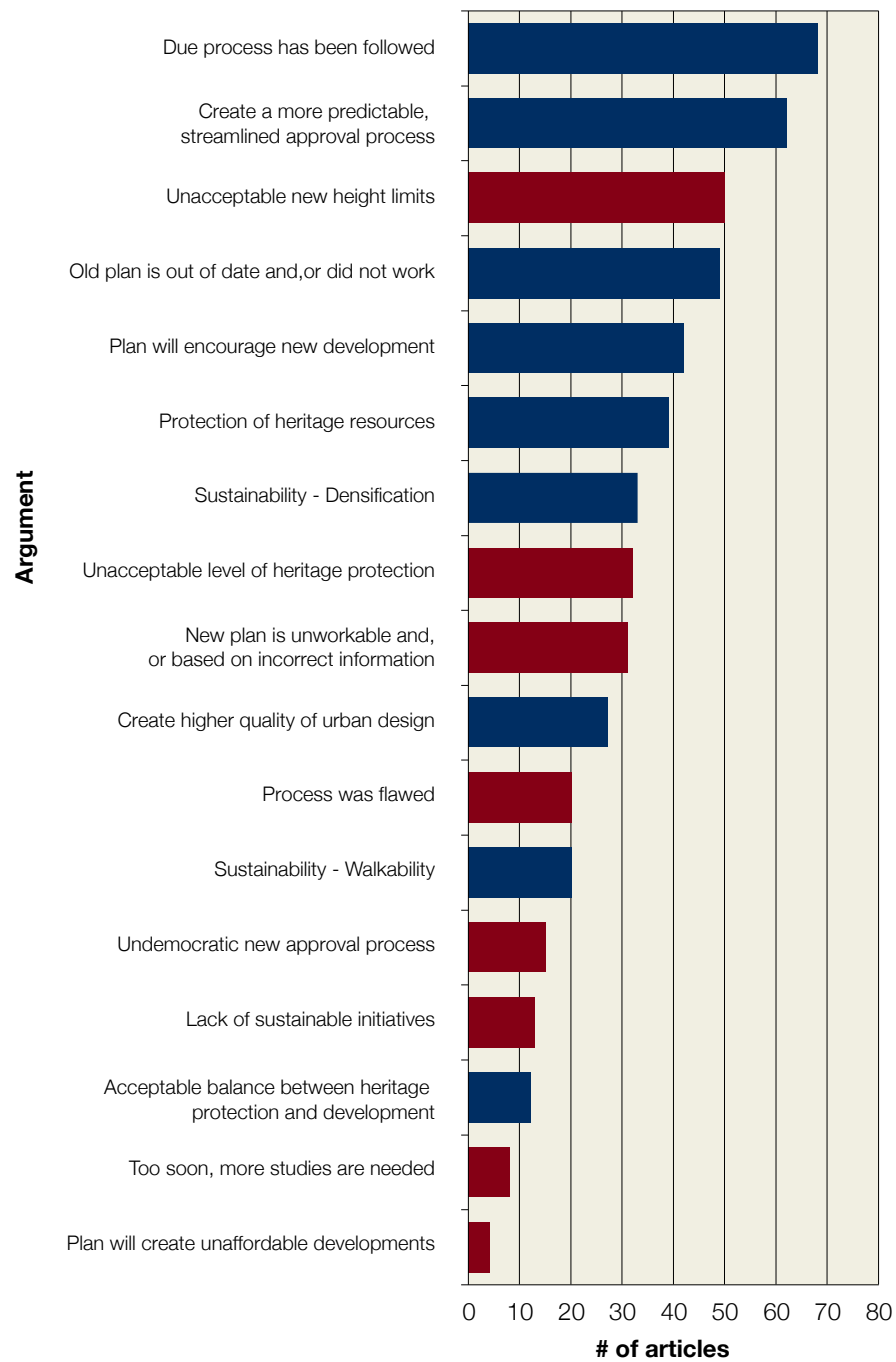
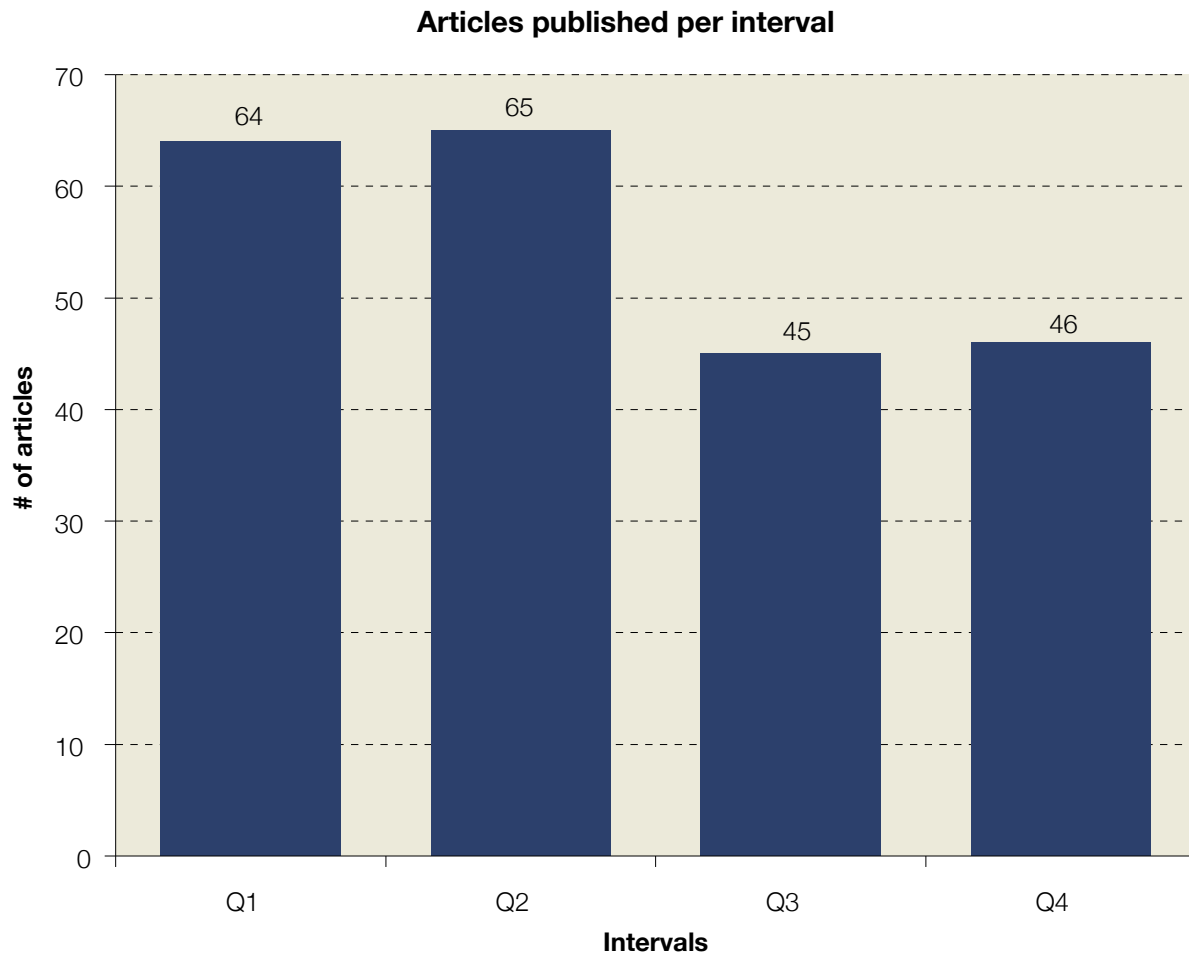


Figure 2: Number of articles per argument

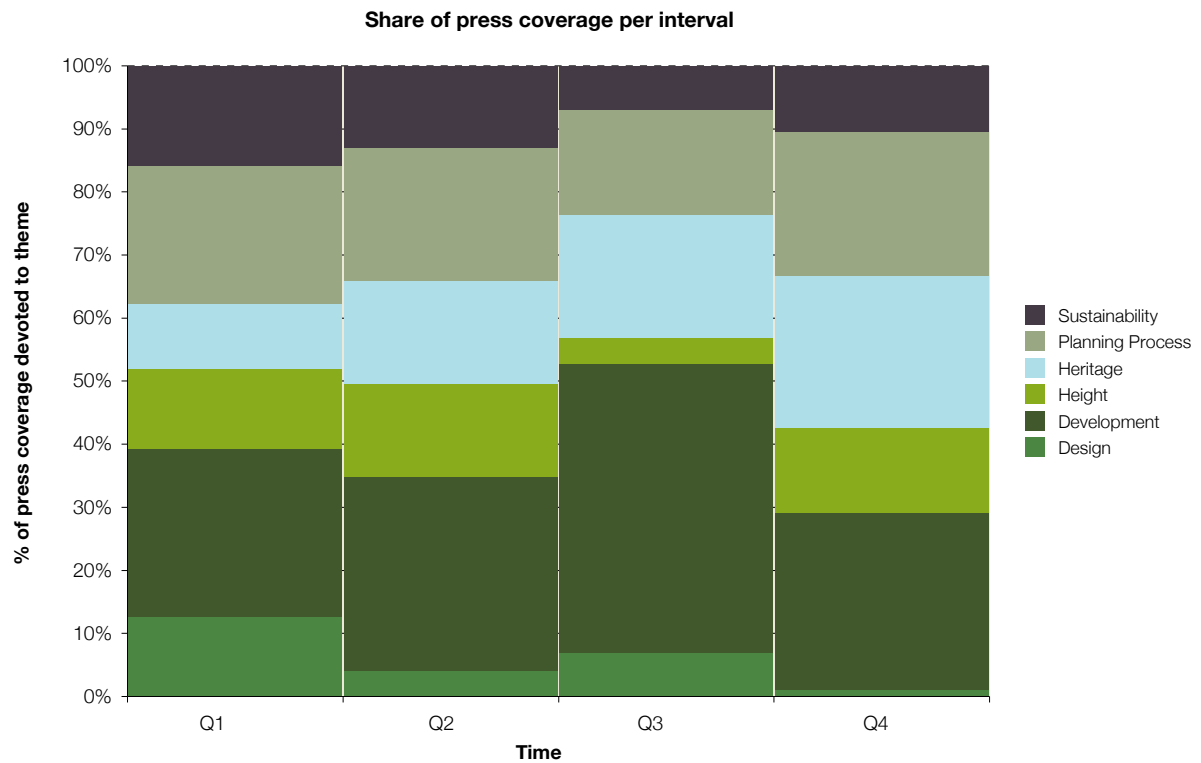
The salience of each argument did not stay constant over the 22 month study period. Some arguments seemed to gain or lose popularity over time, while others maintained their prominence. To chart the salience of concerns over time, I divided the study period into four equal intervals. Q1 covers September 2007 until the February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008. Q2 covers February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008 until the end of July 2008. Q3 covers August 2008 until January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2009. Q4 covers from January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2009 to June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009 (Figure 3).



*Figure 3:* Articles published per interval

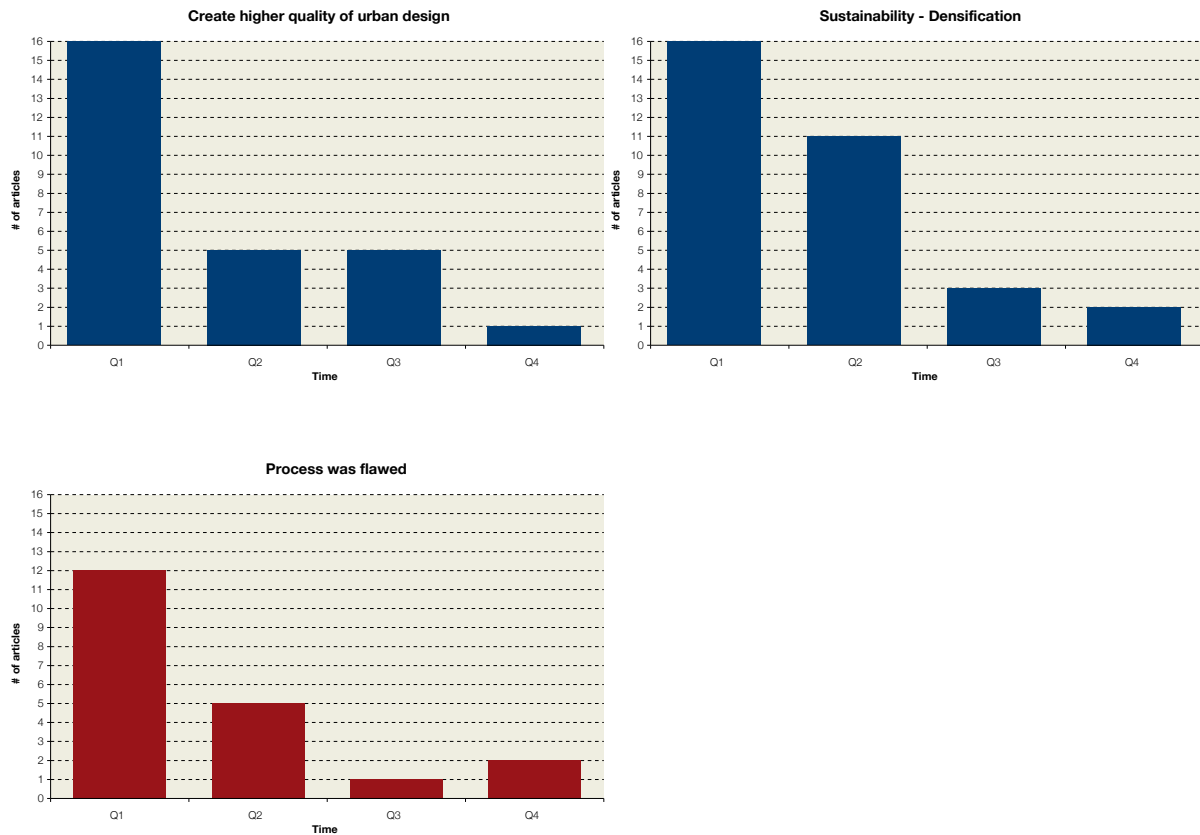


Figure 4 illustrates the share of press coverage devoted to each argument theme, per interval. Some themes became more prominent, meaning more space was devoted to arguments within that theme, while others became less prominent. Articles mentioning design and sustainability issues dissipated with time, while heritage issues garnered a growing share of the coverage. Arguments related to the planning process, height limits, and development concerns, maintained their salience throughout the process.



*Figure 4:* Share of press coverage devoted to each theme per interval

In the graph above, the six themes combine supportive and critical arguments. The graphs below chart the salience of specific arguments during each quarter.



**Figure 5, 6, & 7:** Argument salience per interval; create higher quality of urban design, sustainability – densification, process was flawed

The arguments illustrated above lost prominence as the HRMbyDesign planning process went on (Figure 5, 6, & 7). The charts plot the salience of the following arguments: Create higher quality urban design, Densification as a sustainable initiative, and criticism that the HRMbyDesign planning process was flawed. These once prominent arguments lost popularity over time.

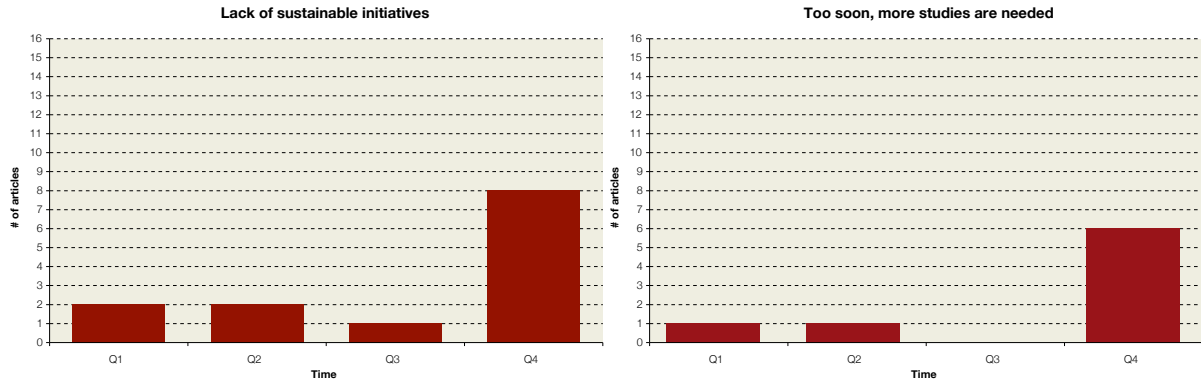


Figure 8 & 9: Argument salience per interval; lack of sustainable initiatives, too soon/more studies are needed

Other arguments gained prominence as the planning exercise continued (Figure 8 & 9). The two examples above: criticism of the lack of sustainable initiatives in the plan, and concern that the plan was being pushed forward without proper study, became more prominent near the end of the exercise. The public hearing and council debate took place in Q4, and it is understandable that stakeholders would push their agendas during this period.

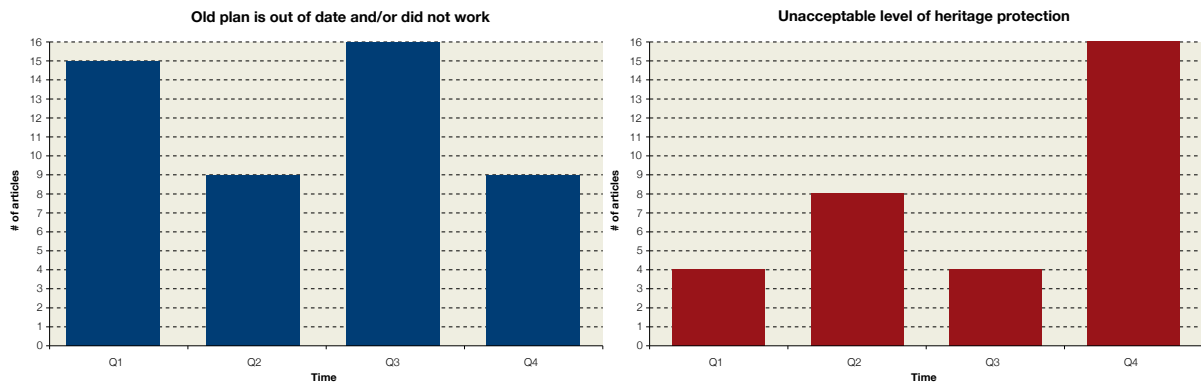
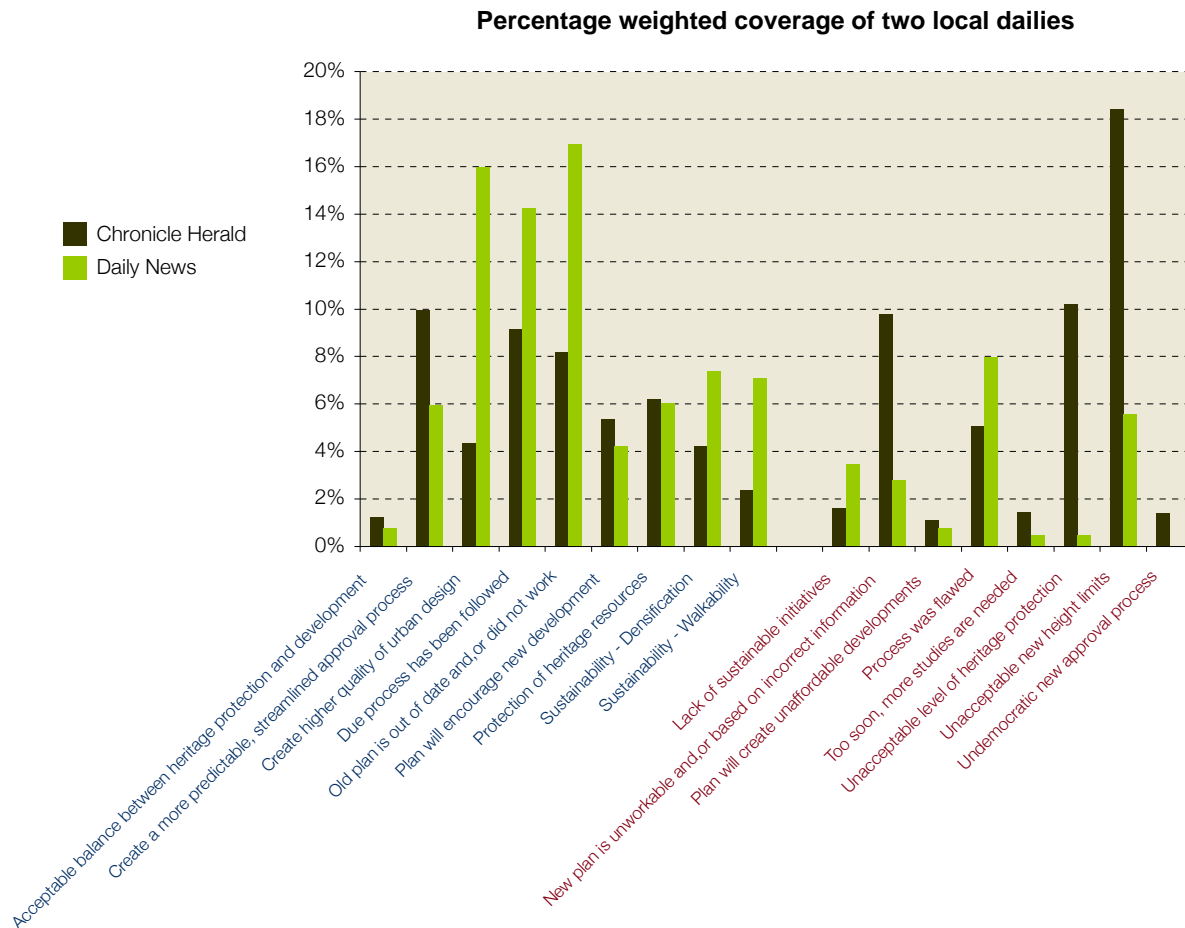


Figure 10 & 11: Argument salience per interval; old plan is out of date and/or did not work, unacceptable level of heritage protection

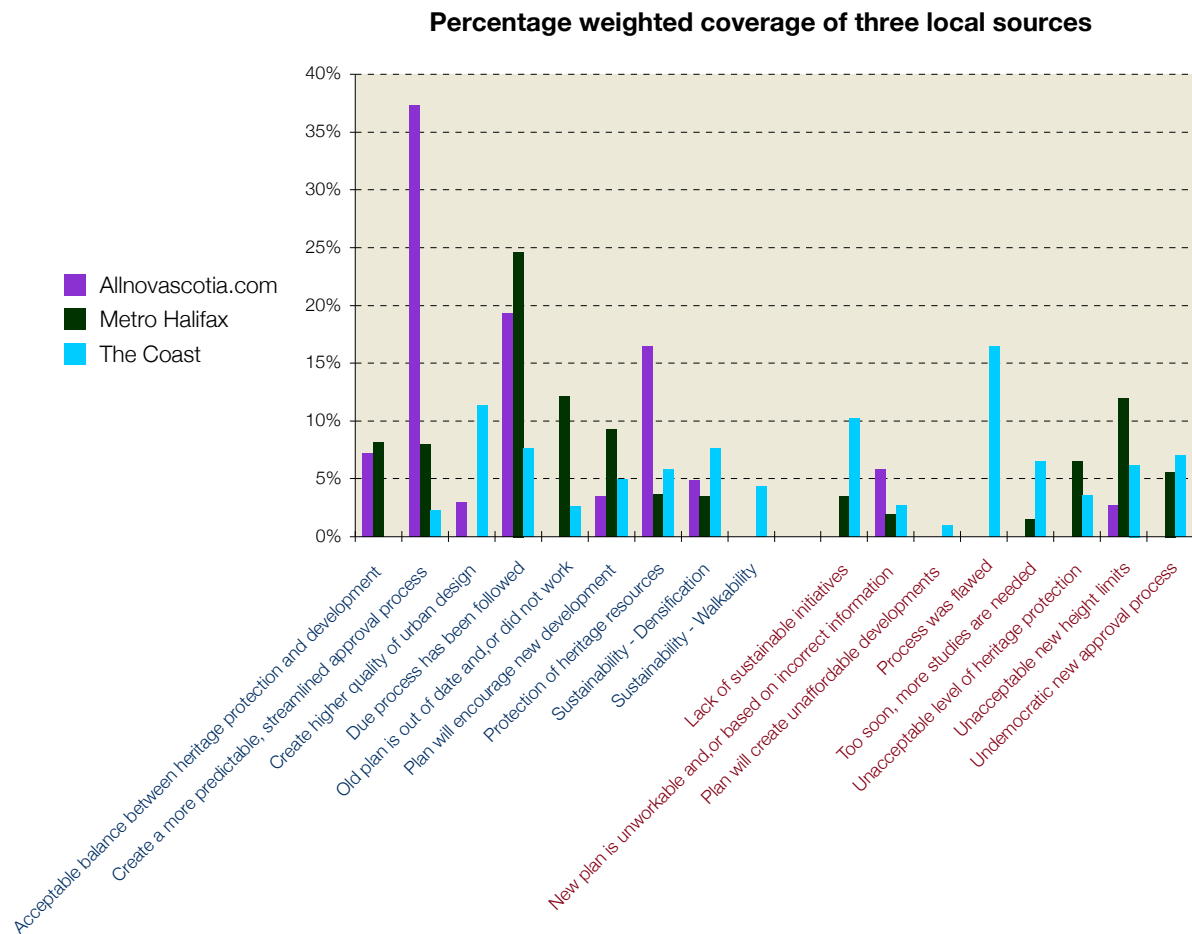
Some arguments did not follow a pattern of gaining or losing salience (Figure 10 & 11). Support for HRMbyDesign due to dissatisfaction with the old plan, and criticism of the heritage protection initiatives, are examples of arguments not following a pattern.

Each source handled coverage of HRMbyDesign differently. Figure 12 is a comparison of the coverage from two major daily newspapers: The Daily Mail and the Chronicle Herald. The graph illustrates the percentage of the coverage devoted to each argument within each source. Arguments supportive of HRMbyDesign are on the left, arguments critical of HRMbyDesign are on the right.



**Figure 12:** Percentage weighted coverage of two local dailies

The Daily Mail devoted far more coverage to arguments supportive of HRMbyDesign than critical ones. The Chronicle Herald's weighting of coverage is spread more evenly on the supportive and critical sides. In February of 2008, the Daily Mail folded six months into the process. This data only reflects the Daily Mail's reporting on the early stages of HRMbyDesign, when the plan contents were abstract. Despite this, some inferences can be made into the priorities of the papers. For example, the Chronicle Herald devoted about the same number of words to the argument that HRMbyDesign would foster a higher quality of urban design, as did the Daily Mail in their six months of coverage.



**Figure 13:** Percentage weighted coverage of three local sources

The next three most prolific news sources vary in the weighting of their coverage (Figure 13). Allnovascotia.com, a subscription based news website, was mostly supportive of HRMbyDesign, devoting most of their coverage to HRMbyDesign's aim to bring clarity and predictability to the development approval process. Metro Halifax was mostly supportive of the planning exercise. The Coast's coverage was the most evenly distributed across all arguments. The Coast's Tim Bousquet, by his own admission, was cynical about the process (Reporter, October 29, 2009). His cynicism, and the Coast's weekly press schedule, contributed to balanced coverage that touched on almost all arguments.

Letters to the editor were the only article type containing more critical arguments than supportive ones. Although this suggests dissatisfaction from the readership, there is not enough information, such as how many letters to the editor were submitted and not printed, to draw meaningful conclusions.

	Total	Supportive	Critical
Report	164	138	82
Letter to the Editor	28	13	16
Op-ed	17	12	9
Editorial	11	10	2
<i>Total</i>	<i>220</i>	<i>173</i>	<i>109</i>

*Table 5:* Supportive and critical articles by article type

The 28 letters to the editor and 17 op-ed pieces demonstrate the public's engagement with the public debate within the news media (Table 5). In May 2008, Rachel Mendleson won the Edward Goff Penny Memorial Prize for her five part series about HRMbyDesign and related development issues published in September of that year in the now defunct Daily News. Metro Halifax reported "Mendleson's series on urban development in the city and the battle between heritage and conservationists and growth-and-renewal supporters was deemed "an important catalyst in engaging local residents in the debate," [by the Canadian Newspaper Association]" ("Journalism award for Metro reporter," April 14, 2008).

## *Influencing the public discourse*

I talked to representatives from four stakeholder groups to investigate what shaped the coverage. I met with members of the planning team (HRM Employee A & B), a member of the media (Reporter), and members of four organized citizens' groups, two supportive of HRMbyDesign (Supporters A & B) and two critical of HRMbyDesign (Critics A & B). Insight from these meetings helped explain why the media coverage looked the way it did.

My analysis of the coverage demonstrated the existence of a sizable public discourse. The large number of articles suggests resilient interest in the issues. The perceptible change in the salience of certain issues can be at least be partially explained by the actions of the stakeholder groups listed above. When talking with these groups, it became clear that those involved with the process are able to affect the discourse. The news outlets are not the sole arbiters of which issues are written about and which are not. The various stakeholders employed several techniques to shape the discourse, with varying degrees of success.

All groups, with the exception of the member of the media, identified letters to the editor as a powerful tool for affecting coverage of HRMbyDesign. Writing a letter to the editor was often a reactive process. If a group felt misinformation was being spread, a letter to the editor was a timely technique to correct the perceived misrepresentation. Op-ed pieces served a similar function, but were used far more sparingly.

All parties acknowledged that the HRM planning department took a deliberate and pro-active media campaign. A communications specialist was assigned to the HRMbyDesign project full time. HRMbyDesign was branded with a consistent name, logo and colour scheme. This tactic was not universally lauded; HRM's polished media campaign had critics. One concerned citizen chided the HRM planning department for the dissemination of what they referred to as constructed messages (Critics A, October 27, 2009).

Organized groups critical of the process felt they disadvantaged because they lacked the slick presentation and funds of HRMbyDesign (Critics A, October 27, 2009; Critics B, October 30, 2009). Groups critical of HRMbyDesign believed certain reporters trivialized their position. They felt they had to fight to have their voices heard. Some groups supportive of HRMbyDesign thought the opposite, believing groups such as the Heritage Trust got easy coverage (Supporters B, November 2, 2009). The press relied on groups such as the Heritage Trust to supply the conflicting position on many issues. Other groups critical of HRMbyDesign felt marginalized by the press when they were lumped in with the Heritage Trust. The Coalition to Save the View from Citadel Hill was made up of a number of individuals and groups that were critical of HRMbyDesign. Some members were disappointed to see the group described as a heritage coalition in the Chronicle Herald (Power, September 20, 2009). They felt this description did not adequately convey their message of sustainability and view protection (Critics A, October 27, 2009).

The news reporting process was another force influencing the discourse. The local newspaper industry has suffered cutbacks. Fewer staff cover more stories (Bousquet, December 3, 2009). Stakeholders claimed reporters presented stories they were given as opposed to doing independent research (Critics A, October 27, 2009; Critics B, October 30, 2009). The tight timelines required for a daily paper mean reports rely on pre-existing material such as press releases (Reporter, October 29, 2009). Stakeholders objected to the loss of detail when complex issues got reduced to daily bulletins (Critics A, November 27, 2009; HRM Employee A, October 27, 2009).

Reporters may shy away from subjective issues. Coverage of HRMbyDesign's goal of elevating the level of urban design is a prime example. Contemporary architecture is a contentious issue in HRM. What is good urban design to some will be unacceptable to others (HRM employee A, October 27, 2009). The Daily Mail attempted to cover the urban design issue in some detail, but the Chronicle Herald did not add much to the debate. This discrepancy demonstrates the differing priorities each editorial board brings to their coverage.

The press coverage lacked planners defending good planning practice. Perhaps planners need to listen to the suggestions of Nico Calavita and Norman Krumholz when they say that "it is the responsibility of planning faculty members, as well as practicing planners, to become more engaged in the public debate about the role of government and public planning in today's society" (Calavita & Krumholz, 2003, p. 400). They go on to say, "writing op-ed pieces is an effective, even crucial, mechanism to enlighten and influence the public debate" (Calavita & Krumholz, 2003, p. 400). The downtown Halifax debate was missing an independent

expert. The news reports would frequently quote supporters, detractors, the planning department, and councilors, but rarely did the press seek out an unbiased third party, nor did the planning community offer their services penning op-ed pieces or letters to the editor.

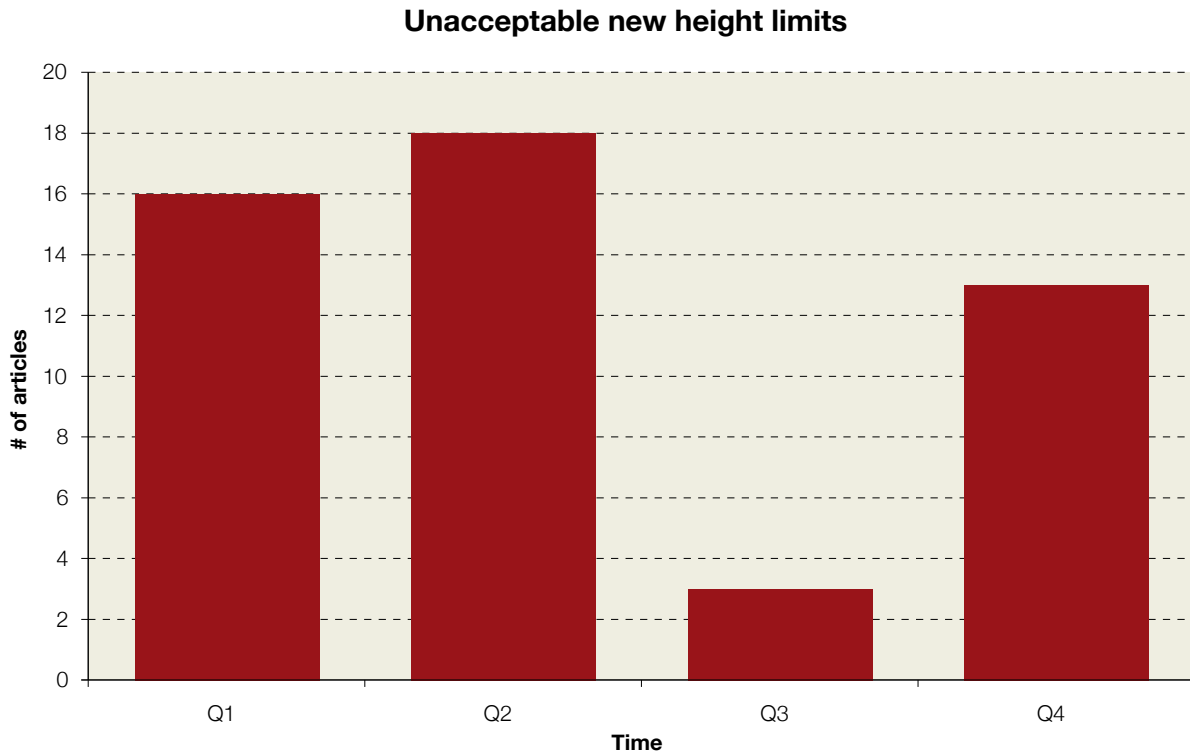
This is not to say independent voices were never contacted. Dalhousie School of Planning faculty member Frank Palermo was quoted in the Daily News article “CityThink” published September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2007. The article discusses the findings of a poll dubbed CityThink that asked citizens whether they thought HRM’s policies favoured development or heritage protection. Palermo makes a plea for reason and informed debate, as opposed to emotional responses. He is quoted as saying “My suspicion is that very few people actually know what the policies are ... It seems to me that it’s really more in the nature of a kind of wish or aspiration, as opposed to simply stating a response to what the policy is right now” (Mendleson, September 28, 2007). Including his insight brings a neutral voice to an article discussing a particularly contentious topic in HRM. Most of the quotes in the article are from developers and heritage preservation group members.



## Analyzing the height debate

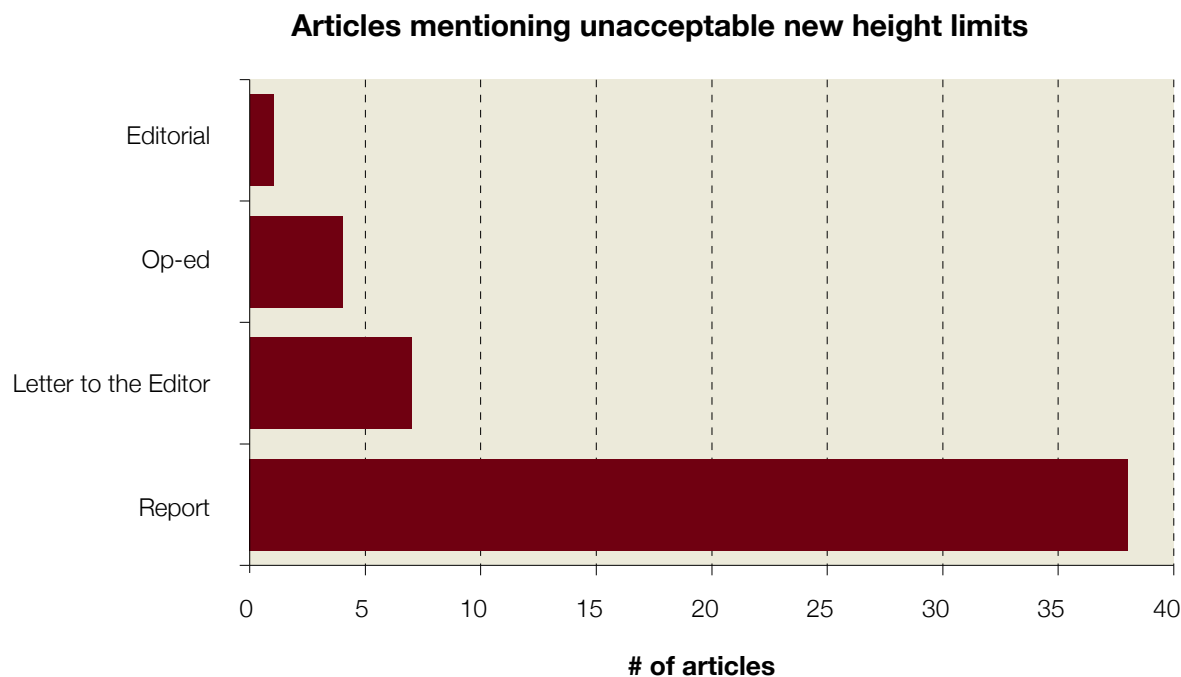
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Dissatisfaction of HRMbyDesign's proposed height limits was the most prolific argument from those critical of the process. In total 50 different articles criticized the height limits in some way. The height issue was fairly salient throughout the study period. Figure 14 graphs the frequency of sources critiquing height limits is graphed below.



*Figure 14:* Number of articles mentioning unacceptable new height limits per interval

Height was mentioned in all categories of article types. Reports made up the vast majority, but height was also a popular topic in letters to the editor. This distribution of article types is graphed in Figure 15 below.



*Figure 15:* Number of each article type mentioning unacceptable new height limits

Of the 50 articles, 29 argued for lowering the proposed height limits, while 18 argued the opposite.

The substance of these arguments varied. Five general themes emerged from those arguing height limits were too high: Generous height limits provide financial incentive to replace heritage resources, tall structures detract from views, tall structures encourage wind currents and an uncomfortable pedestrian climate, tall structures erode street life by sucking people inside, and tall structures are less sustainable than existing or shorter structures. Four themes emerged from those arguing that height limits were too low: The limits do not encourage economies of scale and will scare off development, the limits will drive development to the suburbs, the limits will lead to boring architecture, and the limits will inhibit HRM from meeting its population density target. Proponents of higher height limits almost always invoked an economic argument.

The writings of a Chronicle Herald business columnist demonstrate how misinformation can be damaging to the planning process and complicate the public debate. Roger Taylor wrote the majority of articles critiquing the height limits as being too low. His columns focused on the economic issue, warning that low height restrictions would discourage development. He frequently referred to a proposed six or seven-storey height limit in downtown. The HRM planning department contends there was never such a limit legitimately proposed in the HRMbyDesign regulations (HRM Employee A, October 27, 2009; Supporters A, October 30, 2009). The planning department took measures to correct what they saw as misinformation. Members of the HRMbyDesign team met with Taylor and editors of the paper in an attempt to set the record straight. Despite their efforts, they feel the columnist was unresponsive. (HRM Employee A, October 27, 2009).

Articles claiming HRMbyDesign's proposed height limits are too high are often really about heritage protection. Proponents of this view say that if heritage property owners are given too much of a financial incentive, they will tear down their heritage buildings and build up to the new height limits. It can be a persuasive argument if expressed cogently. Unfortunately many of these articles lack that explanation.

The public discourse about height should be an informed debate. Frequently though the debate is framed as being a fight between two opposing sides, developers vs. heritage preservationists (HRM Employee B, November 2, 2009; Reporter October 29, 2009). Little space is devoted to balanced analysis of the issue.

A survey of the language used demonstrates how the plan was criticized.

From the Daily News on December 7, 2007 a letter to the editor states, "Even moderately high buildings bring air currents down to the streets. Given that Halifax rates highly with respect to wind velocity, this is a reality we should consider carefully.

Let's keep high-rises out of the downtown area." (McCurdy, December 7, 2009)

A report in The Coast, dated April 10, 2008 states "Heritage president Phil Pacey is concerned about the dizzying heights of the latest HRM By Design plans (approved in principle by regional council in February), most notably the threat he feels they pose to heritage homes." (Benjamin, April 10, 2008)

An April 22, 2008 report from the Chronicle Herald business columnist warned "There are plenty of developers itching to build in the downtown and this is a good thing for the downtown and the city as a whole; that is unless they are held up by the seemingly arbitrary nature of HRM by Design height restrictions." (Taylor, April 22, 2008)

A short article in Metro Halifax, dated May 6, 2009 tells us "[Peggy Cameron of Help Save the View from Citadel Hill] called HRMByDesign "a well-greased machine" that will get rid of height restrictions on buildings near the world-renowned historic site." (Lipscombe, May 6, 2009)

The first quote is an excerpt from a letter to the editor demonstrating an argument against allowing additional height. The author frames the argument as a call for pedestrian safety and comfort. The remaining examples are about development and heritage protection. Calling the proposed heights dizzying or arbitrary is bold criticism of the process. Others go further, such as the representative from Save the View from Citadel Hill, by critiquing the entire planning exercise. The representative also gives us an example of inflammatory language. Her claim that height restrictions would be abolished on any buildings is an exaggeration that could lead to a misinformed public.

The discourse around HRMbyDesign was varied and robust. The height debate represents just a fraction of all the issues raised by such a planning process. Keeping abreast of the discourse is essential if one wants the debate to be informative and based on fact.

## *Holding the press accountable*

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Reports are influential since press coverage of a public policy issue can shape public opinion (Fan, 1988). Proving whether press coverage of HRMbyDesign really did reflect public opinion is outside of the scope of this paper. However, this analysis has demonstrated news outlets alone do not dictate the public discourse. Due to this influence, the press must be held to high standards.

Stakeholders criticized the media for a lack of independent investigation. They claim the media relied on narratives that were devised by someone else (Critics A, October 27, 2009; Critics B, October 30, 2009). As an example of the arbitrary nature of how much coverage is devoted to a particular issue, representatives from one stakeholder group told a story of a recent press release. The group of concerned citizens was troubled by an upcoming development proposal that in their view would comprise views from Citadel Hill. The group issued a press release complete with graphic representations they produced of the existing conditions and their representation of the consequences of the project. The document was given to the lone news editor serving at HRM's daily paper on a Saturday. The citizens group was thrilled to see a long article published subsequently including visuals they had produced. They attribute this success to chance. It was an unusual occurrence they were unaccustomed to, having released many press releases in the past. It demonstrates how coverage of an issue can be driven by the public as opposed to a news director. (Critics B, October 30, 2009)

Roger Taylor's six-storey height limit was not the only example of facts being misinterpreted by the press. The Chronicle Herald article published April 1, 2009 titled "Four projects approved" incorrectly stated council had approved four large developments within the HRMbyDesign plan area. The authors state the projects "have been given approval" and, "Council agreed that all four projects must be completed within three years after they are started" (Simpson, & Jeffrey, April 1, 2009). Council had not approved the projects; instead it grandfathered them into HRMbyDesign, allowing them to proceed under existing planning rules. The Chronicle Herald published a small correction in their April 2 edition (Corrections, April 2, 2009). Metro Halifax correctly reported the process in their April 1 edition (McLeod, April 1, 2009). Incorrectly stating that four large-scale developments had been approved without due process is damaging to the public discourse. Planners must be vigilant about monitoring the press, correcting reports when facts are misinterpreted.

Another criticism levied against the press concerns their appetite for controversy and reliance on pre-existing story lines. "Scholar after scholar has documented journalists' proclivity to rely on set story lines that don't fit the facts" (Glasser, 1999, p. xviii). In the HRM this is framed as the heritage vs. development debate. Many interviewees noted that, in their view, the majority of HRM citizens know the debate to be more nuanced (Reporter, October 29, 2009; HRM Employee A, October 27, 2009; HRM Employee B, November 2, 2009). Some journalism theorists "argue that it helps to attend to the tensions that underlie staked-out

positions. And they argue that most people aren't at the extremes on any issue. Instead, they are distributed along a continuum of positions, or they are ambivalent rather than resolved about where they stand" (Glasser, 1999, p. xviii). The interviewed for this project would agree. They criticized the press for propagating this debate as opposed to educating the public on the issues.

## *Implications for planners*

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The media both reports on, and is a forum for, public debate. Its role, then, is to inform and engage the public. This makes the media a potentially powerful force in encouraging public engagement and participation within a planning process. The media's influence within the HRMbyDesign process was clearly demonstrated. Rachel Mendleson's five part series on HRMbyDesign and development within HRM is a potent example. Before this piece was published, the HRM planning department was not impressed by public attendance at its public forums. Mendleson's piece was released just before forum 4, which saw attendance sky rocket. The HRM planning department attributes this turn out at least partially to Mendleson's encouragement (HRM Employee A, October 27, 2009; Supporters A, October 30, 2009).

Bengston argues that media analysis can be a tool to monitor the social environment. In the case of urban sprawl, the researchers focus, they find policy makers can use such analysis to "develop more socially acceptable strategies for managing growth that are consistent with the social landscape" (Bengston et al., 2005, p. 755). The same could be said for any planning issue or exercise.

Analyzing the media coverage of HRMbyDesign has demonstrated that it is critical to consider the media coverage when planning. The media can be a powerful educating force, encouraging informed debate on what good planning is. Elevating this debate should be a goal of the planning community. One interviewee lamented the lack of a dedicated architecture and planning critic within the local media (HRM Employee B, November 2, 2009). Creating such a position at the local daily paper could have a profound impact on planning in the region.

The media provides a forum for public debate about planning issues, and this debate should be encouraged. I agree with Nico Calavita and Norman Krumholz when they advocate for greater involvement in the press from the planning community (Calavita & Krumholz, 2003). Informing and educating the public leads to better-informed debate surrounding planning and development issues, and ultimately a higher quality plan.

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## *Appendix i: Literature review*

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For background literature, I looked to three distinct sources: studies of a similar type, content analysis instruction, and literacy awareness research. Each source contributed in different ways to shape my investigation. Early in the research process it became apparent that news media analysis related to planning issues was scarce, but similar analyses concerning environmental issues seemed abundant. Environmental issues and planning issues are so closely linked that the environmental studies were a clear starting point.

Studies have demonstrated a strong relationship between the prevalence of stories in the media, and the relative importance given to those issues by the public or politicians (Bengston et al., 1999, p. 517). The relationship seems to work both ways, however. The findings from investigations into the prevalence of attitudes towards a given environmental issue in the news media “produce results that parallel the findings of attitude and opinion polls” (Bengston et al., 1999, p. 517).

Several studies have investigated the news media and its role in shaping environmental issues. The approaches range from the subjective to the empirical. Cinda Becker’s *Newspapers on Land Use: The Who, What, When, Where and Why of Takings* is a subjective audit of attitudes expressed in articles concerning the issue of regulatory takings raised in three high-profile U.S. Supreme Court cases. This format proves useful because it illuminates how differently the same issue or argument can be treated. This subtlety is difficult to capture in a purely scientific analysis of news reports.

*Roads on the U.S. National Forests* by Bengston and Fan represents the other end of the spectrum from Becker’s work. They performed a methodical content analysis on articles related to road construction on U.S. National Forests using computer software. Bengston and Fan explain their rationale for analyzing the news media this way: “Analysis of the media has repeatedly been shown to produce results that parallel the findings of attitude surveys and opinion polls. Most studies have shown that the media play an important role in influencing public attitudes and beliefs about various environmental issues” (Bengston et al., 1999, p. 517).

Content analysis literature describes a rich field quantitative research. Kimberly Neuendorf defines it briefly as “the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics.” (Neuendorf, 2002, p.1). Arthur Berger offered this definition: “Content analysis ... is a research technique that is based on measuring the amount of something (violence, negative portrayals of women, or whatever) in a representative sampling of some mass-mediated popular art form.” (Berger, 1991, p. 25). Content analysis is well suited for analysis of newspaper coverage of a given issue, such as Miller, Boone & Folwer’s study of the newspaper coverage given to the Greenhouse Effect (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 3). There are other examples. A law firm hired content analysis researchers to back up a change of venue motion, hoping to prove excessive negative press coverage (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 9). A newspaper even employed content analysis to monitor its own coverage of the African American community (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 9).

The purpose of content analysis is, in part, to “make inferences to audiences of content, and to determine the effects of content on the audience.” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 52). These are very important considerations to anyone interested in how information is transmitted. The type of content analysis I am interested in is discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is concerned with word use, descriptions of issues, and thematic analysis to draw out central themes (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 6). It suits itself particularly well to forms of public communication, like the print news media (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 6). Judith Duncan employed discourse analysis in her 1996 ““For the sake of the children” as the worth of the teacher? The gendered discourses of the New Zealand national kindergarten teachers’ employment negotiations.” During the 1992 contract negotiations, Duncan identified two discourses that were evident in both sides of the debate, invoked by teachers representatives interested in raising pay and benefits, as well as by employers who were opposed to such expenses. Duncan also notes that her report is just “one reading of the texts, and there will be numerous other readings possible” (Duncan, 1996, p. 161). These insights helped me direct the design of my discourse analysis.

Content analysis literature instilled in me the importance of a rigorous method. Any content analysis should follow a prescribed method, “all decisions on variables, their measurement, and coding rules must be made before observations begin” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 9). After all, content analysis should be systematic and replicable.

This project involves analysis of news reports and therefore requires a certain level of media awareness. For this component, I consulted Eleanor MacLean’s work “Between the lines : How to detect bias and propaganda in the news and everyday life.” This work investigates how news is created, and asks the reader to carefully question the source of news and how it is presented. MacLean warns that as we “study our sources of information, we will find that the major part of many messages we are given consists of the presentation of information, not the information itself. That is, facts, statistics and other data are presented in such a way that we will interpret them in certain ways” (MacLean, 1981, p. 4). These are sobering words. She goes on to remind us that whenever we get information from a source other than first hand experience, the information is passed on through someone else’s interpretation of their experiences (MacLean, 1981, p. 7).

MacLean’s interest in careful examination of the credibility of a source dovetailed well with Albert Gunther’s work, “Biased press of biased public? Attitudes toward media coverage of social groups.” Studies have “suggested a connection between an individual’s personal stake in an issue and media credibility judgments. Those more involved in an issue, demonstrated by their highly partisan or polarized attitudes, were also most skeptical of the media” (Gunther, 1992, p. 150). It is useful to be reminded that “media credibility is a receiver assessment, not a source characteristic” (Gunther, 1992, p. 150). This research was useful in alerting me to my own bias.

## *Appendix ii: A note about bias*

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In the interests of disclosure, I should state that I interned this summer with members of the Urban Design Task Force and the HRM planning department responsible for HRMbyDesign. I understand the danger of colouring my results with my personal bias. I attempt to mitigate my personal attitudes as much as possible. By outlining my analytical method before hand I hope I provide a fair analysis. I also submitted all my research to my technical advisor, who played the role of a disinterested third party, and would alert me to any potential infractions.

