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“But it is not getting any safer!”: The Contested Dynamic of Framing Canada’s Military Mission in Afghanistan

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Abstract. The Canadian government and military struggled to control its media framing of the war in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2009. This content analysis (n=900) critically investigates the mediated dynamic of framing Canada’s military mission in Afghanistan. This study found that while journalists overwhelmingly indexed their stories to elite sources, they frequently impeached the frames sponsored by government and military leaders. Journalists used elite criteria to fact check the frames of military and government leaders. Most of the coverage was episodic and event-oriented rather than thematic and contextual. While Canadian journalists challenged official claims of improving security, for instance, their coverage lacked context and critical appraisal of Canada’s military mission in Afghanistan, raising questions about journalism’s normative role in Canadian democracy.

Résumé. Le gouvernement canadien et les militaires se sont efforcés de contrôler la présentation de la guerre en Afghanistan par les médias entre 2006 et 2009. Cette analyse de la couverture médiatique (n = 900) examine de façon critique la dynamique médiatisée de l’encadrement de la mission militaire du Canada en Afghanistan. Cette étude a révélé que tandis que les journalistes ont dans leur grande majorité fondé leurs reportages sur des sources d’élite, ils ont fréquemment boudé les cadres soutenus par le gouvernement et les chefs militaires. Les journalistes ont privilégié des critères d’élite pour vérifier factuellement les cadres des dirigeants militaires et gouvernementaux. La couverture était en grande partie épisodique et axée sur les événements plutôt que d’ordre thématique ou contextuel. Alors que les journalistes canadiens ont remis en question des allégations officielles concernant l’amélioration de la sécurité, par exemple, leur couverture a manqué de contexte et d’appréciation critique de la mission militaire du Canada, soulevant des interrogatifs sur le rôle normatif du journalisme dans le cadre de la démocratie canadienne.

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The young Canadian man who died in service of his Afghan counterpart was sent off home last night. Into the warm and deceptively benevolent spring night—with songbirds, confused by the lights in the big hangar optimistically called Taliban’s Last Stand, chirping as thousands of army boots moved with surprising quiet onto the darkened tarmac... (Blatchford 2006)

Canadian journalist Christie Blatchford proudly admired Canadian soldiers serving in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2011. The veteran columnist wrote vividly and affectionately about Canada’s military men and women. Accused by her critics of cheerleading for Canadian soldiers and the war (Solga, 2009), other more academic assessments concluded that Blatchford—and all Canadian journalists¹—failed to serve Canadian audiences effectively (Bergen, 2009; Maloney, 2015). Considerable research, especially in the US context, suggests that journalists frequently fail to live up to their normative watchdog role during times of war, often acting as nothing more than stenographers, echoing and amplifying, uncritically, the rhetoric of military and political leaders (Bennett et al., 2007; Hallin, 1986; Massing, 2004).

Fletcher and Hove (2012) examined (in this journal) the role emotions played in Canadians’ support for the war in Afghanistan. Similarly, Fletcher and colleagues (2009: 925) concluded (also in this journal) that the Canadian government’s “information transmission” about the war in Afghanistan (despite the low public support) succeeded. Little attention, however, has focused on the actual media messages available to Canadians during the conflict. If content is key to understanding media effect and how the news media might “exert their own unique shaping power” (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014: 4), then it follows that researchers investigate the actual content and interrogate what role (if any) Canadian journalists played in the “information transmission” Fletcher and colleagues (2009: 925) describe. This study responds to this deficit, concluding that Canadians did not receive uncontested media messages sponsored by government and military leaders. Canadian journalists resisted and challenged—up to a point—the political rhetoric and justifications offered by officials. It is beyond the scope of this research to make claims about the effect on audiences of the media messages analyzed in this study. Media consumers are, undoubtedly, smart and active (Livingstone, 2000), factoring their own experience and popular

wisdom into political decision making (Gamson,1992). Moreover, Bennett and Iyengar (2008) provocatively argue that media effects are increasingly minimal because of the growth of social media and the rising detachment of individuals from mainstream media.

Canada Goes to War

The Conservative government of Stephen Harper and the Department of National Defence strategically marketed Canada's combat operations in Afghanistan (2006–2011) as part of a noble effort to (1) make Afghanistan safe; (2) rout terrorists; (3) help women and children; (4) provide microfinance to Afghans; (5) clear land mines; (6) support the democratically elected government; and (7) police the war-torn nation (Canada, 2007). An investigation by The Canadian Press uncovered that the Conservative government “script[ed] the words it wanted to hear from the mouths of its top diplomats, aid workers and cabinet ministers in 2007–2008 to divert public attention from the soaring double-digit death toll of Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan” (Blanchfield and Bronskill, 2010). Moreover, a report commissioned by the Department of Foreign Affairs concluded that the Harper government's public comments about the war were “too American,” suggesting that government and military officials instead use phrases such as “rebuilding, restoring, reconstruction, hope, opportunity, and enhancing the lives of women and children” in an effort to convince Canadians to support the conflict (Woods, 2007).²

Canada's media were the site of significant public debate about Afghanistan; and this study examines them “as both an agent and a venue” with an eye to understanding how journalistic practices may have “contest[ed] the ways in which we think and talk about policy issues” (Kosicki and Pan, 1997: 8). As Gitlin rightly explains, the media are “a significant social force in the forming and delimiting of public assumptions, attitudes, and moods” (2003 [1980]: 9). Furthermore, to better understand normative conceptions of media, war coverage “should not be seen as a special case of how the media works” but a close-up look at “many of the things that happen in peacetime” (Williams, 1992: 158; see also Carruthers, 2000). With a mind to situating this research's methodology and empirical findings theoretically, the coming section turns to conceptual understandings of journalism, indexing and framing.

Normative Roles of the Media

Christians and colleagues (2009) offer a useful theoretical conception of journalism's normative role in democracies. Journalists, in this mode, can take on four roles: (1) monitorial; (2) facilitative; (3) radical; and (4) collaborative. The philosophical underpinning of Canada's news media flows from liberal thinking and is premised largely on the assumption that journalists, in line with Christians and colleagues' thinking, are monitorial, fulfilling a watchdog and truth-speaker function (Ward, 2015). Journalists, in this conception, disseminate objective truth with a mind to empowering citizens (Mill, 1991 [1859]) so they can make informed decisions and legitimate democratic decisions (Habermas, 1989 [1962]). This model, it is often argued, protects democracies from the tyranny of the majority and the over-reach of the state (Schumpeter, 2003 [1943]). Yet journalism does not always live up to its normative conceptions (Schudson, 1995).

Indexing

News organizations focus on—and implicitly place greater emphasis on—what elites do and say. Journalists “tend to index the range of voice and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate” (Bennett, 1990: 106; italics in original). This conception flows from the normative assumption that journalists are honest brokers of information in a democracy who represent the “legitimate” and “credible” views of elected representatives (Bennett, 1990: 107). Elites—cabinet ministers, members of parliament, military officials, senior civil servants, judges, experts, academics—have “privileged access to (and greater claims on) media coverage” because of their “status” or “claims to expert knowledge” (McCullagh, 2002: 68). Drawing on previous research (Gans, 1979; Hallin, 1986; Tuchman, 1978), Bennett (1990) hypothesized that news media closely adhere to elite communication, echoing and amplifying hegemonic views. Elites, in this conception, are not unified. Different perspectives, from different elites (government MPs versus opposition MPs, experts and pundits, for example), frequently get represented in the media. Entman's cascading activation model (2003), in fact, envisions different levels of government, journalists and even the public shaping how news gets framed. Conversely, Althaus (2003) argues that journalists frequently resist the

power of indexing, incorporating their insider view (from years of experience as beat reporters and off-the-record sources) into their reporting, ensuring that their stories do not end up only parroting elite discourse. As the coming discussion details, journalists do have the power to resist the powerful frames of elites, but do not necessarily do it always or effectively.

In times of war, government and military officials tend to be the dominant sources of information for most news organizations (Hallin, 1986; Zaller and Chiu, 1996). Media coverage tends to align with hegemonic interpretations and positions during these times of conflict (Domke et al., 2006; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Embedded journalists—attached to military units during war—frequently get accused of echoing and amplifying military and political leaders’ framing of the war (Knightly, 2003) because reporters feel “an affinity with the troops, a shared determination to see the venture through to the end” (Morrison and Tumber, 1988: 97). Lewis and colleagues (2006: 154), on the other hand, found no evidence of bias from embedded journalists covering the invasion of Iraq in 2003—but their research did conclude that war zone reportage turns the conflict into a story that ultimately forces larger more critical questions about the war “into the background.”

In line with Shoemaker and Reese’s hierarchical model (2014), institutional factors such as embedding can shape and frame news content. Canadian journalists embedded with the military in Kandahar lived, slept, ate and were in harm’s way with Canadian Forces (Potter, 2014). There was no censorship, per se. The military did not vet journalists’ stories before publication and all conversations with Canadian Forces were on the record (Henderson, 2006). Journalists agreed to certain conditions in order to be embedded with the military, including not revealing future troop movements. As well, reporters were prevented from disseminating any information that commanders in Kandahar “restricted for operational reasons” (Lamarche, 2013). Journalists, not surprisingly, complained that the military used the restriction pell-mell to the point where it “became like a moving yard stick throughout the whole war” (Lamarche, 2013). While there was no censorship, there were, arguably, discursive implications. Hallin (1986: 117), of note, concluded that journalists’ reliance on official sources during conflict produced

“spheres” of “consensus” and “legitimate controversy” in line with hegemonic interpretations and positions. Having offered an overview of the potential shaping power of embedding and indexing, this discussion transitions to outlining the theoretical contours of framing.

Framing

Framing remains a “fractured paradigm” (Entman 1993: 51). Frames also lead a “double life” (D’Angelo, 2002: 873). They are both strategic rhetoric used by elites and journalists and the intellectual scaffolding used by audiences to interpret news (Kinder and Sanders, 1990). Social constructivists, for their part, put journalists at the centre of the framing practice, creating “interpretive packages” that often reflect their source’s preferred frames (Gamson and Mogdilianai, 1989: 3; italics in original). Furthermore, news reports are frequently framed by reporters as either episodic—“events oriented [and] concrete instances”—or thematic, context-laden “abstract” motifs or “back-grounder” pieces (Iyengar, 1991: 14). Notably, Iyengar concluded that episodic framing trivializes public discourse, “prevent[ing] the public from cumulating the evidence towards any logical, ultimate consequence” (1992: 48). For the purposes of this research, frames are conceptualized as the way elites spotlight conflict, aiming to accomplish four important tasks: “problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993: 52; italics in original).

As noted in the introduction, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper purposely scripted its rhetoric in support of Canada’s NATO-led military mission in Afghanistan. Dimitri Soudas, Harper’s former director of communication, details in his master’s thesis how governments effectively “manipulate” public opinion through the media (2015). While Soudas’ claim of manipulation is debatable, it is, of course, a long-established practice for political actors to attempt to advance their agendas with strategic communication (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; McNair, 2000). Politicians hope their media messages provide citizens “influential cues” (Callaghan and Schnell, 2005: 2) “that promote their preferred vision of reality” (Johnson-Cartee, 2005: 199).

News professionals also frequently fact check, interrogate, challenge, and even reject the framing sponsored by political actors (Cook, 2005; Dobbs,

2012; Graves, 2016). The proclivity of journalists to challenge frames sponsored by elites happens, in part, because of journalistic routines and socialization, events, technology, counterspin, and ideological and institutional forces (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). The growth of interpretive journalism has increased the “policing of publicity relevant lies, spin and misdirection” (Schudson, 2013: 169). Uscinski and Butler (2013: 163) define fact checking as the process of “comparing” the statements of elites “to ‘the facts’ so as to determine whether a statement about these topics is a lie.” Jones (2009: 2–3), of note, argues this “accountability news” aims to hold political actors culpable for their statements.

Events often disrupt the framing power of elites. Baum and Groeling offer their elasticity of reality concept as a means of understanding how elites often have more framing authority in times of war initially but that power wanes over time as reporters “are better able to discern for themselves what is actually happening on the ground” (2010: 34). When no weapons of mass destruction (WMD), for instance, were found in Iraq (which contradicted the major rationale invoked by both American and British leaders for going to war in 2003), journalists increasingly reflected a less-unified picture about the rationale for the military invasion of the Middle Eastern country and gave more prominence to anti-war frames (Baum and Groeling, 2010). Furthermore, journalistic ethics and professional norms require news practitioners to be skeptical and questioning (Tuchman, 1978). Moreover, when elites disagree about an issue, those dissenting voices become even more newsworthy (Hallin, 1986).

Journalistic fact checking often comes in the form of rational and technical claims. While most journalists and media scholars reject notions of objectivity (Ward, 2015), journalists remain normatively objective in their method or work routines (Kovach and Rosentiel, 2014). Moreover, reporters tend to impeach elite rhetoric with elite standards (Ettema and Glasser, 1998). Sometimes, when critical voices are not readily available, journalists themselves are “compelled to challenge the official version of events” so as to include “tension and conflict that would otherwise be absent from their stories” and thus inure themselves and their news organizations against charges of bias (Cook, 2005: 106; see also Mermin, 1996). Interviews with Canadian journalists who covered the conflict in

Afghanistan found that these reporters believed they possessed a professional obligation to challenge frames promoted by Canadian government and military leaders (DeCillia, 2009). Echoing Tuchman (1978), Bennett argues most adversarial actions by journalists constitute a “[r]itualistic posture of antagonism,” ultimately “creat[ing] the appearance of mutual independence while keeping most news content to political perspective certified by authorities” (2012: 202).

Numerous conceptual frameworks (see Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980) shed light on how media content gets shaped. This study uses Shoemaker and Reese’s hierarchical influences model (2014) as a conceptual springboard for understanding and testing how indexing, framing and journalistic practices influenced the coverage of Canada’s military mission in Afghanistan. The “routines” and “ideological positions” of Canadian journalists, arguably, also played a significant role in shaping the content they produced about the conflict in Afghanistan (7–8). This study poses two research questions:

1. What (if any) role did indexing play in the news media’s coverage of Canada’s military mission in Afghanistan?
2. What role (if any) did journalists play in contesting or perpetuating the preferred frames of the military and government surrounding Canada’s military efforts in Afghanistan?

The next section turns to outlining the methods and rationale for testing this work’s research questions.

Methodology

To examine this study’s research questions surrounding indexing and framing, a classic content analysis (CA) offered a reliable tool for quantifying media practice and content. Advocates of CA (Bauer, 2007; Krippendorff, 2013; Neuendorf, 2002; Riffe et al., 1998) contend the method offers an efficient means of quantifying and analyzing media phenomena. Moreover, the method offers an effective tool for identifying and analyzing indexing, framing and the reaction of journalists to elite-sponsored frames. The public debate about Canada’s controversial military mission in Kandahar essentially ended with a confidence motion

in Canada's House of Commons in March 2008, pledging that Canadian Forces would stay until the end of 2011 (Canadian Press, 2014). Moreover, of the 158 Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan, 132 died between 2006 and 2009 (CBC, 2014). Therefore, this CA restricted its corpus to the most intense period of public debate: 2006–2009.

Using the online news archive Infomart.com, the search terms “Afghanistan” and “Canada” defined a potential sampling frame of 8,967 stories produced by CBC, CTV, The National Post and The Globe and Mail.³ This research's systematic sample (n = 900) represents⁴ 10 per cent of the nearly 9,000 stories about Canada's combat operations in Afghanistan identified by the online news media archive between 2006 and 2009.⁵ The samples,⁶ split almost evenly among the four years, were drawn from The Globe and Mail (29.1%), The National Post (25.6%), CBC Radio News (21.4%) and CTV National News (23.9%).⁷

Using Entman's (1993) definition of framing as a starting point, a careful reading of media texts, government documents, news releases and government speeches revealed persistent themes and elite sponsored frames surrounding Canada's military mission in Afghanistan. This inductive process led to this study's coding categories.⁸ This study's theory-driven coding focused on assessing (1) how journalists may have indexed their coverage to military and government sources; (2) the presence of military and government frames; and (3) how (if at all) journalists adopted, fact checked, interrogated or impeached the frames sponsored by government and military leaders.⁹ Ten per cent of the entire sample was randomly coded a second time by an independent researcher. This validation process produced an intercoder reliability above 80 per cent for all of the variables.¹⁰ Reliability higher than 80 per cent points towards a well-defined coding scheme and a robust sampling validity that can stand the test of being replicated (Bauer, 2007; Krippendorff, 2013).

Results: Framing and Challenging

Research question one assesses what role indexing played in the news media's coverage of Canada's military mission in Afghanistan. Military and government officials comprise nearly half (47.3%) of the primary sources in the news media (see Figure 1).

More than four in ten (44.7%) news media accounts of Afghanistan did not include a secondary source (see Figure 2). When media coverage does contain a secondary source, official government and military sources again

FIGURE 1 - Primary Sources (n = 900)

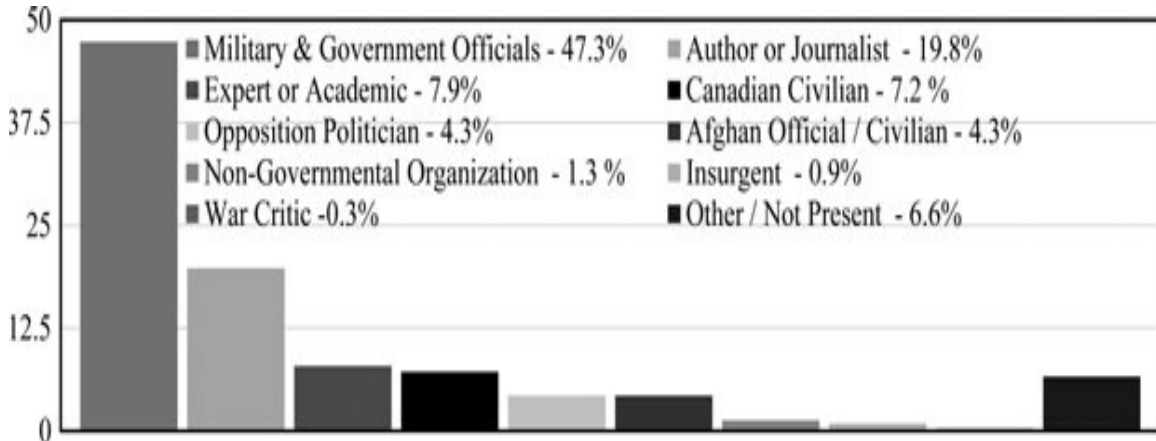
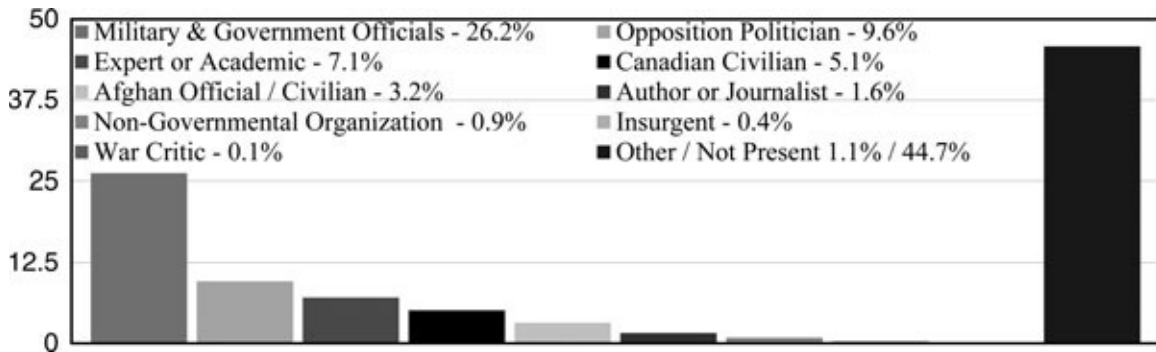


FIGURE 2 - Secondary Sources (n = 900)



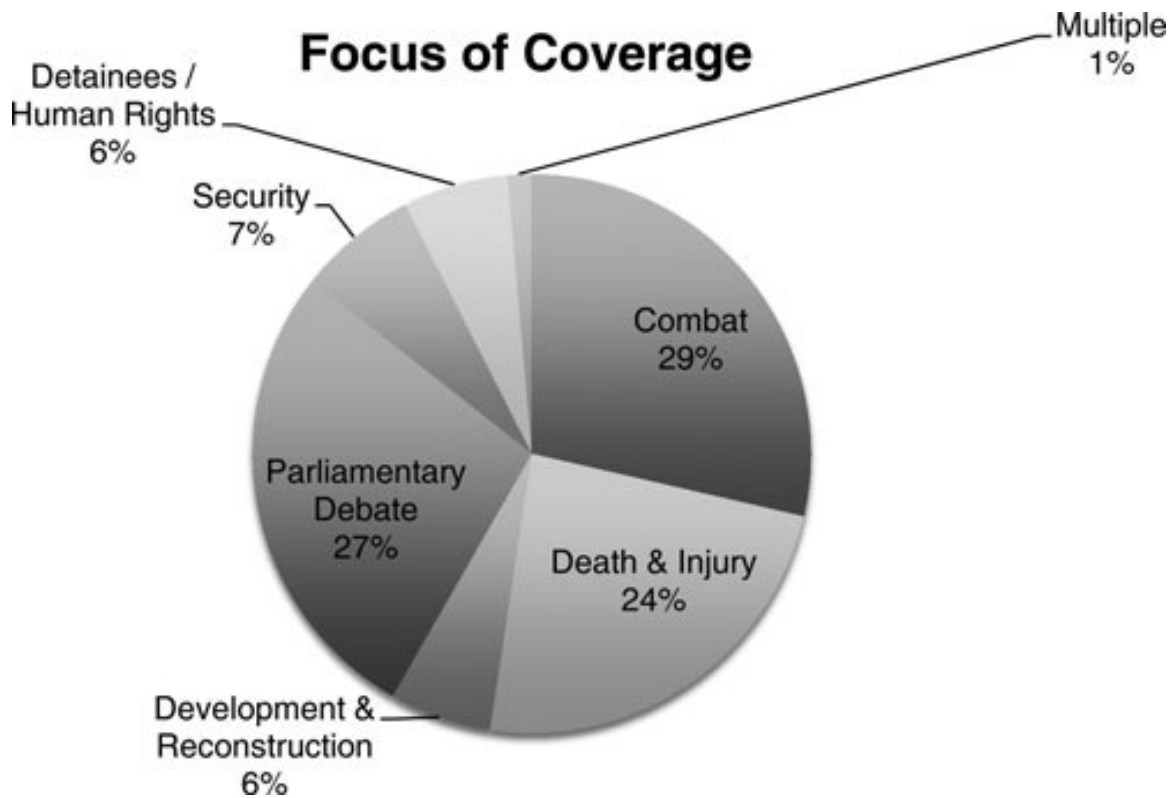
comprise the largest percentage at 26.2 per cent. Statistical analysis (two-sided Fisher's exact test [FET]) found that embedded journalists relied more heavily on military (45.3%) officials as primary sources than journalists in Canada (19.2%), $p < .001$, FET. Of note, journalists based in Canada covering aspects of the military mission were more likely (19.1%) to include opposition politicians in their coverage than embedded journalists in Afghanistan (5.8%), $p < .001$, FET. As well, voices outside of the government and military (opposition politicians, academics, non-governmental organizations) increased as a percentage of primary sources

from 22 per cent in 2006 to an average of 27.25 per cent for the four years, $p < .020$, FET. Similarly, voices outside of the government and military increased as secondary sources in media coverage from 22.9 per cent in 2006 to an average of 27.6 per cent between 2006–2009, $p < .001$, FET.

With respect to the focus of the media, combat operations, death and injuries, military equipment and reconstruction and development are the spotlight of nearly six in ten reports (58.3%) in the coverage about Afghanistan (see Figure 3). The protracted parliamentary debate about when Canadian Forces should leave Kandahar accounts for more than a quarter (27.3%) of the spotlight of the news media coverage of Afghanistan. Most of the coverage (90%) was episodic compared to thematic (10%) in nature. Coverage based in Canada (12.3%) was two times more likely to be thematic than coverage produced by embedded journalists in Afghanistan (6.2%), $c^2(3, N = 900) = 8.907$, $p = .038$.

Research question two aims to assess what role journalists played in contesting or perpetuating the preferred frames of the military and government surrounding Canada's military mission in Afghanistan. Consistent with the Harper government's efforts to systematically author the media messages coming out of its officials' mouths, preferred frames—those sponsored by government and military leaders—are present at least once in 76.4 per cent of the media coverage about the conflict in Afghanistan.

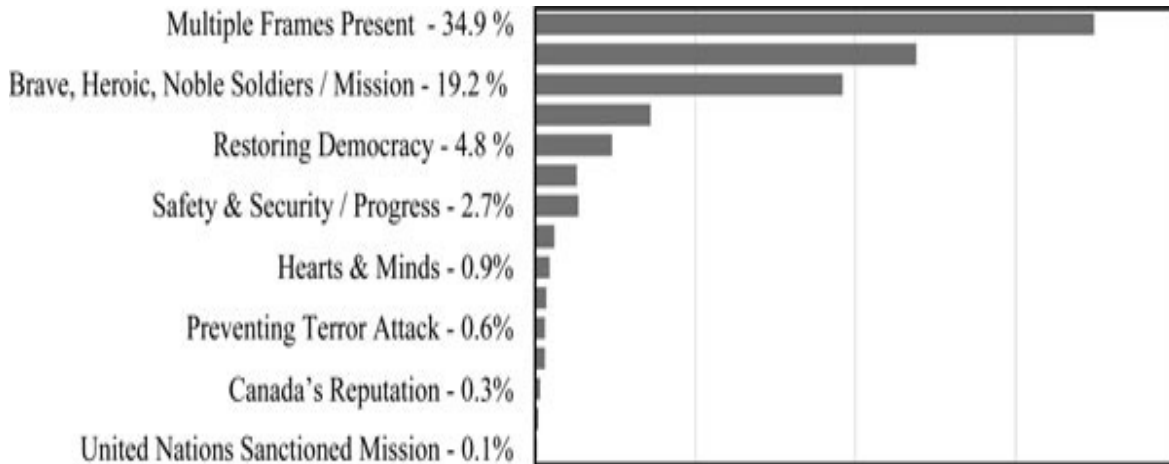
Figure 3 - Focus of News Coverage ($n = 900$)



Moreover, much of the coverage (34.9%) contains multiple frames in the same news report, commentary, editorial or letter to the editor (see Figure 4). News and commentary about the war in Afghanistan frequently, for instance, coupled reconstruction with safety and security frames (49.7%), $c^2(1, N = 900) = 187.136, p = .001$.

When the preferred frames of government and military leaders are present in the news, government and Canadian Forces officials are the largest (52.9%) sponsors of these frames, $c^2(11, N=900)=817.381, p = .001$ (see Figure 5). A newspaper headline from 2008, for example, quoting military leaders, reads: “Fine Canadians, courageous men; Three slain soldiers are remembered for their bravery, dedication and love of adventure.” In the story, Prime Minister Harper praises the dead soldiers’ “selfless service” to Canada, “while helping to ensure a brighter future for the Afghan people” (Moore, 2008). Journalists (24%) were the

FIGURE 4 - Preferred Government / Military Frames (n = 900)

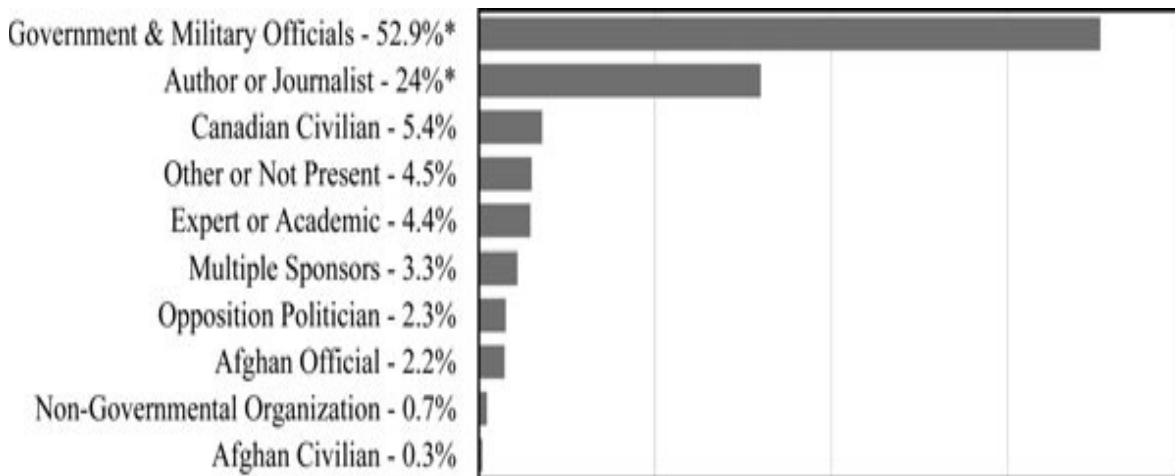


second largest sponsor of preferred government and military frames. This adoption of the government and military's preferred frame(s) often came in commentaries and editorials. In a column entitled "A soldier's motto: Always come back for your friends," *The Globe and Mail*, for example, highlights Warrant Officer Willy MacDonald's bravery, describing how the soldier "with machine-gun fire and RPGs raining down on him" helped his wounded comrades (Blatchford, 2009).

Of note, more than three-quarters (76.5%) of the media coverage containing a preferred government or military frame also contained a challenge to or fact check of that frame, $\chi^2(1, N = 900) = 390.035, p = .001$. Typical of this approach, *The Globe and Mail*'s Graham Smith challenges Canada's Chief of Defence Staff claims of improving security, writing: "Canada's top soldier has dismissed the growing violence in Kandahar as 'insignificant,' contradicting all public data and highlighting the growing gap between Canada's upbeat view of the war and the sober analysis from other NATO countries" (2008; italics added). The news story then offers a lengthy list of statistics fact checking the general's claim about improving security. This study's statistical analysis confirmed an association between this type of elite framing and challenges or fact checking sponsored by a journalist (63.9%, $p < .001$, FET). Journalists themselves (and not opposition politicians or critics of the war) presented the largest and most sustained challenge to government and military framing in the news media coverage of Afghanistan. Simply

put, journalists fact checked the preferred frames of government and military leaders. The challenges by journalists grew over time, too. In 2006, just less than half (49.8%) of the news media coverage about Afghanistan contained a fact check of a government or military frame. Challenges to elite rhetoric grew to 64.4 per cent in 2007; dropped to 56.7 per cent in 2008; and then rose to 62 per cent in 2009, $c^2(3, N = 900) = 11.266, p = .010$. It is also worth noting that 79 per cent of the coverage that featured an opposition politician as a primary or secondary source also contained a challenge to a government or military preferred frame, $p < .001, FET$.

FIGURE 5 - Frame Sponsor ($n = 900$)



More than three-quarters (76.9%) of news and commentary makes note—if only briefly—of the seemingly perpetual violence and precarious security in Afghanistan. In a *Globe and Mail* feature about training Afghan police officers, for example, the story ends pessimistically, stressing that insurgents were increasingly killing Canadian soldiers with suicide bombers and roadside improvised explosive devices (Koring and Dobrota, 2007). Mentions of the deteriorating security in Afghanistan increased from 76.1 per cent in 2006 to 77.8 per cent in 2007. Concerns about security rose again to 82.8 per cent in 2008 before falling below the four-year average of 76.9 to 70.9 per cent in 2009, $c^2(3, N = 900) = 9.610, p = .025$. Of note, 85.4 per cent of samples containing a mention of safety or security also contained a challenge or impeachment (overwhelmingly authored by a journalist) of the preferred government or military frames, $c^2(1, N = 900) = 51.130, p = .001$.

To be sure, the media coverage of Canada's role in Afghanistan did contain other critiques of Canada's military mission in Afghanistan. Independent of the fact checking of government and military framing, the news media, for instance, highlighted numerous concerns about the treatment of detainees (6.1% of the coverage). Writing about turning Afghan detainees over for torture, columnist Rick Salutin charges the practice would spark recrimination among Muslims and inspire more terrorism (2009). Yet, as this study's CA illustrates, most of the journalistic challenges come in the form of fact checking the military and government's stated goals and progress on those objectives. The next section turns to a discussion of this study's research questions and the findings outlined above.

Indexing

Canadian journalists largely indexed their coverage to government and military leaders. Yet, in contrast to considerable US-focused research (for example, Bennett et al., 2006; Zaller and Chiu 1996), Canada's news media were not docile streams of unfiltered messages of government and military leaders. Journalists did fact check what government and military leaders were saying about the war. Furthermore, this study's data illustrate well how elites do not represent a singular—and unified—block (Gramsci, 1971). There are clear battle lines and different groups framed the war in different ways. Moreover, the inclusion of opposition politicians in coverage of the war increased the chances of government and military framing getting contested. Canada's minority parliament likely played a role in this phenomenon and illustrates how elites are not monolithic. Indexing theory holds that elite disagreement often leads journalists to produce more critical coverage of issues and events (Bennett, 1990). Canada's Parliament was split over the question of Afghanistan. Both the Bloc Québécois and the New Democratic Party eventually came to demand that Canadian Forces withdraw from Afghanistan (Saideman, 2016). Parliamentary motions extending the mission were largely brokered between the ruling Conservatives and the official opposition Liberal party (BBC, 2008). Even some Liberals, whose party initially committed Canadian troops to Kandahar while in power in 2005, questioned Canada's commitment to the conflict while in opposition (Bratt, 2007). Furthermore, US President George W. Bush's

handling of the Iraq war made him increasingly unpopular in 2005 and 2006 (Bennett et al., 2007).

Canadian political actors were no doubt aware of the growing public skepticism about both the war in Afghanistan and Iraq internationally and at home. Canadian journalists, arguably, cued to this concern, fuelling their challenges to the Harper government's framing of the war in Afghanistan. Entman (2003) also predicts political actors are often vocal or silent based on public mood. Opposition politicians who did not support combat operations in Afghanistan likely felt emboldened to speak more critically about the war with opinion polls showing a drop in public support for military mission in the first year of the conflict (CTV, 2007). This public discontent, in turn, was reflected in the news media's growing skepticism about the conflict.

As well, politicians need to manage their relationship with news professionals in order to increase the chances of their preferred frame(s) being adopted by journalists (Entman, 2004). The acrimonious relationship between the Conservative government and the news media (Martin, 2010; Wilson, 2006), arguably, heightened skepticism among journalists about the government's framing efforts. A panel of prestigious Canadians appointed by the Conservative government to study Afghanistan concluded, in fact, that the Harper government "failed to communicate with Canadians with balance and candour" about the conflict (Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan, 2008: 20). Journalists experienced that lack of sincerity first hand. This in turn made journalists mistrustful of the Harper government's framing of the conflict (DeCillia, 2009).

Reality versus Government and Military Framing

The literature surrounding indexing and framing depicts two competing visions of journalism's power to challenge hegemony. In the one camp (Baum and Groeling, 2010), journalists frequently challenge elite framing and represent an "independent, strategic actor in the policy-making process" (Potter and Baum, 2010: 455). In the other camp, journalists are often depicted as stenographers whose content is predominantly shaped by dominant ideology (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Bennett and

colleagues (2007), notably, conclude that journalists' reliance on official sources precipitated a spectacular failure by the news media leading up to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. As noted earlier, Baum and Groeling (2010) contend journalistic counterframing to elite rhetoric concerning war grows over time when journalists obtain more information firsthand. The passage of time allows journalist to critique government and military leaders' rationale for war against facts on the ground.

This research offers a different insight into indexing and framing, highlighting that while Canadian journalists did largely index their coverage largely to officials, they challenged government and military frames from the beginning of Canada's combat operations in Kandahar. Moreover, the Canadian coverage of Afghanistan conforms with the growing interpretive style (Schudson, 2013) and fact checking form (Graves, 2016) of journalism over the last decade, raising questions about indexing theory's predictive power that news content generally adheres to elite debate.

From the onset of the war, Canadian journalists fact checked government and military claims of Canadian Forces making the volatile region safer, albeit their challenges increased over time. There was a clear association between frame contestation by journalists and mentions of safety and security in the news coverage. Canadian Forces were not making the volatile region of Kandahar safer as politicians and military officials kept claiming (United Nations, 2009). Journalists compared government and military leaders' statements against their own observations or the facts in Kandahar to "determine" the truthfulness of elite framing (Uscinski and Butler, 2013: 163). "If the text frame emphasizes in a variety of mutually reinforcing ways that the glass is half full," stresses Entman, "the evidence of social science suggests that relatively few in the audience will conclude it is half empty" (1993: 56). Reality asserted itself at the beginning of Canada's combat operations in Kandahar, allowing reporters' observations from the volatile region to impeach the preferred frames of the government and military early on in the conflict (Baum and Groeling, 2010). As well, the violent insurgency in nearby Iraq and the failure to find WMD arguably inoculated many Canadian journalists to what they would likely perceive as spin concerning the conflict in Afghanistan. By 2006, when Canada stepped up its military role in

Afghanistan, the increasing skepticism about the Iraq invasion among journalists seeped into the coverage and commentary about Afghanistan (DeCillia, 2009).

Compared to the domestic journalists covering the conflict (and political debate surrounding the war), embedded journalists did not have readily available sources in Kandahar to critique the government and military's framing. Lacking access to critical voices, embedded reporters in Afghanistan, in line with their professional conception, used their own observations and research to "challenge the official version of events" (Cook, 2005: 106). The tone of Canadian journalists' coverage of the war "parallel[ed] objective indicators of reality" in Kandahar (Baum and Groeling, 2013: 35). Security was precarious in Kandahar from the start of Canada's military mission in the region, and journalists were aggressive from the start of the mission about challenging officials' perpetual optimistic frames of progress and improving security.

Canadian journalists used elite criteria and definitions to judge and fact check the frames sponsored by officials. Government and military leaders' frames were consistently assessed by elite-defined and administered "objective" rules, laws, standards and codes (Glasser and Ettema, 1989: 2). Journalists turned the government and military's motivations and actions surrounding the military mission into quantitative or scientific criteria that they then assessed in their coverage. While the news media may have challenged the frames sponsored by elites, those frames still structured most of the stories, commentaries and editorials produced by journalists. Elite frames provided the intellectual scaffolding for journalistic production. As Bennett (2012) has argued, the news ritual of assessing and challenging political actors' objectives produces distorted coverage. When Canadian journalists fact checked government and military framing, they still incorporated—and even highlight—the frames sponsored by political actors in their coverage. Contradicting a frame ultimately evokes that same frame (Lakoff, 2004). "[I]f you negate a frame, you have to activate the frame, because you have to know what you're negating. If you use logic against something, you're strengthening it" (Lakoff, as quoted in Rosenberg, 2017). In many ways, elite frames repeated in the media—even if they are contested—become "connected to and implicit in practical life" (Gramsci, 1971: 330). This practice,

arguably, moves beyond story-telling to producing “meaning in the service of power” (Thompson, 1990: 7; italics in original) and questions the power journalists possess to challenge elite framing, as Baum and Groeling (2010) describe.

Ignoring the Bigger Questions

Many academics and experts—and even some journalists—were offering less optimistic depictions and prognostications of the conflict early on in 2006. International law expert Michael Byers (2006) told members of Parliament and senators in 2006 that combat in Afghanistan “was the wrong mission for Canada.” Academics also questioned Canada’s tactics (Greaves, 2008) in Afghanistan, while others doubted whether NATO countries such as Canada were equipped to deal with Afghanistan’s counterinsurgency, concluding the military organization’s “expectations of success were not realistic” (Kay and Khan, 2007: 163). Furthermore, a number of aid agencies also publicly chastised Canada for its focus on combat over reconstruction and development (Kairos, 2007).¹¹ Counter-

narratives and arguments contrasting the government and military’s preferred frames were publicly available. Despite this, journalists stuck to their usual events-oriented coverage, focusing their critiques on assessing the progress of government and military framing of the conflict. Simply put, journalistic counter-framing only went so far. All too frequently, though, there are discrepancies between “what ought to be” and the what is, as Gramsci noted (1971: 172; italics added).

While Canadian journalists fact checked the frames sponsored by government and military leaders, larger macro or structural forces such as the interests of the military and the industries that support it were not widely addressed in the news media. The coverage was largely episodic and lacked thematic values such as context, pushing critical assessments “into the background” (Lewis et al., 2003). The news media coverage about Afghanistan was largely event-driven, without needed context and information. Critical—thematic—accounts of the war were, therefore, largely absent in the mainstream media. In line with Iyengar, the episodic news coverage produced by Canadian journalists, arguably, “trivialize[ed] ... public discourse” (1991:143), echoing and amplifying elite positions and ideology. As well, the predominance of episodic coverage

presumably silenced important critical questions about war in mediated public discourse. “There is not one but many silences,” contends Foucault, “and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (1990: 27). This privileging—through absence—also represents an intangible power that is “most effective when least observable” (Lukes, 2005: 1).

Normative Roles of the Media

While journalists did fact check the government and military’s framing of the war, their largely episodic coverage—in the end—highlighted dominant interpretations. Their fact checking still integrated and spotlighted the frames sponsored by government and military leaders. Canadian journalists might argue that their challenges to military and government frames exemplify their role as a watchdog. Yet the binary ritual by which journalists used elite benchmarks to impeach the frames sponsored by government and military leaders arguably perpetuated hegemonic interpretations of the conflict. The practices of countering the rhetoric of elites by judging it against their own words and criteria arguably provided the Canadian public with a distorted view of the war. As this CA’s findings highlight, the news media’s meaning making is closely aligned with the dominant political and economic power system. Collaboration does not imply censorship. “Collaboration,” Christians and colleagues emphasize, “represents an acknowledgement of the state’s interest—to which the media accede either passively or unwittingly, reluctantly or wholeheartedly—in participating in the choices journalists make and the coverage they provide” (2009: 197).

The abundance of events-oriented coverage over thematic (substantive and contextual) coverage further compounds concerns about the perpetuation of hegemonic interpretations in the news media. Journalists and their editorial leaders need to pay more attention to how episodic coverage can unwittingly perpetuate dominant meanings. Journalistic rigour requires more than simply using official yardsticks or values to discredit the frames of officials. This type of journalism is too reductionist, too simplistic. Ethical and dogged journalism requires more imagination, nuance and complexity. Informative journalism requires “more than what is contained within the power boundaries of the frame” (Durham, 2001: 134). There are not two sides, for instance, to climate

change. The BBC, by means of an example, was criticized in 2011 for its “over-rigid” application of impartiality in its coverage of climate change, giving “undue attention to marginal opinion” (BBC, 2011: 5). This form of journalism, argues Fallows, presents politics and public policy as a he-said/she-said, everyone is to blame affair that occludes deeper understandings and leaves citizens “even more fatalistic and jaded about public affairs” (2016). This, of course, presents a worrying potential consequence for participatory democracies such as Canada (Lewis, 2001). Influence, after all, begins with politicians constructing the context and information people will use to make political decisions.

Conclusion

This research’s CA assessed two research questions concerning indexing and framing. While journalists largely indexed their coverage to government and military sources, they did challenge, to a degree, elite messages. Canadian journalists fact checked the preferred frames of government and military leaders with elite benchmarks. Yet, because their coverage was largely episodic, journalists failed to challenge more fundamental structural issues and justifications for the war.

This study raises more questions than answers. While it offers, as Shoemaker and Reese (2014) urge, a systematic analysis of media content about Canada’s military mission in Afghanistan, it does not offer insight into why journalists did what they did. Further research questioning journalists about their motivations may prove insightful. This study lays the ground work for further understanding of the media effect or “shaping power” of media (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014: 4). Fletcher and Hove (2012) and Fletcher and colleagues (2009) offer useful insight into what factors played a role in how Canadians felt about the war in Afghanistan. Subsequent audience research may be able to assess if media messages containing elite-sponsored frames and journalistic challenges or fact checking influence public opinions about war. So far, most fact checking effects research has focused on US audiences. Future studies should test the impact of fact checking on Canadians.

Akin to Hallin’s analysis (1986) of the Vietnam War, Canadian journalists ultimately ended up echoing and amplifying the elite common sense about the conflict in Afghanistan. It is during times of war when

democracies and citizens need critical and autonomous journalism the most (Jensen, 2003). Episodic, event-oriented coverage offers only “scattered morsels” and not sufficient information and context to allow the public to “gain wide understanding as a sensible alternative to” the interpretations sponsored by government and military leaders (Entman, 2004: 17). “Too much of the press,” argues The Guardian’s Katherine Viner, “often exhibited a bias towards the status quo and a deference to authority” (2016). As this study shows, Canadians and democracy were ultimately not well served because journalists did not offer a more complete and critical account of Canada’s military role in a distant war.

Notes

- . 1 As a journalist with CBC News, the author was twice embedded with Canadian Forces in Afghanistan.
- . 2 More than half (55%) of Canadians supported having soldiers in Afghanistan in March 2006 (Strategic Counsel, 2006). By the summer of 2009, a poll found a majority (54%) of Canadians did not want their soldiers in Kandahar (EKOS, 2009).
- . 3 These news organizations were chosen for their reach. The Globe and Mail and The National Post are Canada’s two national newspapers. CTV and CBC Radio broadcast nationally and have large audiences.
- . 4 In line with Kensicki (2004), a representative sample is typical of the kind of media concerning Afghanistan and Canada.
- . 5 The author’s news reporting from Afghanistan was excluded from the sample.
- . 6 News/current affairs: 79.8 %; editorial and commentary: 12.8 %; letters to the editor: 6.6 % ; and feature: 0.9 % .
- . 7 This research’s focus on national English media organizations is, admittedly, a limitation. An analysis of Quebec media about the conflict in Afghanistan is likely to yield different results.
- . 8 A full coding schedule is available online at: https://www.dropbox.com/sh/gmy2w xm v j c d d 5 1 s / A A A B N G W _ O L q Q s G r K X E U B F J l g a ? d l = 0
- . 9 This research’s text-based analysis of media samples is a limitation. To be sure, visual analysis of the framing of war has merits (Butler, 2009). This study’s primary focus, however, was quantifying framing and indexing. A detailed visual analysis is beyond the scope of this work.

- . 10 The intercoder reliability—including Scott’s pi, nominal Krippendorff’s alpha, and Cohen’s kappa—for all variables is available at: https://www.dropbox.com/sh/gmy2wxmvjcd51s/AAABNGW_0LqQsGrKXEUBFJ1ga?dl=0
- . 11 The Harper government halted spending on Kairos in 2009 because of the aid group’s position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some leaders of Kairos suspect the aid organization was politically targeted and then audited by Canada Revenue Agency (Curry, 2014).

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