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Article abstract

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“Defenders of Perversion”: Professing Same-Sex Marriage Rights in the Local Press

Geraint B. Osborne, Shauna Wilton

ABSTRACT This case study provides an important socio-historical snapshot of the same-sex marriage debate in a small city in central Alberta between December 2004 and August 2005. We explore the relationship between professors and small-town newspapers in fostering democratic dialogues on key social issues through an analysis of faculty columns and the responding Letters to the Editor in a local paper. In so doing, this research focuses on two social groups located in a particular social environment, each representing a particular frame: the professors working in the local university who maintained an op-ed column in the local paper and supported a equality frame; and the general public living in Camrose and the surrounding rural area who supported a morality frame. This article contributes to our understanding of scholarly engagement in the town-gown context, the democratic role of the press, and how a particularly contentious social and political issue—same-sex marriage—was experienced and framed by concerned citizens in a small conservative rural city that is also the home to a liberal arts and sciences university campus.

KEYWORDS community engagement, same-sex marriage, frame analysis, media, democracy

On April 12, 2005, a letter to the editor appearing in the *Camrose Booster*—a community newspaper in the small rural city of Camrose, Alberta—took issue with an op-ed column, written by a political studies professor at the local university, that defended same-sex marriage and cautioned about hateful remarks towards gays and lesbians. The letter stated:

[She] suggests the real question about perversion “marriage” is whether or not all should be equal under the law . . . she counsels respect for the mockers and destroyers of marriage. According to her, we must be careful not to make hurtful comments. . . . [But] the hatred of evil must be acceptable, or there is no morality, no difference in actions, nothing to be opposed in speech or otherwise. A moral person must hate evil. And I would suggest there is no greater evil today than that found in those speaking favourably of perversion.

This clash of views regarding same-sex marriage was typical of much of the back-and-forth between faculty members and many of the Camrose and area population in late 2004 and early 2005 as Parliament debated same-sex marriage legislation. While the same-sex marriage

debate in Camrose mirrored some of what was happening across Canada, particularly in more conservative communities, it also demonstrated the role of academics in engaging the community through the local newspaper and providing information and dialogue crucial to the democratic process.

The same-sex marriage debate had been waged periodically in the local Camrose newspapers for several years but became particularly heated between December 2004 and April 2005 as the intent of the Canadian government to legalize same-sex marriage became clear. Faculty members at the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta, a local liberal arts and sciences institution, were central participants in the debate. Faculty had published an op-ed column in the local newspapers since 1996, but no topic was more controversial than same-sex marriages, and faculty soon found themselves described as “defenders of perversion” by some of the more conservative public.

This case study is part of a broader research project examining the public role of professors and print media within small communities, the “town-and-gown” relationship between universities and the broader communities they inhabit, and the nature of the public discourse on important community, provincial, national, and international issues. Building on our previous research on the motivations and views of the professors who contribute to and support the column (Osborne & Wilton, 2017), we examine the nature of the public discourse on same-sex marriage in a small Albertan city (population 16,000 at the time) and the role of public intellectuals in shaping the debate.

We argue that the faculty’s engagement with the community through the column, and the letters they generated, contributed to the democratic role of the local newspapers in a small city in rural Alberta and shaped the debate around same-sex marriage in the community. In doing so, the dialogue between professors writing columns and the general public demonstrates the importance of faculty engaging with the public on key social and political issues.



Copies of The Camrose Booster, a local newspaper in Camrose, Alberta.
Photo by: Nathalie Bernard

The Political Context of the Same-Sex Marriage Debate

Much has been written on the same-sex marriage issue in Canada, especially its central legal (Glass & Kubasek, 2008; Hogg, 2006), political (Lahey & Anderson, 2004; Larocque, 2005; Matthews, 2005; Pierceson, 2005; Smith, 2005, 2007; White, 2014), and socio-cultural dimensions (MacIntosh et al., 2010; van der Toorn et al., 2017; Young & Nathanson, 2009), including the role of the mass media and especially the role of newspapers (Bannerman, 2011; Johnson, 2012; Lee & Hicks, 2011; Li & Liu, 2010; Pettinicchio, 2010). Larocque (2005)

provides a valuable account of the key events and situates the emergence of same-sex marriage within the broader context of gay and lesbian movements. Indeed, in Canada, same-sex marriage became legalized following several Charter cases and debate within the courts, rather than among the general public (Bowal & Campbell, 2007; Hogg, 2006). It was through the courts that the legal framework for the emergence of same-sex marriage in Canada was constructed and the traditional definition of marriage was successfully challenged (Hogg, 2006).



Founder's Hall, Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta, Camrose Alberta.

Photo: Nathalie Bernard

introduced Bill C-38, the *Civil Marriage Act*, which ultimately passed 158 to 133. The legislation received Royal Assent from the Governor General and became law on July 20th. Canada became the fourth country in the world, after the Netherlands, Belgium, and Spain, to legalize same-sex marriages nationwide (Overby et al., 2011).

The national conversation about same-sex marriage was intense but generally respectful and democratic. The media, long used as an entry point for people to participate in public debate and the political process, was an active site of dialogue and dissension. This was also true of the local papers in Camrose, in which faculty produced several columns on the issue of same-sex marriage generating diverse responses. Theorists working in the functionalist tradition have argued that, ideally, the media can promote democracy by keeping citizens engaged in the practice of governance by informing, educating, and mobilizing the public (Siegel, 1996). In their civic forum role, the media, especially local newspapers, can strengthen the public sphere by mediating between citizens and the state, facilitating debate about the major issues of the day, and informing the public about party leadership, political issues, and government actions (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1995; Nielsen, 2015). Theorists from Habermas (1962) to Sen (1999) have documented how the rise of the politically oriented public sphere in western societies was fundamentally linked to the development of the media. The existence of unfettered and independent media has been essential in the process of democratization, by contributing towards the right of freedom of expression, thought, and conscience. An independent media strengthens the responsiveness and accountability of governments to all citizens, and provides a pluralist platform and channel of political expression for a multiplicity of groups and interests.

In 2003, a motion from the Canadian Alliance Party—the formal opposition in Parliament—politicized the debate. This motion aimed to reaffirm the traditional definition of marriage as a union between one man and one woman, but it was narrowly defeated, with 137 votes against and 132 in favour (Overby et al., 2011). In December 2004, following the Supreme Court of Canada's ruling on same-sex marriage, the new Liberal Prime Minister, Paul Martin, announced his government would move forward on the issue. In February 2005, the government

Bannerman (2011) argues that Canadian newspapers played a key democratic role during the same-sex marriage debate by allowing groups with conflicting interests to take part and voice their positions, as well as creating a site for reflection and the identification of the common good. As such, newspaper coverage of the same-sex marriage debate fulfilled both liberal-plural and republican conceptions of democracy (Bannerman, 2011). The same-sex marriage issue represented a struggle over Canadian values and identity, and newspapers provided citizens, interest groups, and state elites the opportunity to publicly debate the extent to which same-sex marriage was either detrimental to family values or reflected Canada's commitment to tolerance and the accommodation of diversity. Bannerman's analysis of same-sex marriage articles in 14 major newspapers during 2003-2004 found that while both these positions were presented, by the end of 2004, the view that same-sex marriage was consistent with Canadian values of tolerance and accommodation had become dominant; however, smaller newspapers were more likely to position themselves against same-sex marriage.

Across Canada, the equality frame, supported by institutional activists, powerful political and intellectual elites, won out against the morality frame. The equality frame was used to defend same-sex marriage and reflected the position of the courts and the importance of the guarantee to equality within the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Matthew, 2005). The morality frame, on the other hand, was linked to religious freedoms and social conservatism (van der Toorn et al., 2017). Pettinicchio (2010) contends that the equality frame won out for two important reasons. First, while Canadians were clearly divided on same-sex marriage, for most it was not the most pressing issue—polls ranked it 16th among many other salient issues (Pettinicchio, 2010). Second, because of the public's lack of interest in the issue, political elites and institutional activists for whom the issue was salient were able to successfully forward their equality frame. The entrenchment of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* provided a foundation for the increased importance of the equality frame in Canadian society. Ultimately, the broader public held the courts and the *Canadian Constitution* and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in high esteem, making the morality frame less palatable to many Canadians (Pettinicchio, 2010).

While same-sex marriage may not have been a salient issue for the "general public" (Pettinicchio, 2010), we contend that it clearly was for *some* publics, one of which was the Camrose area in the traditionally conservative province of Alberta. In Camrose, Alberta, the debate was very intense, at least as it played out in the pages of the *Camrose Booster*. Camrose had been the subject of a *Globe & Mail* article in 2003 which found that while the same-sex marriage debate was nuanced across Alberta, Camrosians were found to be more opposed because of their "conservatism, rural roots, religious beliefs and fear of the unknown" (Mahoney, 2003, p. A6). People interviewed for the article acknowledged "feeling uncomfortable in the presence of gays or lesbians," believed that "homosexuality" was "wrong, plain and simple," and thought that same-sex marriage "upends time-honoured morals that are the foundation of society" (Mahoney, 2003, p. A6). As such, in general, the Camrose area public who were vocal in the local newspapers supported the morality frame on the issue of same-sex marriage, while the professors at Augustana adopted the equality frame in the column to argue in defence of same-sex marriage.

In examining academic engagement with the community and the democratic role played by local newspapers, this research focuses on two social groups located in a particular social environment: the professors working in the local university and the general public living in Camrose and the surrounding rural area. Obviously, these two social groups are diverse in their constitution, particularly their social, political, economic, and religious views, but the columns and letters to the editor suggest that these groups fall into two opposing camps: the cosmopolitan secular left versus the rural religious right.

The Social Context: Augustana, Camrose, and Conservative Alberta

Camrose is an excellent example of a *rurban* environment, a population centre sharing both rural and urban characteristics (Bonner, 1997; Pahl, 1968). The small city attracts a diverse range of citizens, although politically, it is quite homogenous. Camrose is located in central rural Alberta and its citizens share many of the unique political views and social values held by the people of the province. The political culture of Alberta is unique from the rest of English-speaking Canada as it is, and historically has been, based on socially and fiscally conservative views. Albertans and their government have traditionally supported free market initiatives such as lower taxes and fewer regulations on business (Norrie et al., 2002) and opposed progressive reforms, such as changes to the definition of marriage to include same-sex marriage (Lloyd & Bonnett, 2005; Rayside, 2008).

Rural Alberta is Canada's most conservative region. Most elections have seen the right-wing party of the day win all or most of the ridings in Alberta, often by massive margins (Parliament of Canada, n.d.). The hegemonic status of conservative politics in Alberta leads to diminished competition between political parties and little public debate on major issues. When ideological issues are debated, such as health care and same-sex marriage, Albertans tend to take a hard-conservative stance, speaking out against liberal social and fiscal values (Archer, 1992; Wesley, 2011). The 2001 census distinguished Camrose as a conservative and largely religious community with 85% of residents identifying as Christian, while 14% had no religious affiliation.

What makes Camrose unique among other similarly sized Alberta communities is the presence of a post-secondary education institution. Augustana Campus was, for the first 75 years, known as Camrose Lutheran College (CLC) and the founders of CLC were primarily interested in preserving Norwegian language and culture and in strengthening Christian belief (Johansen, 2012). This emphasis on strengthening Christian belief meant that for many years, the college was theologically conservative. Full degree-granting status was attained in 1984 and the college became a university college in 1985, when its first B.A. degrees were granted. The college changed its name to Augustana University College in 1991 to attract a more diverse student body. In 2004, faced with financial pressures, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) agreed to conveyance and the college merged with the University of Alberta to become a separate faculty and satellite campus of the university, now known as the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta.

In 1991, Augustana University College founded the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in the Liberal Arts (CIRLA) based on the liberal arts belief that university education is best typified as a dialogue between itself and other groups in society and, also, within its own walls. In 1996, CIRLA faculty initiated a weekly column, “Educated Guesses,” written by faculty in the local, and independently owned, *Camrose Canadian* newspaper. After the *Camrose Canadian* was bought by the Quebecor media and telecommunications company, the column was picked up by the *Camrose Booster* and renamed “Second Thoughts.” The *Camrose Booster* is independently owned and has a circulation of over 13,000 households in 21 communities. Interestingly, the creation of the column in 1996 coincided with a broader “upswing in interest in public intellectuals in English Canada” in the late 1990s (McLaughlin & Townsley, 2011, p. 345). Column contributors from various disciplines write on a wide range of topics, such as same-sex marriage, drug policy, evolution, euthanasia, music, religion, sports, and international relations. Our survey found that, for many contributors, the column is a tiny voice from a bastion of progressivism that struggles to be heard in the heart of conservative Alberta (Osborne & Wilton, 2017).

The academics at Augustana who write columns in the local papers agree with Said’s (1994) notion of the public intellectual (Osborne & Wilton, 2017). Said views an intellectual’s mission in life as breaking down stereotypes and advancing “human freedom and knowledge” (Said, 1994, p. 17). This mission often requires intellectuals to adopt the role of the outsider who questions social institutions, actively disturbs the status quo, and “represent[s] all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (Said, 1994, p. 11). Augustana professors write columns largely out of a sense of responsibility, one that consists of providing knowledge and insight, leadership, and service, and breaking down barriers of intellectual elitism to a public that contributes financially to their chosen vocation. The professors’ desire to be vocal through columns and letters to the editor reflects their views of the role of the “public intellectual,” although many dislike this term and prefer public or engaged scholar (Osborne & Wilton, 2017). In a broader sense, they view themselves as contributing to democratic life by sharing knowledge and, ideally, creating a public space for a safe and civil discussion of the most contentious public issues. These views were certainly predominant in 2004–2005 when the Canadian government made clear its intention to legalize same-sex marriages. Our analysis of the columns and letters to the editor generated during this period reveals the important role of academics in shaping and framing the local debate.

Methodology

This article utilizes a case study methodology to explore the role of academics as public intellectuals in the same-sex marriage debate in the rural Albertan community of Camrose. Case studies such as this are noted for their ability to initiate the process of discovery (Yin, 2003a, 2003b). While researchers are limited in the generalizations that they can draw, case studies are nonetheless especially useful for intensively examining and understanding a single case, engaging in theoretical analysis, and generating insights and hypotheses that may be explored in subsequent studies (Gomm et al., 2000). The research for this case study began in

the summer of 2010 after receiving ethics approval from the University of Alberta (Study ID: MS1_Pro00007931). The focus of this article is on the results of our analysis of the columns and the letters to the editor on the topic of same-sex marriage. During this period, the faculty wrote three columns on the topic of same-sex marriage. The columns generated 56 letters to the editor between December 21, 2004 and July 12, 2005, accounting for 35%, or just over a third, of the total letters concerning columns published between 1996 and 2017, suggesting it was a very “salient” issue for the Camrose public.

We began by searching for columns and letters that mentioned same-sex marriage, gays or lesbians, or homosexuality. At the time of the publication of the letters and columns, homosexuality remained a common term within the data, although it is dated and potentially offensive today. Once the columns and letters were identified, we used a grounded approach to coding themes within the articles and identifying key discourses. The findings from the data were then related to the existing literature on the same-sex marriage debate in Canada.

Findings

Our research focused on understanding the nature of the debate around same-sex marriage in Camrose and the role of professors in shaping that debate. The analysis of the content and themes of the letters to the editor during this period reveals two primary frames—morality and equality (as identified by Pettinicchio, 2010)—and seven subthemes, four within the first frame and three within the latter. The morality frame was characterized by four discourses grounded in tradition and religion that were concerned with the negative impact same-sex marriage would have on society: (1) labelling queer sex as deviance; (2) identifying the harm posed by same-sex marriage to individuals, social institutions, and society; (3) denouncing gay rights activism; and, (4) criticizing faculty and the university. While the equality frame was not as well represented as the morality frame within the letters to the editor, it was a significant voice in the debate over same-sex marriage in Camrose. The equality frame discusses the issue through the legal-political lenses of: (1) individual and group Rights; (2) hate speech and hate crime; and, (3) diversity and tolerance.

As mentioned above, the professors writing the columns championed the equality theme, with some support from the community, whereas the morality frame emerges from the letters sent in response to the columns. The following sections begin by outlining the trajectory of the debate in the newspaper before moving on to explore the frames and subthemes in more detail using quotations from the columns and letters as evidence. While it is difficult to assess the impact of these frames on public opinion, the discussion of the findings below demonstrates the central role of faculty, as public intellectuals, in the debate.

The debate

The same-sex marriage debate was initiated by a column in support of same-sex marriage that was written by a faculty member who was “really angry about the public discourse on gay marriage in Camrose and felt very much like an alien in the community” (Interview 6). In particular, she was upset with a letter from a community member that wondered what would

“happen to the moral fiber of our country” should same-sex marriage be legalized. The letter admonished the government, stating “an entire generation is now growing up thinking there is nothing wrong with same-sex marriages!” (Letter 1, Dec. 21, 2004). In her column, Wilton argued that the same-sex marriage debate was a question of equality, not religion. In direct response to the earlier letter, she asked,

Do we want to continue to build a country that is based on a foundation of respect for individuals and their inherent equality, or do we want an entire generation of Canadians growing up thinking it is OK to discriminate against minorities simply because they are different? (Wilton, 2005a)

Consequently, there was a flurry of letters to the editor in response to the column, arguing that since “homosexual sex” was “unnatural,” chiefly because it could not lead to procreation, it was perfectly sensible to deny same-sex couples the right to marriage. As a result, a follow-up column was written by a faculty member on the social construction of sexuality challenging notions of natural and unnatural sex (Osborne, 2005). This column provoked outrage among members of the Camrose community, one of which accused the faculty member of writing for personal gain, while another called him a “perversion lover.” This faculty member also received a personal letter in his campus mailbox written by an alumnus who dismissed the faculty member as a gay, young professor who could not possibly understand God’s plan for “homosexuals.” The faculty member found the letter “hurtful” and “an example of the invisible hostility of the community” (Interview 3). Moreover, the fact that the letter had been hand-delivered on campus, combined with the general tone of the letters to the editor, left the faculty member feeling “anxious,” “creepy,” and

. . . suddenly visible and identifiably “gay” for the first time in my life. While I could not know how many people had read the column, this not knowing left me uneasy. Had this cashier read it? Did she recognize me? Was that “Have a nice day” laced with an undertone of “Get out of town, you dirty bugger, and don’t touch my kids”? Walking in the late evenings, I imagine I felt for the first time in my life, the insecurity that women report feeling when out alone at night. . . . Was my disturbance of the “normal” patterns of desire something that needed to be removed or put in its place? These were all irrational fears that had not one single verifying example to support them, but they arose from the veiled, latent, or naked homophobia in the letters to the editor. (Interview 3)

This feeling of being overly vulnerable to the scrutiny of others is a major concern in smaller communities, where the anonymity of the authors and the ability to work and live in a community without frequently encountering people who know about you is a challenge. In fact, our previous research showed that the size of the community was one reason why faculty were reluctant to

participate in the column when they felt that their views would be unpopular (Osborne & Wilton, 2017). Some of the public response was positive, however, with one letter stating,

After the weeks of letters condemning same-sex marriage and judgmental statements about homosexuals, it is a relief to read the column on the Nature of Sex . . . [He] presents a logical and rational point of view that my husband and I both appreciated. (Letter 28, March 1, 2005)

The issue truly exploded in Camrose with a lengthy letter to the editor written by the town's only Ob/Gyn, who, writing as a doctor, argued that homosexuality is a "high risk sexual behaviour" and linked anal sex to the rise in HIV, herpes, and other sexually transmitted diseases. Furthermore, he alluded to anonymous bathhouse sexual encounters and sexual practices such as fisting, stating that "this is a far cry from healthy sex which is the ultimate expression of intimacy, so exquisite, that out of it, new life may emerge" (Letter 39, March 8, 2005). The letter, written in scientific language and offering to provide supporting scientific sources, implied that according to the medical profession, same-sex relationships were dangerous to one's health and society at large.

Responses to the doctor's letter varied. One letter, written by an English professor, called it a "hysterical scare letter" (Letter 29, March 22, 2005). Another professor at Augustana admonished the doctor for "using the power of scientific research and his position of authority to bolster these hateful stereotypes" (Letter 35, March 22, 2005). Yet another letter accused him of providing "glaring misrepresentations" in "order to support his vilification of homosexuals" (Letter 36, April 12, 2005). The most damning letter, however, came from Dr. Lorne Warneke, a Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. In his letter, Warneke challenged the evidence provided, arguing that the Ob/Gyn's partial and biased use of evidence, "written with a tone of anger and blame," was "nothing more than a thinly disguised expression of homo hatred" (Letter 40, April 5, 2005).

Others, however, were impressed by the doctor's comments and the authority of his position. One letter thanked him for being a medical professional with "the guts to stand up and explain the serious consequences of alternative lifestyles" (Letter 15, March 22, 2005). Yet another letter stated that the article

convinced me that the difference in the risks to health, of those who *ignore* the boundaries provided for healthy sexual expression and those who *observe* those boundaries, is much greater than many of us realized. The documented evidence that he presents firmly establishes his claim that homo and hetero sexual practices are not equal. (Letter 16, March 29, 2005)

In response, Dr. Wilton wrote a column on the topic of hate speech. With the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Canadian Criminal Code* provided as context, she cautioned readers that "stating publicly that homosexuals are perverse, disgusting, unnatural and

well-deserving of our homo-revulsion, comes very close to crossing the line between free speech and hate speech” (Wilton, 2005b). This column elicited a few letters, with one defending the hatred of “homosexuals” because they were clearly evil, and furthermore accusing Dr. Wilton of being immoral and evil and “speaking favorably of perversion” (Letter 19, April 12, 2005).

Dr. Ward later retracted his letter on October 5, 2005, stating, “I want to be clear that I was expressing my own views in the opinions I expressed in that letter. I was not purporting to speak for the medical profession as a whole” (Letter 41, October 5, 2005). This apology ended the public debate over same-sex marriage in Camrose. During the debate, the *Camrose Booster* noticed an increased interest in the newspaper, not only by the number of letters to the editor received, but by how quickly newspapers disappeared from the stands in the community businesses and organizations in which they were placed (Personal Correspondence). The following sections explore the debate in relation to the morality and equality frames.

The morality frame

Labelling “homosexuals” as deviants. One of the most frequently occurring themes in the letters involved characterizing same-sex marriage as “undesirable,” “absurd,” “abnormal,” “sinful,” and a “perversion,” often from a self-proclaimed Christian position. For example, a frequent contributor wrote, “to refer to the union of homosexuals as marriage is blatantly absurd and it should be called what it is—‘perversion marriage’” (Letter 13, March 1, 2005). Others, such as a Lutheran Pastor, provided Biblical evidence for their position:

We need to let the Bible Interpret the Bible.... The Bible’s clear teaching is of law and gospel, sin, and grace. This is also a clear teaching of the Lutheran Confessions. If we follow these important interpretive principles, we will I believe, know that same-sex marriage/union is not biblical and is not to be approved. (Letter 20, April 26, 2006)

What was more common, however, was the derogatory labelling or associating gays and lesbians with more questionable and harmful social behaviour. Homosexuality was referred to as “wicked,” “an unhealthy addiction,” “dangerous,” and was as deplorable as “abortion,” “polygamy,” “child poverty,” “domestic violence,” “bestiality,” and “incest.” Gays and lesbians were viewed as “promiscuous,” were compared to “alcoholics,” “adulterers,” “prostitutes,” “thieves,” and were deemed to be engaging in a “dangerous alternative lifestyle.”

Identifying harm. Another common theme was the identification of the harm posed by same-sex marriage and queer sex to individuals, social institutions, and society. Letters expounded on how same-sex marriage would endanger the “moral character” of the country, negatively impact other social institutions, such as the family, religion, education, law, and healthcare, and even threaten Christmas. One individual who self-identified as an educator, wrote that same-sex marriage would affect society in “unavoidable ways” (Letter 2, Dec 21, 2004). Furthermore, this individual argued that “the school curriculum and the text-books will change” with the

result that “workshops will flood the country on how to deal with ‘family,’ absent of values” (Letter 2, Dec 21, 2004). Children were viewed as particularly vulnerable victims. For instance, for one contributor

Our children, by the way of heterosexual unions, will have to live with, socialize with, go to school with, work with people in these ‘new-age’ situations. . . . it is totally unfair to a tiny child, with no say, to be raised in a homosexual environment.” (Letter 4, Jan. 4, 2005)

The arguments around the potential harm to children were accompanied by arguments around the health risks, which became more pronounced after Dr. Ward’s letter. One of the of the most damning letters thanked Dr. Ward and added,

It’s refreshing to see a medical professional having the guts to stand up and explain the serious consequences of alternative lifestyles. Much has been said by the gay rights movement; it’s important for them, and their supporters to realize the very real and deadly consequences of their actions. It’s not just about their rights anymore; it’s about the rights of unknowing victims of promiscuous behavior. (Letter 15, March 22, 2005)

Denouncing gay rights activism. Another common theme within the morality frame letters was a concern with the gay rights movement itself and what was perceived as “rampant liberal thinking,” “rights and freedoms run amok,” and a minority group “forcing their views” on the majority. One letter writer argued that the pro-same-sex marriage lobby was twisting the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* to suit their own agenda, which was

. . . to shove the whole gay rights to marriage issue down our throats without any regard for our beliefs and opinions. Our opinions be damned; this much has been said by that gutless prime minister of ours; one who is bowing to pressure from a special interest group rather than listen to the majority of Canadians who believe the issue of marriage should be exclusive to one man and one woman. . . . I’d like to think that Canada is a free country, but obviously, thanks to the gay marriage issue, that is no longer the case . . . millions of heterosexual Canadians are no longer free to believe what we want. If we do, and are outspoken about it, we are labeled homophobes and bigots. I am sick and tired of special interest groups cramming their garbage down my throat. (Letter 3, Jan. 4, 2005)

Within this theme were letters pleading for various forms of social action to counter same-sex marriage. One individual argued, “It’s high time we stand together and fight for what’s right before this country slides further and faster into hell” (Letter 3, Jan. 4, 2005). There were

also pleas for people to write letters to their local MLAs and federal government officials, to organize locally, and to hold and attend prayer meetings. For instance, one letter suggested “a twenty-four hour pray-a-thon” that would “show the commitment of our churches to keeping God’s plan for marriage the plan for our country”. (Letter 5, January 18, 2005)

Criticizing faculty members. The final theme identified in the morality discourse appeared in those letters directed specifically at the university members who supported and defended same-sex marriage and gay rights in their columns and letters. Professors were called “perversion lovers,” “defenders of perversion,” “evil,” “nutty,” “over-educated,” “bleeding-hearted liberals,” and as “lying” or being “highly subjective” in the columns they wrote. One faculty member had defended same-sex marriage, counselled against discrimination of any kind, and argued that the founders of the institution would be proud of the inclusiveness that now characterized the institution. She garnered the following response:

It is disingenuous of her to pretend not to know that the founders of Augustana lived in an era when no one godly found sexual perversion in any way acceptable; so her hope that they would be proud to see students and staff practicing perversion is ridiculous. . . . I say this about her because she has put herself out there as a defender of perversion. (Letter 18, April 5, 2005)

Professors were viewed as betraying the religious, Lutheran roots of the institution. One individual scolded a professor who had explained in her column the role of the Supreme Court in upholding the Charter:

Does she know that Augustana University was conceived, founded, and nurtured by God-fearing men seeking to serve future generations with a better education, and to develop in them a strong moral conscience in a true democracy, and to treat everyone with love and respect, even those of a different sexual orientation? I take my hat off to the farsighted Christian fathers of Augustana. Does she? And does she not feel that she is biting the hand that feeds her? (Letter 6, January 25, 2005)

While most of the letters favoured the morality theme, it was not completely uncontested. Several letters supported the equality theme espoused by the faculty in their columns.

The equality frame

Individual and group rights. The most prominent theme within the equality frame emphasized the importance of recognizing and protecting individual and religious rights and freedoms as identified by the Canadian Charter. Letters emphasized the importance of “equality,” “tolerance,” “minority rights,” “religious rights and freedoms,” and “democracy,” and writers expressed being “saddened,” “disgusted” or “angered” by the “backward thinking” of those

opposed to same-sex marriage. For instance, one letter began by stating how “angry” they were at the “narrow minded” people who opposed same-sex marriage and added:

Things are changing and people need to realize that gays and lesbians have just as much right to get married as straight people. What does it really have to do with them anyway? . . . It’s really none of their business and I don’t understand what all the fuss is about. (Letter 22, Dec. 28, 2004)

Others pointed to the fact that gays and lesbians contributed to their communities in a myriad of ways and deserved the same rights as heterosexuals:

The recent letters in response to proposed gay marriage are saddening. Let us for a minute open our minds. I personally know of many gay/lesbian educators, business owners, volunteers, health and helping professionals in this community. Why should it be that these hard-working taxpayers have fewer rights to equality? (Letter 23, Dec. 28, 2004).

Some individuals reminded people that Canada was still a secular state:

Trying to prevent people the right to marry the person they choose for religious reasons is a contravention of our religious freedom in Canada. This in no way is interfering with the freedom of religious organizations. They can practice their religion in any way they want. Just don’t impose on others. (Letter 27, Feb. 15, 2005)

Other letter writers made historical references to illustrate how denying same-sex marriage and persecuting non-heterosexuals was undemocratic and dangerous. One individual, who could not “understand why anyone would want to marry another of the same-sex,” nevertheless reminded readers that they lived in a democracy:

Citizens have inherent rights. . . . The way others choose to exercise their rights is none of my business, as long as I am free to exercise my rights in a manner that suits me. What does concern me, is the possibility that people may be denied their rights, simply because others disagree with how they are exercised. (Letter 31, April 15, 2005)

Similarly, a letter written by an elderly woman argued that “giving same-sex couples the same rights she and her husband enjoyed” was not threatening at all and compared gay rights to women’s rights:

For the first year of my life, according to the law of that time, I was not a person. Due to the dedication and advocacy of a group of women who did not give up on their challenge to parliament to change the existing laws, I am now a person with equal rights to the men in our society. (Letter 28, March 1, 2005)

Hate speech and hate crime. The second notable theme with the equality frame was a concern for hate speech and hate crimes. This theme was expressed by people who found much of the tone and rhetoric in the letters of those opposed to same-sex marriage to be hurtful, hateful, and completely unacceptable in a country like Canada. These contributors recognized the importance of free speech in a democracy, but also realized there were important limits that must be recognized to ensure the safety of certain vulnerable and marginalized groups in society. As one contributor suggested:

There are limits to freedom that prevents harm to others. That is why we have laws against slander and why we have laws against inciting hate towards innocent groups. We do not allow child mutilation or abuse of children and women for religious reasons. What religious people believe in their own minds is their business. They have no right to make all of society conform to these beliefs. Perhaps it is time to use the anti-hate laws to stop this verbal abuse of homosexual people. It seems like hate mongering to me. (Letter 27, Feb. 15, 2005)

Another letter, written by a sessional instructor at the university, wondered what the letters said about the identity of Alberta and reminded readers that while free speech was important, hateful words were to be questioned: “Although the words aren’t directed toward me, they make me cringe: ‘abominable,’ ‘foul,’ ‘perverse,’ and ‘despicable’ . . . I can’t imagine how a gay person living in this community feels after reading such letters” (Letter 34, March 29, 2005). This letter highlights the impact of this debate to the community and the impact of the debate on individuals. While faculty felt that they needed to speak out on the issue, there was also an awareness among them that in speaking out they were making themselves targets.

Diversity and tolerance. The final theme was concerned with promoting diversity and tolerance. It promoted a progressive agenda of inclusiveness that was deemed essential to democracy in general and to Canadian national identity specifically. Letters containing this theme were supportive of gay rights and the rights of others, including professors, to support same-sex marriage. Some used a range of political and religious arguments to promote their perspective. One individual wrote that instead of following all the Bible’s outdated rules, she was more inclined to reflect on her personal interactions with “many gay/lesbian parents who have raised open-minded, non-judgmental, successful, loving children” (Letter 23, Dec. 28, 2004). Similarly, a Lutheran Minister wrote a letter arguing that people condemning gay sex and same-sex marriage from a religious perspective were taking verses in the Bible “out of context” and

that “current attitudes were based on outdated information, stereotypes, prejudices, cultural mores, and speculative fears about ‘its’ consequences” (Letter 30, April 5, 2005).

The debate in the *Camrose Booster* attracted the attention of the Federal Minister of Health, Ujjal Dosanjh, who as Attorney General of British Columbia had shepherded same-sex pension and family law changes in the 1990s. For him, same-sex marriage reflected important Canadian values:

Canadians have always stood for the protection and defence of minority rights in this country. We do not intentionally deny someone a right because it is unpopular or controversial. That is not the Canadian way. We are the envy of the world in this regard.... Allowing same-sex civil marriage is an affirmation of Canada’s commitment to equality for all. It will promote a society that advocates tolerance and understanding rather than the marginalization and segregation of its citizens. (Letter 25, Feb 1, 2005)

Finally, it is worth noting that some letters, while not necessarily favouring same-sex marriage, contained a theme that was sensitive to the importance of a plurality of views in a democracy which included the professors’ columns in the newspaper. As one student contributor put it,

I have a problem with the attacks on the professors’ articles. They have the right to express their beliefs and I think it is healthy to have a debate on issues. Freedom of speech is one of the most important things that makes me proud to be a Canadian. It has been implied by some who have written in that students who attend Augustana are going to become brainwashed by their professors’ beliefs. As a student at the University, I am happy to say that the Professors welcome debate and often encourage everyone to have their own beliefs. Never once have I been pushed towards believing something that I don’t agree with. . . . I do not always agree with everything written in “Second Thought,” but I respect their freedom to say what they believe. (Letter 33, Apr 5, 2005)

The Second Thought column went on its summer hiatus at the end of April, and letters on the topic of same-sex marriage ceased. Either people were weary of the debate, or more likely, they recognized that same-sex marriage was a done deal. However, the debate re-emerged briefly in March 2007 when the local United Church announced it was approving same-sex marriages. The *Camrose Booster* received a letter from one of the more vocal opponents to same-sex marriage who referred to homosexuals as “perversion addicts,” and compared them to those who “practice incest and bestiality” (Letter 36, April 3, 2007). Two faculty members responded with their own letters, one congratulating “the Camrose United Church for their courageous and . . . Gospel-inspired decision to approve same-sex marriage” (Letter 37, April 10, 2007). The other took aim at the letter from the community member and questioned the newspaper’s decision to publish the letter in the first place.

I always encourage my students to analyze prejudice critically and to see the dangers inherent in it. To make unfounded derogatory statements based on one's beliefs about a certain group is to engender misunderstanding and hatred. I would like you to examine [the] letter of April 3, 2007, and imagine that instead of a nameless, faceless group called homosexuals, he had referred to a racial group, for example Jews or Aboriginals . . . let's imagine that the author referred to Jews, Aboriginals or myself as "perversion addicts" . . . comparing us to a list of criminals from perpetrators of incest to pedophiles. Would *The Booster* have printed that letter? No, of course not. Then I must ask why prejudice and hatred against homosexuals is acceptable in print? (Letter 38, Apr 10, 2007)

The following week, on April 17, 2007, Berdie Fowler, the long-time owner of the *Camrose Booster*, published the following notification regarding the cessation of letters to the editor on the topic of homosexuality and same-sex marriage:

After careful, even agonizing consideration, I have decided not to print letters that debate the topic of homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and/or the religious beliefs relative to it. I think the subject is important, I believe in freedoms of speech and religion, but I have come to the conclusion that a community paper is not a proper forum in which to debate the topic of homosexuality—there are other more appropriate places. What tipped the balance in my decision to take this step was learning first-hand of the destructive impact—including physical harm—that some of the public discourse has on innocent children.

Fowler's comments challenge our argument surrounding the importance of debating controversial issues in local papers. The "physical harm" to which the editor was referring was the unfortunate assault perpetrated by a group of teens against another teenager at a local high school because her parents happened to be a lesbian couple. Although the teenagers who perpetrated the assault were expelled and eventually charged, the Camrose police refused to treat the incident as a hate crime. Other than a column on the "Outing of Dumbledore" (Harde, 2007), there were no more columns on same-sex marriage or gay and lesbian issues. Over the following years, a few other debates have erupted, inspired by columns on such topics as climate change and evolution, but none have reached the intensity of the same-sex marriage debate.

Conclusion

This article concerns itself with understanding how academic engagement with communities through the local print media plays a role in fostering civil debate that is essential to the democratic process. This case study provides an important historical snapshot of the same-sex marriage debate in a small town in Alberta, and sheds light on the important function of small-town newspapers in constructing and debating Canadian values. It demonstrates how

newspapers create forums for debate and the expression of different perspectives. The *Camrose Booster*, by publishing op-ed columns and letters to the editor on the topic of same-sex marriage and gay rights, both promoted or catered to particular shared values among certain groups and provided a forum for bringing conflicting views into the open, where a common conclusion could hopefully be reached. In the end, however, the newspaper decided that the public and hateful nature of aspects of the debate went against democratic values and determined to limit debate on these issues.

Canadians were mostly divided on the issue by the time the *Civil Marriage Act* was passed. While the Canadian public, in general, may have thought other issues were more important, based on an analysis of the local press and letters to the editor in the *Camrose Booster*, same-sex marriage was a very salient issue for Camrose and the surrounding area. Most of the letters indicated that Camrose citizens supported the morality frame because they perceived queer sex as inherently deviant, gay rights as an abuse of the *Charter*, and same-sex marriage as harmful to society. Moreover, the morality frame depicted anyone who supported same-sex marriage as equally immoral. Meanwhile, the equality frame was defended by a minority including professors who felt they had a responsibility to provide an alternative voice and stand up for minority rights. This frame supported same-sex marriage by maintaining the primacy of rights and freedoms as defined by the Charter, cautioning against hate speech and hate crimes, championing diversity and tolerance, and identifying other more important issues.

In the end, it is unlikely that either group convinced the other to change their position, but the debate as played out in the newspaper allowed readers to be exposed to both perspectives and, potentially, change their minds or at least encourage them to formulate a compromise. What is clear, however, is that the same-sex marriage debate in Camrose demonstrated that there were people in Camrose who openly favoured same-sex marriage and were willing to defend the rights of gays and lesbians. As one participant put it,

As a gay man it was hurtful to see some of the comments being made about gays and lesbians, but it was wonderful to know that not everyone felt that way and that there were people willing to stand up for us. (Interview 15)

It was shortly after the debate that the university was officially identified as a safe space for LGQBT individuals and ideas, and the group Augustana Queers and Allies (AQUA) was established on campus. Soon after, the Camrose Pride Community was formed and Camrose saw the development of Camrose Pride Week, as well as a number of key annual events for the queer community, including the “So You Think You Can Drag?” event at The Bailey Theatre and an All Ages LGQBT Dance Party at the Elk’s Hall. More recently, in the spring of 2017, two letters were published attacking the inclusion of a gay character in the new *Beauty and the Beast* film. Unlike previous years, there was an immediate and significant public response with letters condemning any expression of homophobia, suggesting that the equality frame has been firmly adopted by many in Camrose.

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