

Democracy and Equality in UK, USA and Canadian Newspapers, 1988 - 2013

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Abstract

Democracy and equality are foundations of modern societies. The news media has long been both a reflection and a shaper of modern societies; in their pages (both web and paper) we would expect that they present the news about democracy and equality and, in doing so, help shape national conversations about these issues. Do they, much? I use a worldwide newspaper database to explore the extent to which major newspapers in the UK, US and Canada present news on democracy, equality and their combination, over a 25 year span (1988 to 2013). Overall, the level of coverage is small, especially the combination of democracy and equality, of which one can say that it hardly ever appears in major Western newspapers. Newspapers vary quite a bit in coverage, and there is substantial variation across newspapers even within the same country. From this analysis, we cannot say that one Western nation's news media pays more attention to democracy and equality than another. Lately, there has been a marginal yet visible upswing in news media coverage in how democracy connects with equality.

Democracy and equality are foundations of modern societies. Democracy means that “the people rule.” In the democratic context, equality means that, “everyone can, and should, rule.” In my new edited book, *Political Inequality in an Age of Democracy: Cross-national Perspectives*¹, nine chapters written by established and young, up-and-coming social scientists explore the theoretical, methodological and empirical dimensions of democracy and equality across the world. Political inequality is usefully defined as both unequal influence over decisions made by political bodies and the unequal outcomes of those decisions. Political theorist Robert Dahl called political equality “a fundamental premise of democracy”². Other social scientists and philosophers claim similar³. Democracy and equality are pillars on which humanity’s heights rest.

The news media has long been both a reflection and a shaper of modern societies. In their pages (both web and paper) we would expect that they present the news about democracy and equality and, in doing so, help shape national conversations about these issues. Do they, much? This article explores the extent to which widely read newspapers in the UK, USA and Canada present news on democracy and equality.

Methods

In keeping with the book’s theme of interdisciplinarity and cross-national perspectives, this article bridges comparative sociology and culturomics⁴, combining methods of both. My data come from *Factiva*, a worldwide newspaper database. I observed the frequency of which news items⁵ about democracy and equality, alone and in combination, appear in six English language newspapers across three countries. The newspapers are: *The Times* and *The Guardian* of the UK, *The New York Times* and *USA Today* of the US, and the *Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail* of Canada.

I searched for, “democracy,” “equality,” and their combination⁶. To be reasonably sure that the observed news item is about one or both of these ideas, I searched for these words only if they appear in the headline or lead paragraph of the news item⁷. To glimpse change, I observed the relative trends in coverage of the search terms from 1988 to 2013⁸.

To compare newspapers, and get comparable statistics, it is necessary to know the universe of news items available for each newspaper in each year⁹. To obtain a reasonable facsimile of this universe, I needed a search term that is used very often. “The” is perhaps the most common word in the English language; I standardized the other search terms by the frequency of “the” as “the” appears in headlines and lead paragraphs for each newspaper and year. For example, in *The New York Times* from 1988 to 2013, there are 2,137, 418 news items in which “the” appears in a news item in either the headline or lead paragraph. By comparison, in the same newspaper and timeframe, the word “democracy” appears in 14,656 news items. I then multiplied the ratio by 10,000. The final, comparable statistic is the frequency of democracy, equality and their joint appearance in the headline or lead paragraph per 10,000 news items. For

example, in *The New York Times*, between 1988 and 2013, there are 68.56 news items about “democracy” for every 10,000 of that paper’s news items¹⁰. I refer to this statistic as “the rate.”

Findings

Figure 1 shows the rate of news items about democracy and about equality in the UK, US and Canada, averaged from 1988 to 2013. Figure 2 shows this rate with regard to the combination of democracy and equality. I highlight the main findings.

- Overall, the level of coverage is small, especially the combination of democracy and equality, of which one can say that it hardly ever appears in major Western newspapers.
- Newspapers vary. While *The New York Times* leads all newspapers with coverage on democracy, it is dwarfed by *The Guardian* in coverage of equality, especially in combination with democracy.
- Newspaper matters more than nation: In news coverage of democracy, equality and their combination, there is substantial variation across newspapers within the same country. From this analysis, we cannot say that the US media pays more attention to democracy than the UK, or that the UK media is more concerned about equality than Canada, and so on.

Figures 3 and 4 show trends in the rate of news items that feature democracy and equality from 1988 to 2013. Figure 3 presents coverage of “democracy,” and figure 4 of “equality.”

- Over time, news coverage of democracy and equality shows no strong overall trajectory either upward or downward.
- Democracy and equality each have their own levels of and trends in, coverage. Democracy rises and falls in two main periods: after the Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe (1989 – 1991) and in the beginning of the Iraq War (2003 – 2005). After the global economic crisis of 2008, there has been an upswing in equality coverage.
- With regard to both equality and democracy, across time there is considerable variation in the rate of news items within newspapers. *The Guardian* leads the pack.

Between 1988 and 2013, these newspapers average around eight, non-consecutive years in which there are no articles at all on the combination of democracy and equality. This changed, recently. Figure 5 shows the trends in the rate of articles in three major newspapers about both democracy and equality from just before the global economic crisis to 2013.

- Since 2008, in three major newspapers (one each for the UK, US and Canada) there has been a marginal yet visible upswing in news media interest in how democracy connects with equality.

Discussion

We live in an age of democracy, but as my new edited book demonstrates, it is a scientific fact that where there is democracy, there is political inequality. We need to understand better the form, duration and magnitude of political inequality within and across nations. We need to study it systematically, continuously, and diligently, and in an inclusive, open-minded way, inclining our ears to the varied contributions of the many academic disciplines.

What we do with our scientific knowledge is another matter. As this brief article shows, across the Western world there has been an upswing in news media interest in the link between democracy and equality. Most of life is lived beyond the academic world; this is an opportunity for the news media to help lead national conversations about how our democracies need equality, yet remain unequal.

Figure 1. Rate of News Items (per 10,000) about Democracy and about Equality for Six Newspapers across the UK, US and Canada, Averaged from 1988 to 2013

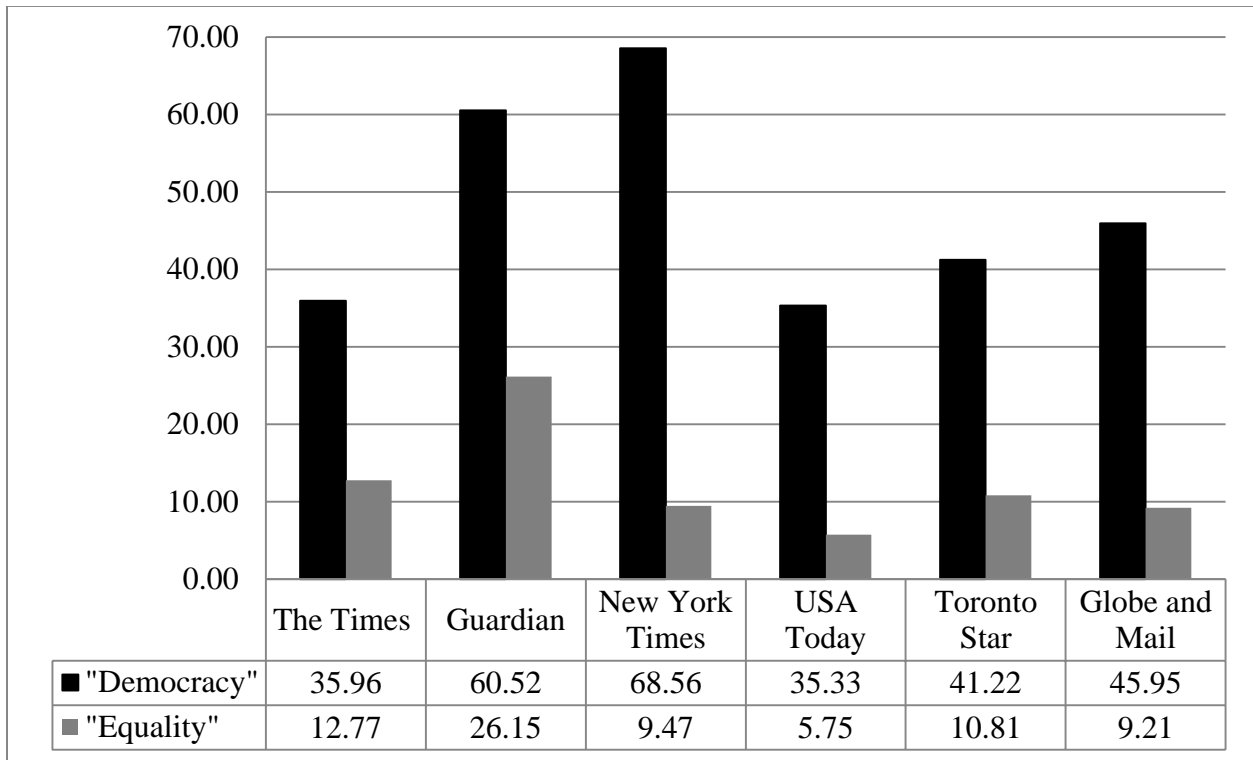


Figure 2. Rate of News Items (per 10,000) about Democracy and Equality for Six Newspapers across the UK, US and Canada, Averaged from 1988 to 2013

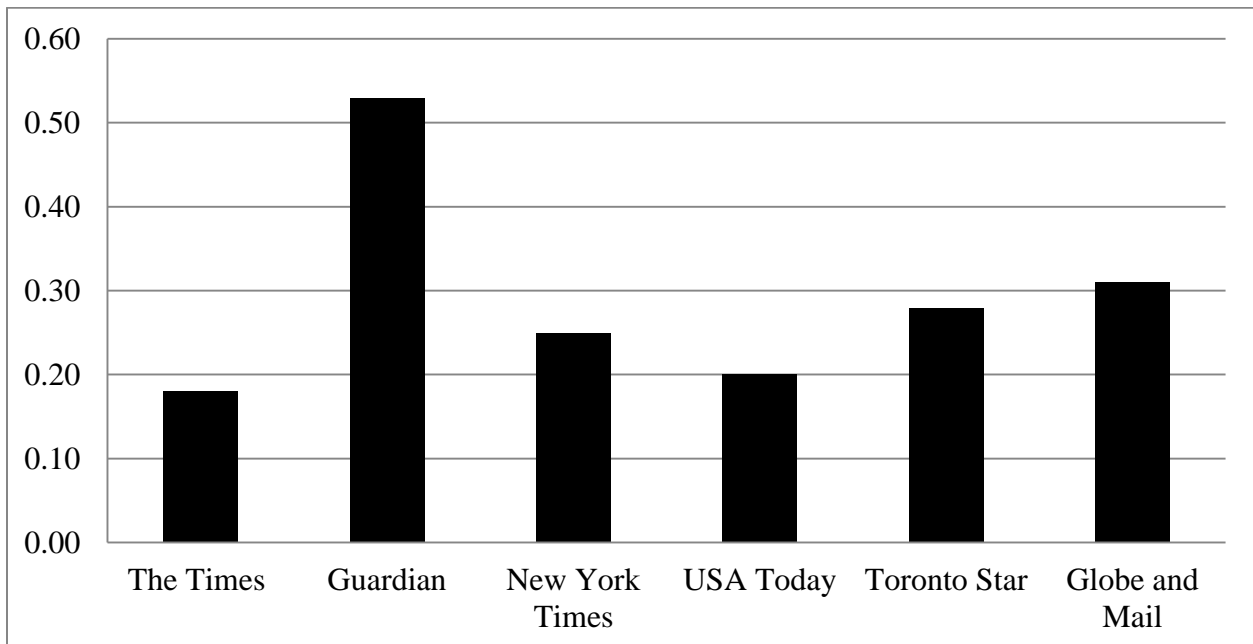


Figure 3. Trends in the Rate of News Items (per 10,000) about Democracy for Six Newspapers across the UK, US and Canada, 1988 - 2013

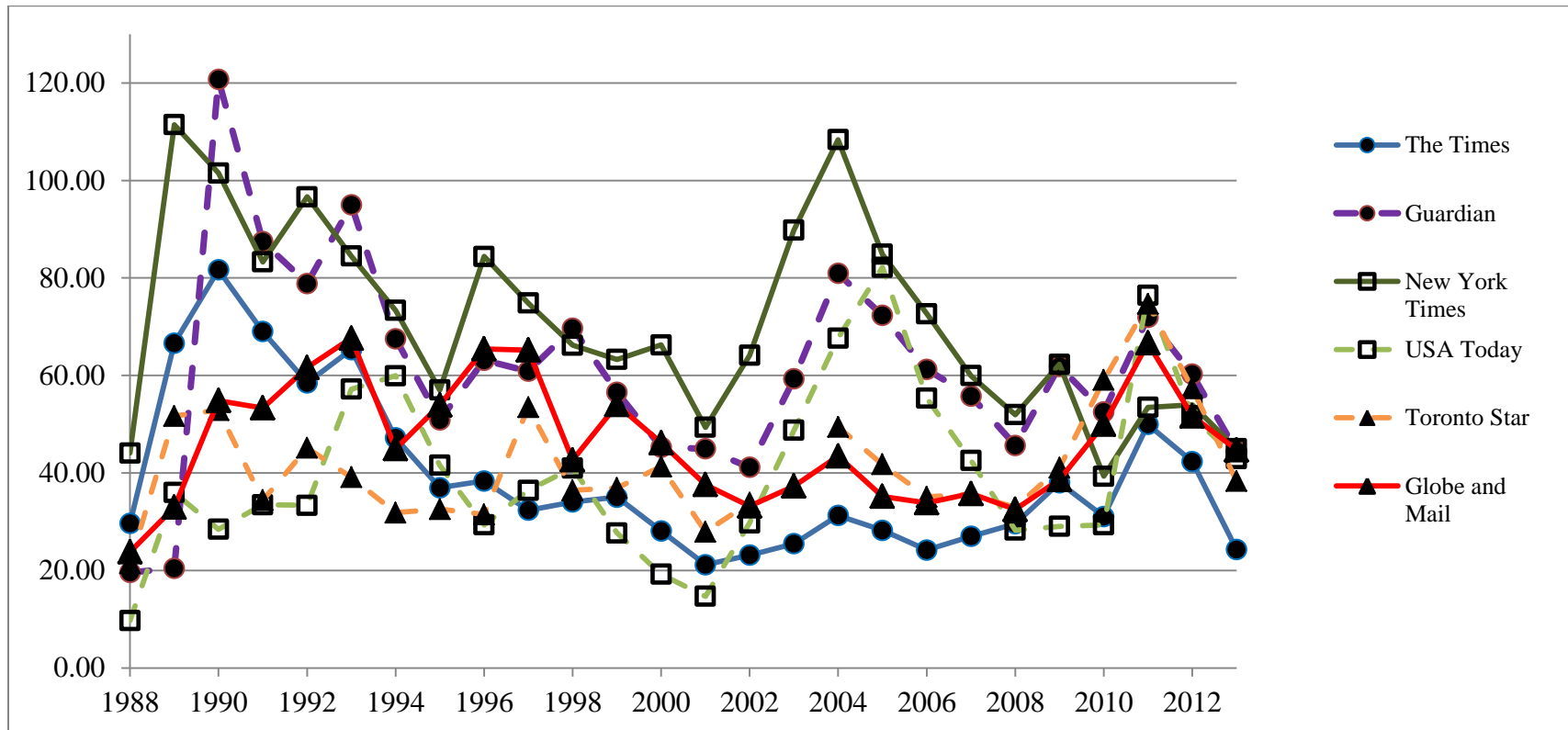


Figure 4. Trends in the Rate of News Items (per 10,000) about Equality for Six Newspapers across the UK, US and Canada, 1988 - 2013

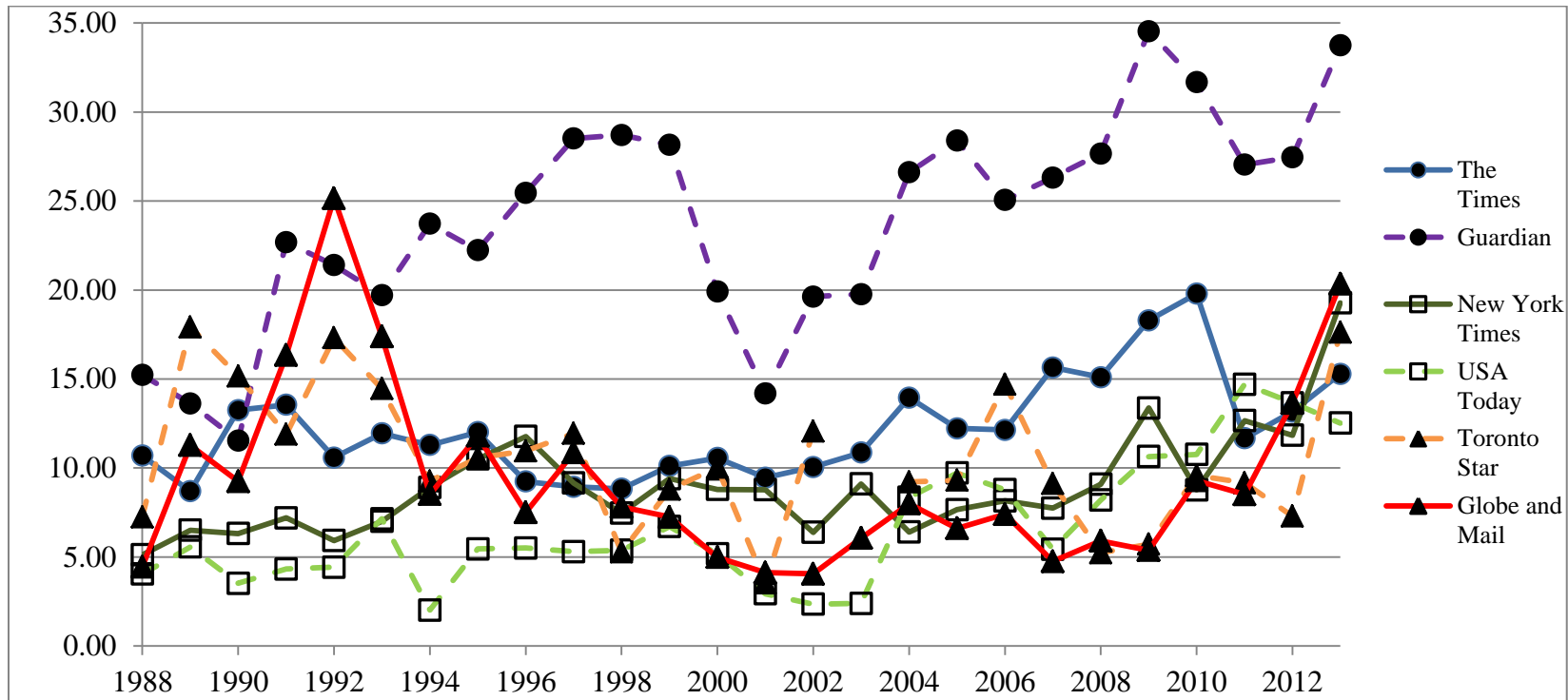
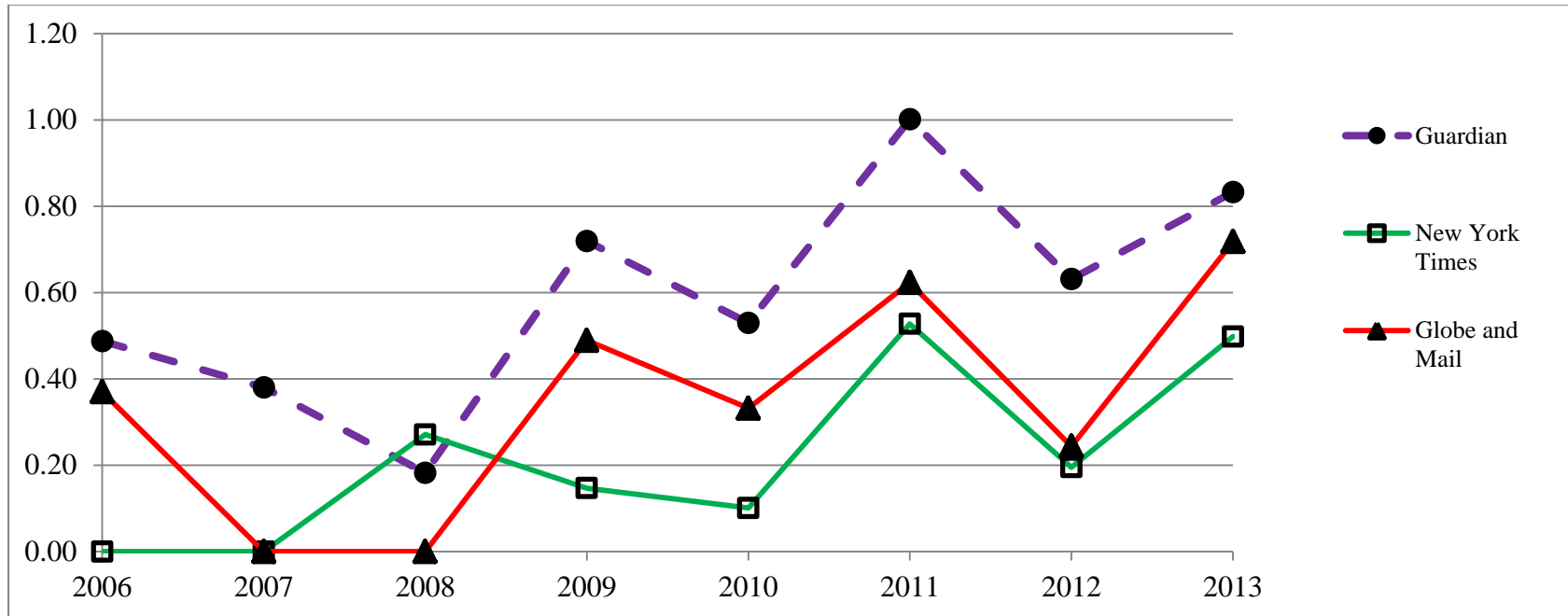


Figure 5. Trends in the Rate of News Items (per 10,000) about Democracy and Equality in *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *The Globe and Mail*, 2006 – 2013



Endnotes

¹ Published by Routledge in July 2014.

² Dahl, Robert A. 2006. *On Political Equality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. ix.

³ APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy. 2004. *American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality*. www.apsanet.org/imgtest/taskforcereport.pdf. (accessed July 4, 2007); Bohman, J. 1999. "International Regimes and Democratic Governance: Political Equality and Governance in Global Institutions." *International Affairs* 75(3): 499-513, pp. 500-1; Rueschemeyer, D. 2004. "Addressing Inequality." *Journal of Democracy* 15(4): 76-90, p. 76; Vera, Sidney. 2003. "What If the Dream of Participation Turned Out to be a Nightmare?" *Perspectives on Politics* 1(4): 663-678, p. 663; Verba, Sidney. 2006. "Fairness, Equality and Democracy: Three Big Words." *Social Research* 73(2): 499-540, p. 500; Wall, Steven. 2007. "Democracy and Equality." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 57(228): 416-438, p. 416.

⁴ Jean-Baptiste Michel, Yuan Kui Shen, Aviva Presser Aiden, Adrian Veres, Matthew K. Gray, The Google Books Team, Joseph P. Pickett, Dale Hoiberg, Dan Clancy, Peter Norvig, Jon Orwant, Steven Pinker, Martin A. Nowak, Erez Lieberman Aiden. 2011, "Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books." *Science* 14 January, 331(6014): 176-182.

⁵ A news item is any item in the newspaper -- article, editorial, blog piece and so on -- with the exception of the following (quoting from *Factiva*): "republished news", "recurring pricing and market data", and "obituaries, calendars, captions, letters, weather news, food items, routine traffic reports, and sports and recreation stories."

⁶ I also searched for "inequality" or "unequal", and their combination with "democracy." The averages and trends are interesting, but not terribly different from what is presented here. I had also searched for the terms, "political inequality" and "political equality", but the rate was so low that it is obvious that these are academic, and not media-friendly, terms.

⁷ For example, in *The New York Times* on February 3, 2013, the news item is an editorial about Supreme Court Justice Kennedy's support for racial equality in the wider context of his potential decisive vote in a voting rights case. On March 10 of that year, *The Times* on their website reported on the arrest of Saudi Arabian human rights activists, which had the effect of "dealing a body blow to the campaign for equality and democracy in the ultra-conservative kingdom." In October 2013, *The Globe and Mail* reported on an interview with the Liberian president on the stability of democracy and the slow rise of gender equality in her country.

The three news articles are: Caplan, Lincoln. 2013. "Will Justice Kennedy Vote for Voting Rights?" *The New York Times* February 3; Tomlinson, Hugh. 2013. "Saudi human rights activists jailed." thetimes.co.uk, March 10; Kielburger, Craig. 2013. "In an Africa on the rise, 'bleeding hearts' aren't welcome." *The Globe and Mail*, October 11.

⁸ Except for the *Toronto Star*, of which 2003 data is missing.

⁹ A search term is required to obtain news items; *Factiva* does not present the total number of news items without it.

¹⁰ The data for this article is available on the book's website, politicalinequality.org/book.