

# Consultations on Physician-Assisted Dying - Summary of Results and Key Findings

[← Previous Page](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

## Annex I - Media Analysis Sep. 2014 - Nov. 2015

### Table of Contents

- [Executive summary](#)
- [Methodology](#)
- [General coverage](#)
- [Tone](#)
- [Opinions on assisted dying over time](#)
- [Opinions on the panel over time](#)
- [Opinions on assisted dying by region](#)
- [Coverage by region](#)
- [About MediaMiser](#)

### Executive summary

- There were 8,939 media items that appeared on assisted dying in Canada from September 1, 2014 through November 22, 2015, with a combined circulation of 654,236,718.
- While there were a number of broadcast interviews conducted on the issue, they are not reflected in this report.
- Thirty-five per cent of all articles were published in February 2015, driven by the Supreme Court's ruling on assisted dying. Much of the coverage included reactions from politicians and interest groups.
- A small peak in October 2014 occurred as the Supreme Court was set to hear challenges to the ban on assisted dying, while the formation of the expert panel caused a sustained peak in coverage from August through September 2015.
- While coverage was primarily neutral across the board, opinions were more split around the issue of assisted dying itself.
- Overall, opinions on the panel were 90 per cent neutral, while opinions on assisted dying were 53 per cent neutral.
- Two outlets - *National Post* and the *Ottawa Citizen* - had both their print and online editions in the list of top ten most prolific outlets.
- Top journalist Sharon Kirkey of *Postmedia News* had more than four times the articles of the No. 2 journalist, Michael Den Tandt of the *Ottawa Citizen*. Ms. Kirkey wrote widely on the assisted dying issue, with her articles syndicated across Postmedia publications.

# Methodology

## Objective

This report offers an examination of media coverage of assisted dying between September 2014 and November 2015, inclusive.

## Content

Articles pertaining to assisted dying were collected from online and print media sources using MediaMiser's news monitoring modules.

## General coverage

### Tone

A sample of articles was manually toned for opinions presented on assisted dying, as well as opinions on the external panel and consultation process.

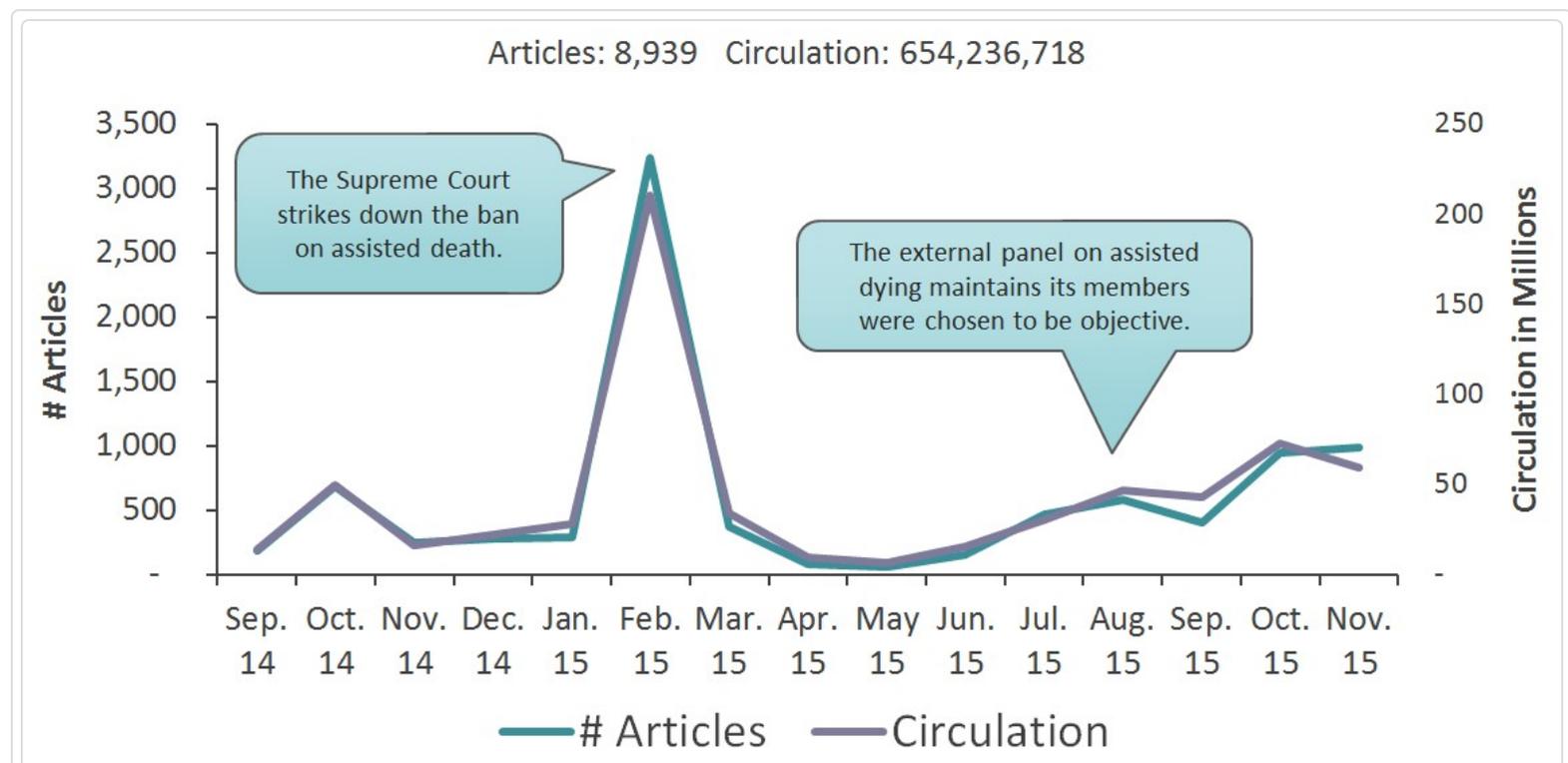
The following rating scale was used:

**Added point:** Article is supportive of or in favour of assisted dying, the consultation process, or panel members.

**Loss of Point:** Article is critical of or against assisted dying, the consultation process, or panel members.

**Neutral:** Article is purely factual, with no opinion presented.

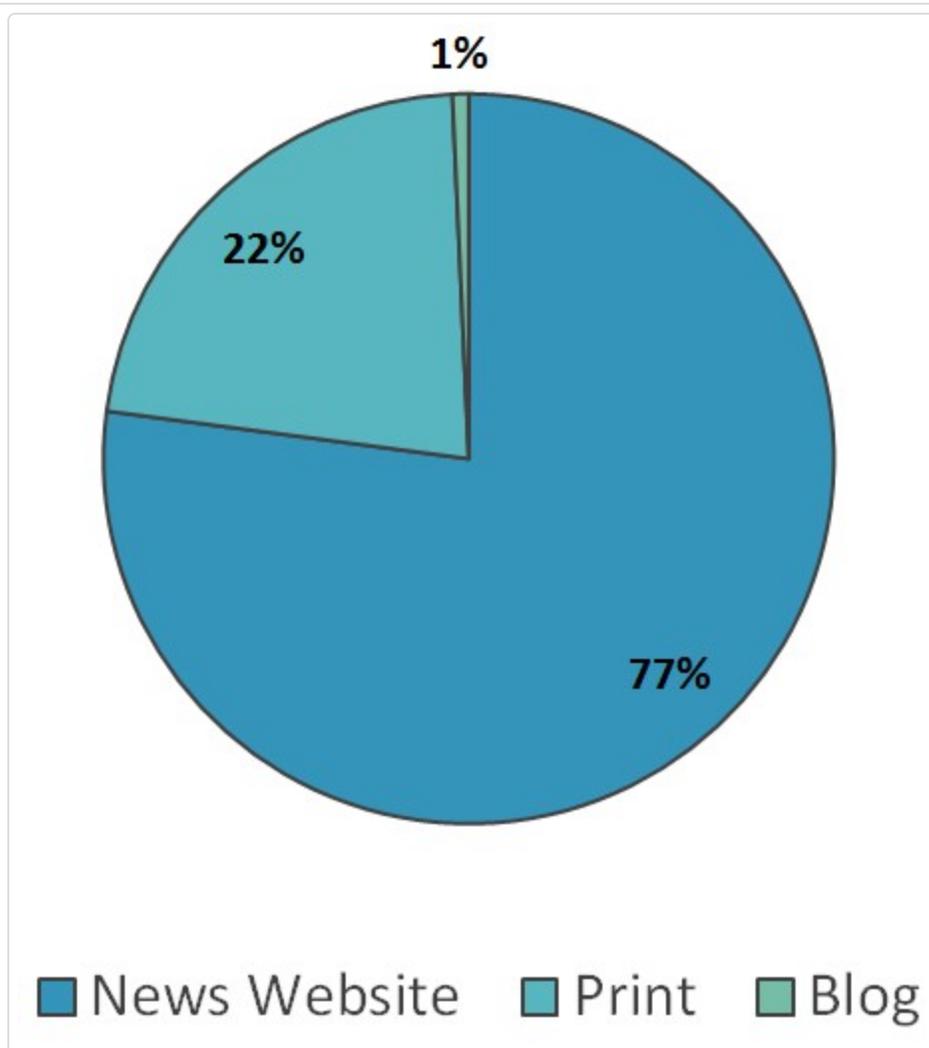
### Coverage trend



► Figure 1 - Text equivalent

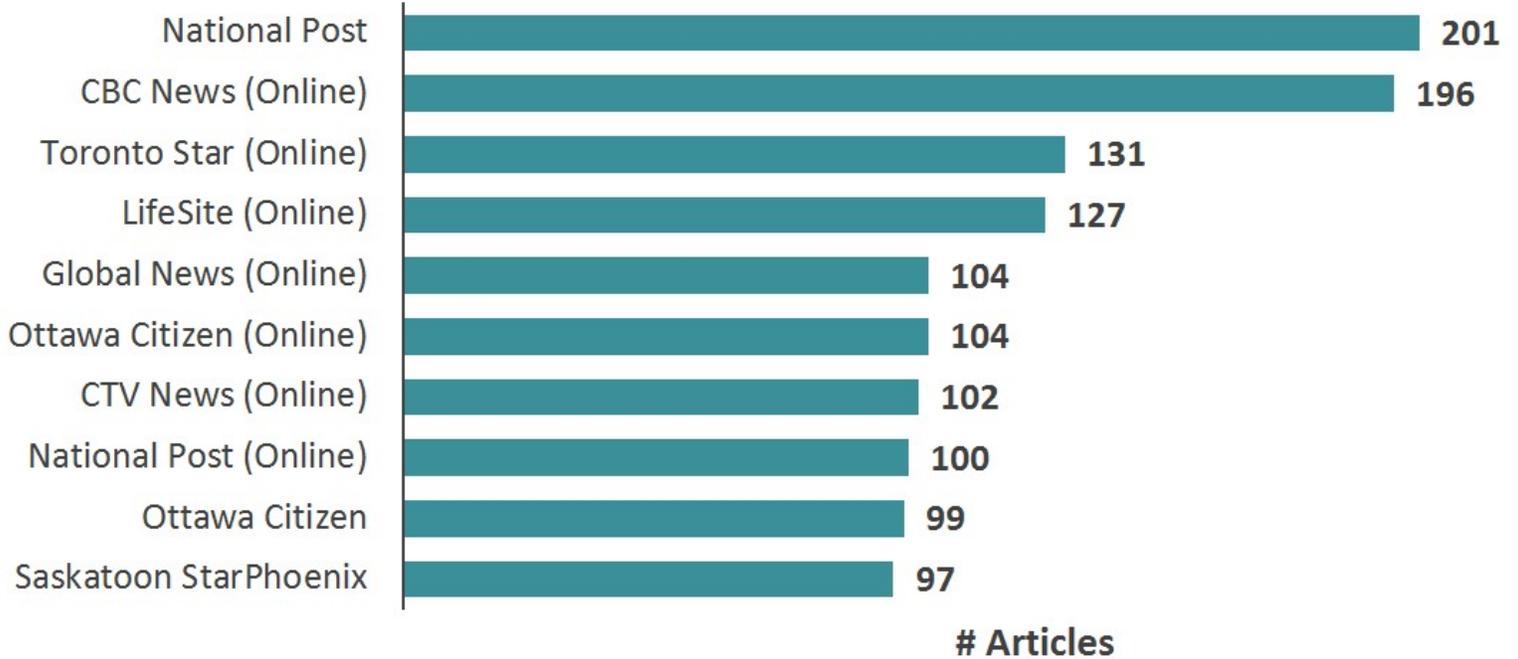
- Over the nearly-fifteen months, there were 8,939 media items that appeared on assisted dying in Canada with a total circulation of 654,236,718. Of these, 35 per cent were published in the peak period of February 2015. Smaller peaks were also seen in October 2014 and August through November 2015.
- The February 2015 peak was driven by the Supreme Court's ruling on assisted dying, and comprised reactions from politicians and interest groups, including calls for open discussion on the topic ("Nova Scotia Premier Stephen McNeil wants national discussion on doctor assisted death" in *CTV News (Online)*, Feb. 12, 2015) and denunciation of the decision ("Assisted suicide testifies to a society that has grown cold" in the *Western Catholic Reporter (Online)*, Feb. 17, 2015).
- The small peak in October 2014 came as the Supreme Court was set to hear challenges to the ban on assisted dying ("Suicide assisté - La "patate chaude" entre les mains de la Cour supreme" in *Le Devoir*, Oct. 1, 2014).
- The continuous peak from August through September 2015 follows the formation of the expert panel, and questions of the panel's independence ("Federal assisted-death panel defends independence as group travels to Europe" in the *Penticton Herald (Online)*, Aug. 31, 2015).

### Publication types



► Figure 2 - Text equivalent

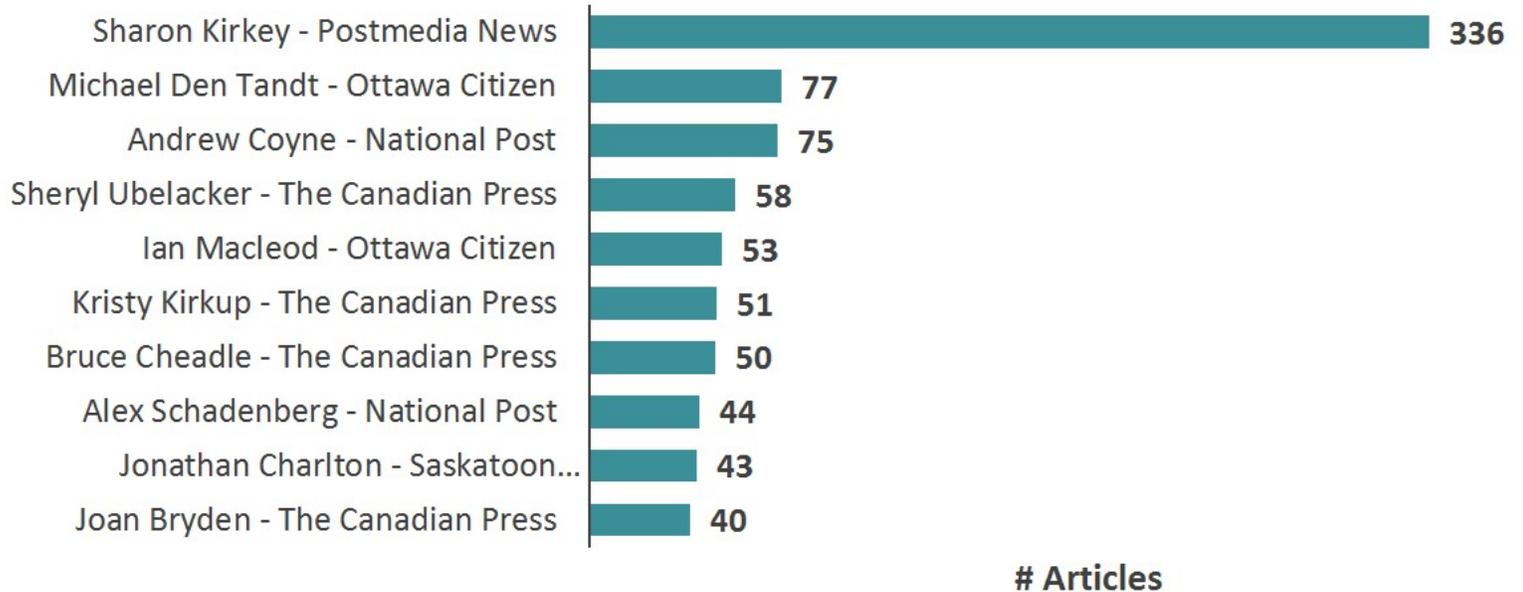
### Top outlets



► Figure 3 - Text equivalent

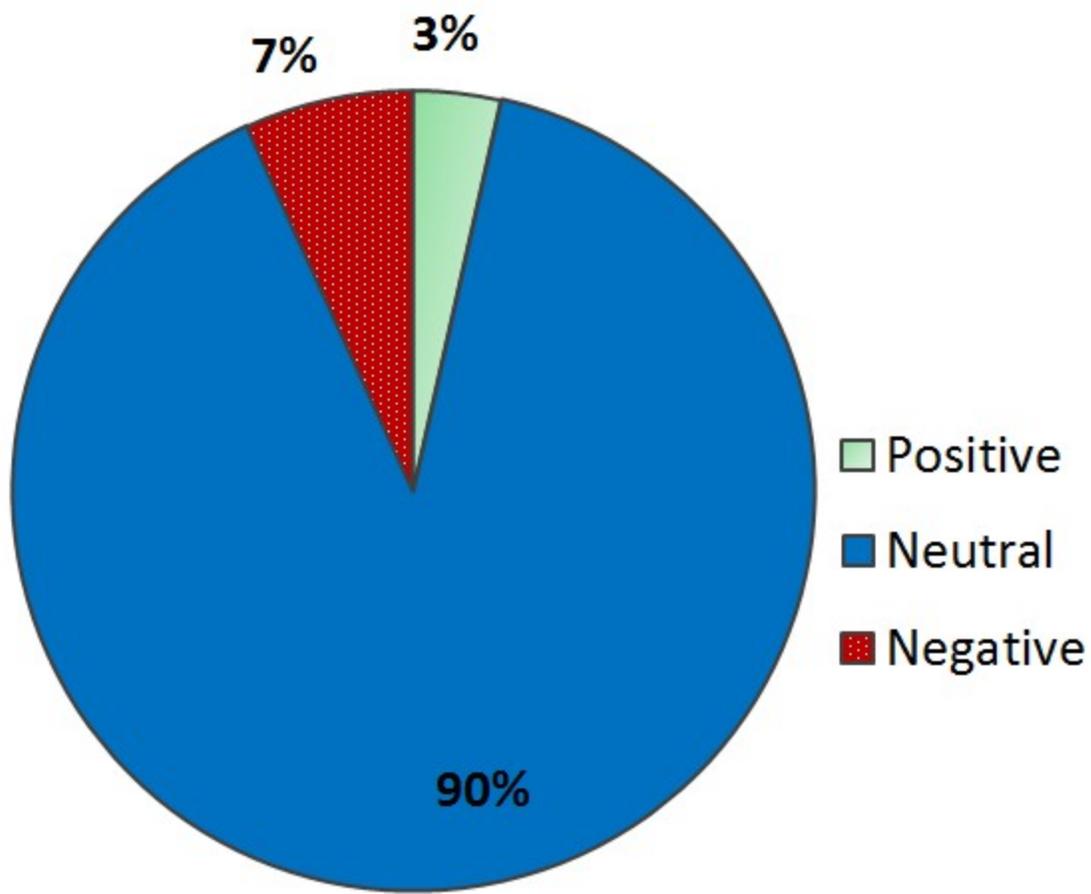
- Two outlets - *National Post* and the *Ottawa Citizen* - had both their print and online editions in the top ten.
- The No. 4 outlet, *LifeSite (Online)*, was the only online outlet not connected to another news source.
- Top journalist Sharon Kirkey of Postmedia News had more than four times the articles of the No. 2 journalist, Michael Den Tandt of the *Ottawa Citizen*. Ms. Kirkey wrote widely on the assisted dying issue, with her articles syndicated across Postmedia publications.

### Top journalists



► Graph - Text equivalent

### Chart #1 - Opinions on the panel and consultation process



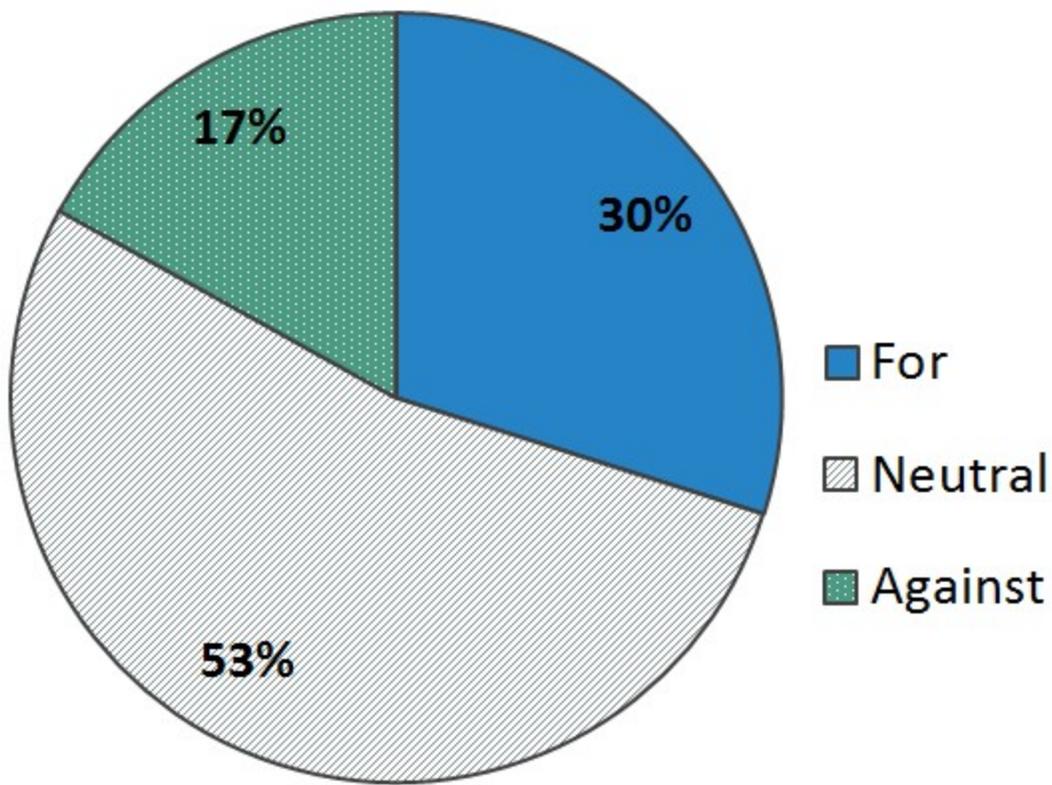
► Chart 1 - Text equivalent

**Positive:** Supportive of the consultation process or panel members

**Negative:** Critical of the consultation process or panel members

- While coverage was primarily neutral across the board, opinions were more split around the issue of assisted dying itself.
- Overall, opinions of the panel were 90 per cent neutral.
- Opinions on assisted dying were 53 per cent neutral, and just under one-third in favor. (Pie-Chart #2)
- Examples of articles both for and against assisted dying are presented below. The following pages will examine by month opinions on both assisted dying and the panel.

### Chart #2 - Opinions on assisted dying



► Chart 2 - Text equivalent

**For:** Supportive or in favour of assisted dying

**Against:** Critical of or against assisted dying

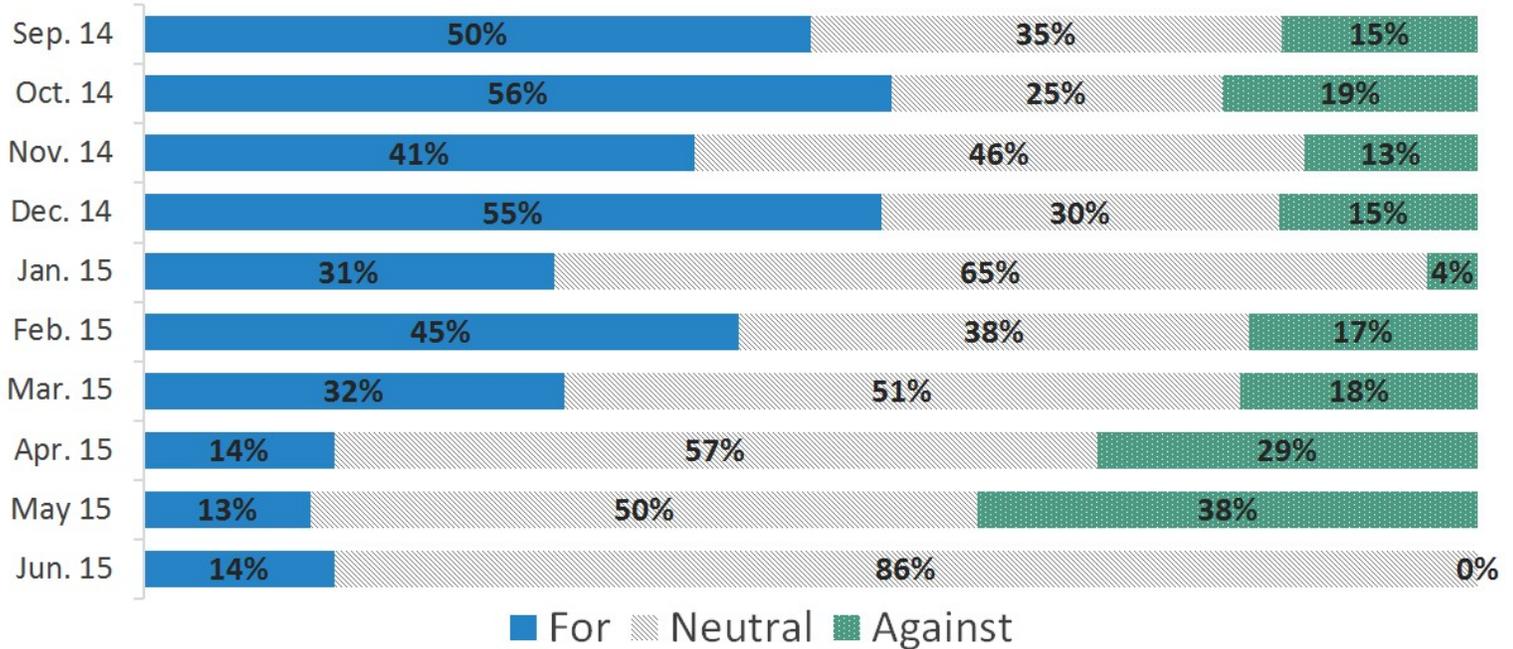
**Coverage for:**

- "B.C. woman wants to be first in Canada to receive doctor-assisted death" in the *Sudbury Star (Online)*, February 11, 2015
- "Steven Fletcher: We need physician-assisted death and palliative care" in the *Vancouver Province*, June 6, 2015

**Coverage against:**

- "Margaret Somerville: Rejecting euthanasia and respecting the secular spirit" in the *National Post (Online)*, October 27, 2014
- "Doctor-assisted suicide: Who does the killing?" in the *Vancouver Sun (Online)*, February 10, 2015

**Opinions expressed in media coverage on assisted dying (Sep. 2014 - Jun. 2015)**



► Figure 7 - Text equivalent

**Note:** Articles appearing in this section were selected to give examples of the most prominent articles for the month, with attention paid to non-neutral stories. In months with a particularly large percentage for or against, articles were chosen to give examples of coverage that led to this percentage.

### September 2014

- Sara Fox, the daughter of a B.C. woman who wrote a public letter before taking her own life, spoke in favour of assisted dying in a widely syndicated article. "Certainly, assisted suicide doesn't lead to more deaths. We're all going to die anyway," she said. "It doesn't lead to more deaths but it could lead to less suffering," ("Ethically, this seems to me the right thing to do': Wrenching suicide of B.C. woman with dementia spurs euthanasia debate", in the *National Post (Online)*, Sep. 1, 2014).
- In a column in the *Hamilton Spectator*, Daniel Opperwall wrote against assisted dying, writing "Advocates of euthanasia are compassionate people, but they've missed something: there is meaning in suffering. No human life, however agonized, is devoid of significance," ("There is meaning in suffering" in the *Hamilton Spectator (Online)*, Sep. 20, 2014).

### October 2014

- October had the largest proportion of articles in favour of assisted dying, with advocates speaking up as the Supreme Court heard challenges to the ban.
- At a rally held in Edmonton, Al Hancock, a spokesperson for Dying With Dignity Canada, spoke of his mother's death: "The end of life doesn't have to be terrible, it can be beautiful if you are given that choice. My mother would have been horrified to see the way she died," ("I have to have some options': Advocates march for death with dignity" in the *Calgary Herald (Online)*, Oct. 15, 2014).
- Those speaking before the Supreme Court panel were quoted in articles, including lead lawyer for the appellants Joseph Arvay: "Assisted dying should only be allowed in the most serious cases and not just because somebody wants to; it's because their condition is not going to get any better," (Supreme Court confronts right-to-die question" in *Metro News (Online)*, Oct. 15, 2015).

## November 2014

- November 2014 saw coverage of MP Steven Fletcher's personal stake in the assisted dying debate. Fletcher refuted the idea that right-to-die legislation would devalue the lives of the disabled: "I'm disabled. I'm as disabled as you can get. But I don't think my life is going to be in any way diminished because, in the hospital down the street, there's less suffering," ("Steven Fletcher's Mission; MP's push for legislation on right to die is deeply personal" in the *Montreal Gazette*, Nov. 22, 2014).

## December 2014

- December 2014 coverage was 55 per cent in favour of assisted dying, with coverage of a poll by Angus Reid Institute that said Canadians support the issue: "Of all the controversial issues you could name, this is the least controversial," said Arthur Schafer, director of the Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics at the University of Manitoba, ("Canadians support assisted dying, poll finds" in the *Montreal Gazette*, Dec. 17, 2014).

## January 2015

- Leading up to the Supreme Court ruling, the *National Post's* series "Exit Strategies" quoted Alain Berard, who has ALS, on assisted dying: "I consider it as an option, like a feeding tube, or a tracheostomy. It's like a treatment for the end of life, when the illness is too difficult to cope with. When you say, you know what? I've had enough. I don't want to do this anymore," ("Exit strategy: 'They want a promise from their doctor, that when they don't want to live, they can stop living'" in the *National Post*, Jan. 24, 2015).

## February 2015

- February coverage was filled with reaction to the Supreme Court ruling, and the deadline for legislation: "We don't legislate to regulate how doctors withdraw life-saving treatment. Why must we legislate to regulate how they administer suicide?" said law professor Amir Attaran in an article debating the issue ("No need for suicide legislation: academics" in the *National Post*, Feb. 27, 2015).
- Lawyer André Schutten came down firmly against assisted dying, writing, "When it comes to the right to life, a substantially minimized risk is an unacceptable risk. Innocent people will die and the state will be complicit in their deaths" ("André Schutten: Thanks to the SCC ruling, the state will be complicit in murder" in the *National Post*, Feb. 10, 2015).

## March 2015

- Following the Supreme Court ruling, Dr. Chris Pengilly wrote a column in favour of the decision, writing, "The advantages of this legislation are simple but immense. It will give control, and hence peace of mind, to patients who are facing progressive illness and helplessness when they know that they are able to end it if and when they feel ready," ("With safeguards, assisted suicide works" in the *Victoria Times-Colonist*, Mar. 20, 2015).

## April 2015

- A syndicated article looked at some of the issues around training doctors in assisted dying: "There will be many complexities to this - it's not going to be a simple process - and whatever we teach our medical students will have to be congruent with the legal parameters," said Dr. Richard Reznick, dean of the faculty of health sciences at Queen's University ("Canadian medical schools tackle assisted suicide" in the *Calgary Herald*, Apr. 2, 2015).

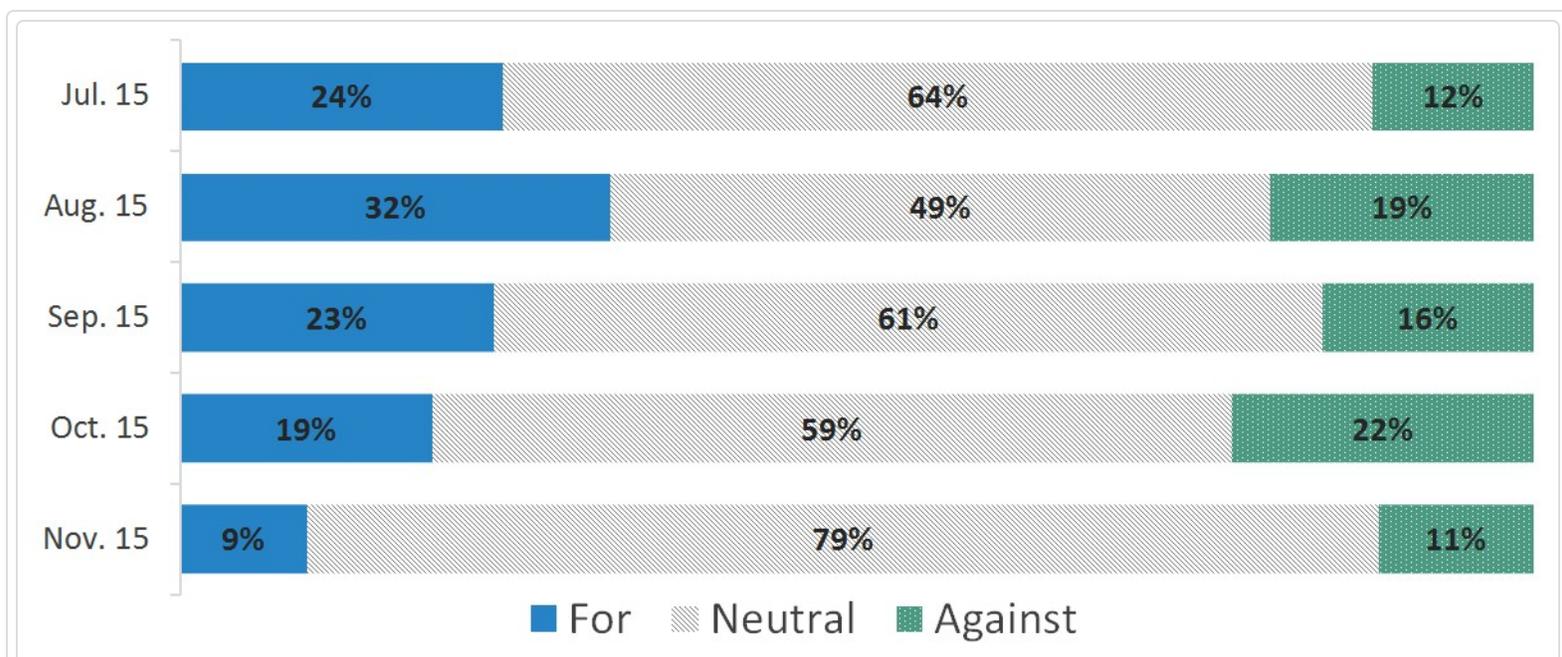
## May 2015

- May had the largest proportion of coverage against assisted dying, but relatively few media items overall. The largest story was a private members motion allowing MPs to vote freely on matters of conscience, which brought up the assisted suicide debate. MP Ed Komarnicki introduced the motion, saying "There are issues of conscience, Supreme Court of Canada decisions, that deal with matters that are difficult and people have differences of views and differences of opinions on that," ("Upcoming right-to-die legislation prompts MPs to consider their voting rights" in the *Ottawa Citizen (Online)*, May 28, 2015).

## June 2015

- June saw the federal government put forward the possibility of an extension on the legislative deadline. "The legislative time frame to present a bill, to have it go through Parliament, and be seriously debated in Parliament at all its stages, I think would take us well beyond that February date," said Justice Minister Peter MacKay ("Assisted suicide response needs more time" in *Metro News (Online)*, Jun. 16, 2015).

## Opinions expressed in media coverage on assisted dying (Jul. 2015 - Nov. 2015)



► Figure 8 - Text equivalent

## July 2015

- July saw the formation of an expert panel to advise the government. Articles about the panel were usually neutral on assisted dying itself, though some affirmed the need to uphold the court's decision: "Whatever advice this panel might provide, it is clear that Parliament must not enact a law that creates barriers for those who wish to access their constitutional right to physician-assisted dying," said Josh Paterson of the B.C. Civil Liberties Association ("Harper government finally launches long-promised consultation on assisted dying" in *Canoe Inc.*, Jul. 18, 2015).

## August 2015

- The Panel's questionnaire on assisted dying was accused of bias by Wanda Morris, Chief Executive of Dying With Dignity and supporters of the organization: "The federal government has moved from inaction

to obstruction," she said. "The questions are clearly designed not to elicit information, but to manufacture fear," ("Rights group decries federal survey on assisted suicide" in *The Globe and Mail*, Aug. 29, 2015).

- The Canadian Medical Association released a summary of online consultation with doctors showing many objections to assisting death, and proposed objecting doctors refer patients to a third party: "A lot of the physicians who oppose this find (referral) absolutely unacceptable," CMA president Dr. Chris Simpson said. But, "we're trying to respect and advocate for everybody's point of view here," ("Assisted death an ethical minefield for doctors" in the *Regina Leader-Post*, Aug. 19, 2015).

## **September 2015**

- The Assembly of Catholic Bishops in Quebec, opposed to assisted dying, released a document to guide the faithful: "Pourrait-il y avoir d'autres raisons pour lesquelles on voudrait avoir une loi comme ça au Québec? Est-ce que la seule raison, c'est vraiment pour soulager les patients?" said Cardinal Cyprien Lacroix ("Les évêques veulent contrer l'aide médicale à mourir" in *La Tribune (Sherbrooke)*, Sep. 30, 2015).

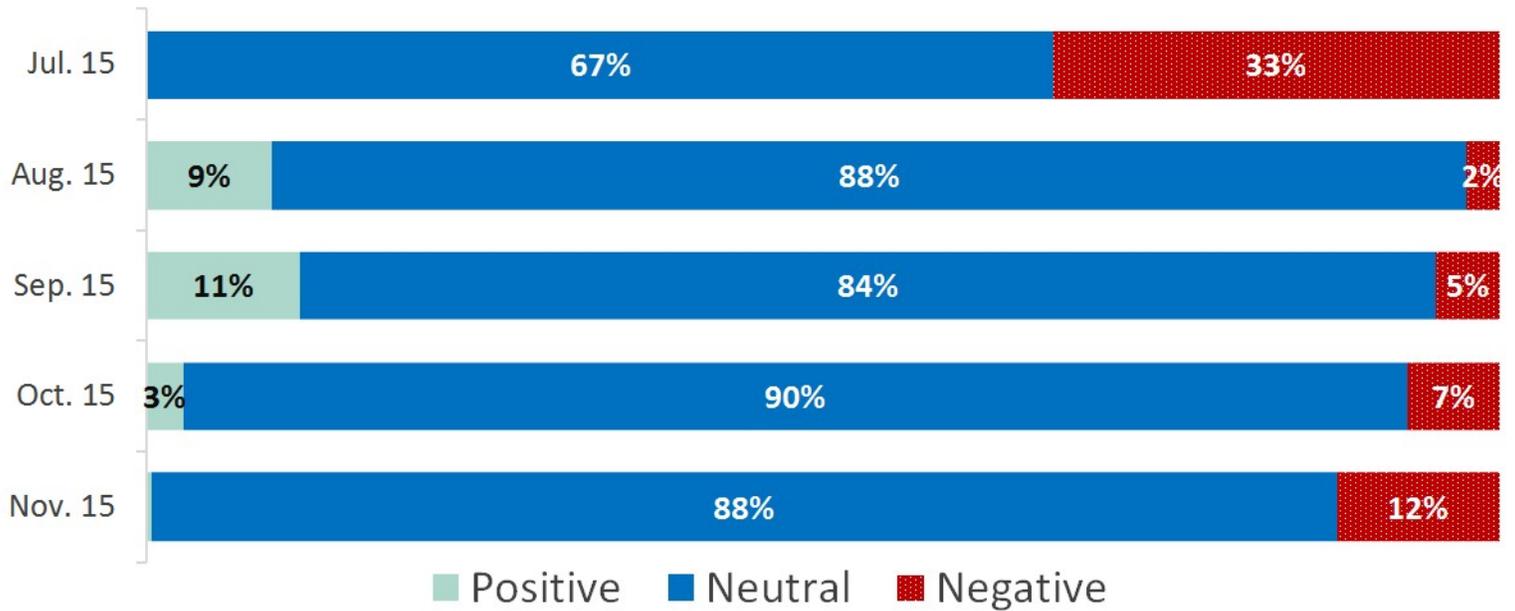
## **October 2015**

- After the federal election, religious leaders joined in urging Justin Trudeau to put legislation in place: "On the basis of our respective traditions and beliefs, we insist that any action intended to end human life is morally and ethically wrong," the group said in a joint statement ("Faith group urges palliative care over assisted suicide" in the *Ottawa Citizen*, Oct. 20, 2015).

## **November 2015**

- The Coalition of Physicians for Social Justice in Quebec want to bring further arguments before the Quebec Superior Court to contest the end-of-life care law. Paul Saba says medical aid in dying isn't a health service: "As a doctor, I can't accept something that is non-medical, non-scientific. It even goes against my code of ethics in Quebec. Under the code of ethics, if we have treatments to offer or an operation, we must always use the least dangerous," ("Doctors to contest end-of-life legislation in court" in the *Montreal Gazette*, Nov. 6, 2015).
- In preparation for the upcoming legislation on assisted dying, Saskatchewan's College of Physicians and Surgeons adopted a new policy on the matter: "We all have to make sure we get it right, because as early as Feb. 6, you may have somebody asking you for this service that you really need to know how to handle," said Saskatchewan Medical Association president Mark Brown ("Sask. docs set policy on assisted death" in the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix*, Nov. 21, 2015).

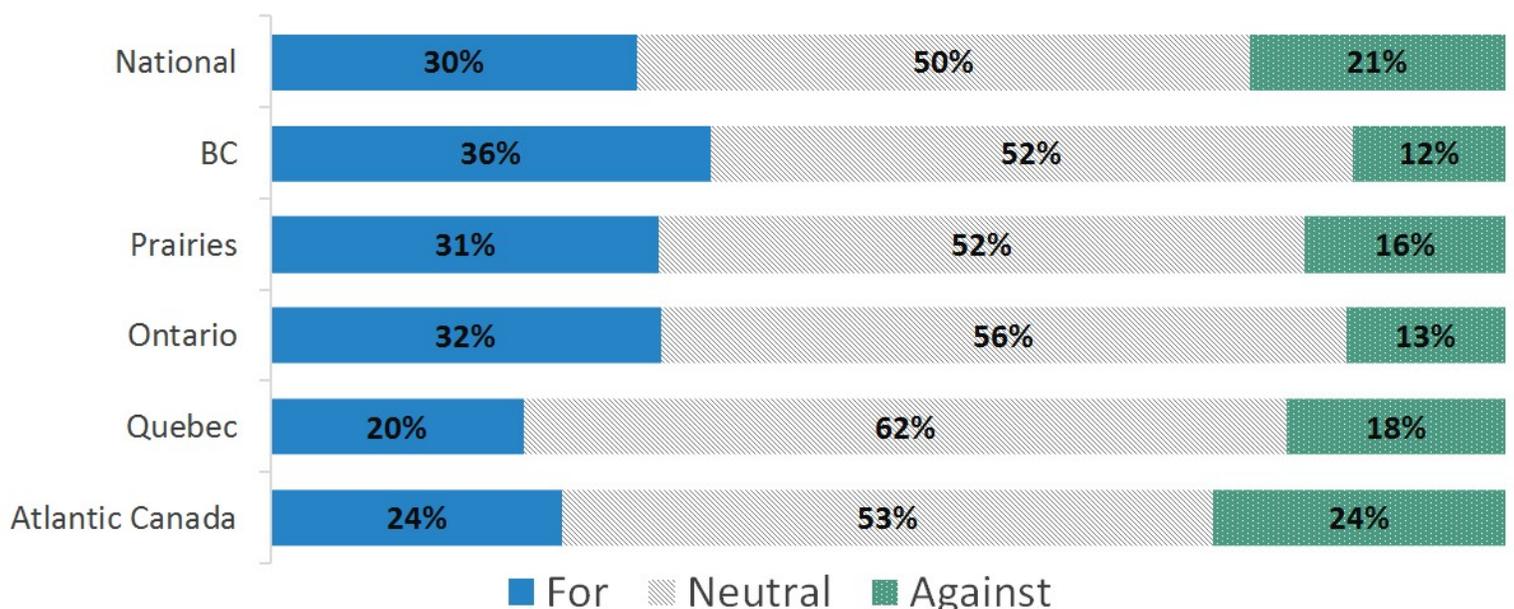
## **Opinions on the panel and consultation process (Jul. 2015 - Nov. 2015)**



► Figure 9 - Text equivalent

- Opinions on the expert panel were neutral on average, with only July seeing neutral articles drop to less than 80 per cent.
- September 2015 had the largest proportion of positive articles, with articles about the panel's fact-finding trip to Europe ("Canadian panel looking at assisted dying learns much from European experience" in the *Hamilton Spectator (Online)*, Sep. 21, 2015).
- July 2015 had the largest proportion of negative coverage, after the newly formed panel was met with accusations of bias ("Ottawa stacks assisted-dying panel" in the *Victoria Times-Colonist*, Jul. 13, 2015). Justice Minister Peter MacKay also assured Canadians that the panel's findings wouldn't be necessarily binding to the government ("Panel won't dictate response: MacKay" in the *Hamilton Spectator*, Jul. 23, 2015).

### Opinions expressed in media coverage on assisted dying by region



► Figure 10 - Text equivalent

## Assisted dying coverage by region

- A majority of coverage across the provinces was on national issues, with syndicated articles about country-wide events, such as the initial hearing in front of the Supreme Court ("All eyes on Supreme Court this week as it hears assisted suicide appeal" in the *Vancouver Province (Online)*, Oct. 13, 2014).

### British Columbia

- B.C. had the largest proportion of coverage in favour of assisted dying, with local stories about the death of Gillian Bennet ("Dead at Noon: B.C. woman's public plea for assisted suicide spurs debate" in the *Penticton Herald (Online)*, Sep. 1, 2015). This story also ran in publications across the country.

### Prairies

- Publications in the Prairies covered local doctors' expertise on the assisted-dying issue ("Sask. docs set policy on assisted death" in the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix*, Nov. 21, 2015), and local reactions to the repeal of the ban on doctor-assisted dying ("Edmonton reaction mixed to Supreme Court of Canada's decision to strike down the ban on assisted suicide in Canada" in the *Edmonton Sun (Online)*, Feb. 6, 2015).

### Ontario

- In addition to wide coverage of the issue overall, local Ontario stories included cases of terminally ill patients taking their own lives held up as proof for the need of legislation ("'Devastated' MD sees need for an assisted-suicide law" in the *Ottawa Citizen*, Dec. 12, 2014).
- A number of Ontario publications also ran articles about the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario's call for nurses to be consulted in developing laws around assisted dying ("Nurses' group wants say in assisted suicide legislation" in the *Kingston Whig-Standard*, Feb. 9, 2015).

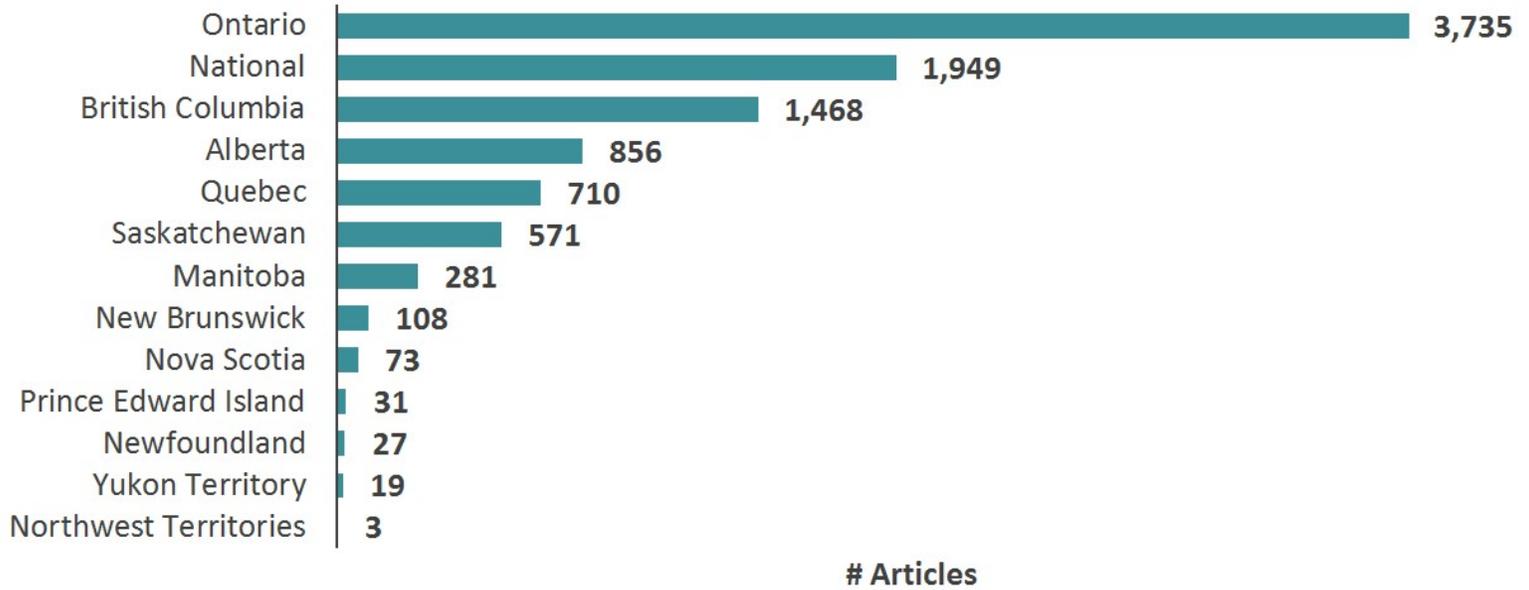
### Quebec

- Quebec had the largest proportion of neutral coverage, with discussions of implementation such as fees ("How much do you charge to help someone die?" in the *Montreal Gazette*, Oct. 7, 2015). Religious concerns also played a part in Quebec's coverage ("Les évêques veulent contrer l'aide médicale à mourir" in *La Presse*, Sep. 30, 2015).

### Atlantic Canada

- Atlantic Canada's coverage was the most balanced between for and against. Coverage included Nova Scotia's premier calling for mature discussion after the Supreme Court ruling in favour of assisted dying ("McNeil: Public should discuss assisted death" in the *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*, Feb. 1, 2015).

### Top regions



► Graph - Text equivalent

## About MediaMiser

### About MediaMiser:

**MediaMiser** clients, from Fortune 500 companies to startups to government departments, trust our web-based media monitoring and analysis solution. They count on us for timely traditional and social media analytics generated by our patented software, the customized reporting options provided by our responsive and proactive client services team, and our 24-hour technical support. We turn news into knowledge for clients based in Canada, the United States, Europe, and Australia.

[← Previous Page](#)

[Table of Contents](#)