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**THE WEB:
POLICY MAKERS, NEWS MEDIA, AND THE PUBLIC AGENDA
IN CANADA
by
CORRI L. BARR B.J.**

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Political Science
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
August 17, 1998

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Chair, Department of Political Science

Thesis Supervisor

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Abstract

Media effects models developed from American scholarship have not been widely studied in the Canadian context. This paper attempts to illustrate and examine the complex interrelationships among actors in the public sphere through generalizations drawn from the long tradition of media effects literature. The tensions among the various goals of the public, the media and policy makers are explored through empirical analyses of national issues, major Canadian daily newspapers and corresponding measures of the public agenda. The media effects models of agenda-setting, priming and framing are each applied to the data gathered in an attempt to illustrate the links among the three actors. The public policy implications of this web of interactions also form part of the discussion. This examination shows that generalizations drawn from the milestone studies of media effects models can be operationalized in the Canadian context, illuminating the symbiotic-antagonistic relationship between politics and the media.

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This paper proved to be a major undertaking -- one that I never would have succeeded in completing were it not for the support I received from many of the people in my life. My first words of gratitude are to those who survived the process with me. Thanks to my family -- Keith, Diane, Tricia and Craig -- for the assorted tasks they performed; Lynn Fortin and Cheryl McIntyre for their support and assistance; the motley cast and crew of the Embassy; and Lynn Ritchie, Jamie Russell, Adrian Croft, Chris Pollock, Grahame Vaughn and many other friends for keeping my spirits up. If I haven't yet thanked each of you explicitly, I am now.

I am also very grateful for the advice and guidance of my supervisor, Conrad Winn, and the other academic supports provided by Scott Bennett and the examination board.

British journalist Cyril Connolly once said literature is the art of writing something that will be read twice; journalism what will be grasped at once. This is neither art nor journalism, but good scholarship needs elements of both to succeed. It was a heck of a good time while it lasted. And good riddance!

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Chapter One

Media Effects Research and Public Policy

Introduction

The notion of agenda-setting has been part of the communications lexicon ever since Walter Lippmann first articulated the idea that the mass media have a role to play in the way each individual understands the wider world in which they operate. In 1922, he wrote that, "[t]he world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined."¹ He captured the essence of the relationship between the mass media and their audience.

Lippmann realized that much of what we experience as members of society is not what we witness directly, but that which is transmitted to us through the mass media. He was most concerned with the effects of press presentation on each individual's view of reality -- what he called "the pictures in our heads."² We respond politically to this pseudoenvironment which is built almost exclusively through the information we receive as consumers of the mass media.

In Lippmann's time the press was the primary source of this mediated experience. We now receive information through a myriad of electronic sources as well, ranging from radio to television to the Internet. Canadians

¹ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1922) 18.

² Ibid.

learn about politics and political decisions mainly through news coverage of political events on television, in newspapers, and on radio -- in that descending order of importance.³ While the methods of delivery have changed over time, Lippmann's essential thesis remains the same. Much of the information we use to form our political opinions comes from the media. As Bernard Cohen wrote in 1963, "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."⁴

At the centre of the notion of a routinized relationship between politics, the public and the media is the concept of a "public sphere," articulated by Jürgen Habermas. His concept describes the nexus of institutions and practices between the private interests of civil society and the power of the state. The public sphere is that geographical or metaphorical space in which public affairs are discussed and resolved. Historically, this space took the form of pubs, coffee houses and meeting halls. The mass media now form an important part of the venue where politics is discussed and a hierarchy of issues takes shape.⁵

The hypothesis of agenda-setting implies that the media can change an individual's views of political reality by defining which issues are salient and pressing in political life and which issues are peripheral to political debate.

³ Mary Anne Comber and Robert S. Mayne, *The Newsmongers: How the Media Distort the Political News* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986) 13.

⁴ Bernard Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963) 13.

⁵ Steven Seidman, ed, *Jürgen Habermas on Society and Politics: A Reader* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) 231-236.

Agenda-setting as an end product of mass media action has been empirically proven and re-proven countless times throughout the evolution of research in this area. Work has also been directed at the related "priming" and "framing" natures of mass media -- that is, the way in which public debate is affected by the agenda articulated in the media.

Using this branch of mass communications research, an understanding of the relationship between politics, the public and the media can be approached. However, this relationship is complex, comprising elements of both symbiosis and antagonism. There is little that resembles a linear causality in the relationship. The web drawn by these actors is the crux of the potentialities and problematics of media effects models.

Research Question

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of the amplitudes and attributes of media effects on public perception in various areas of public life in Canada. The goal is to investigate whether or not media effects models evolving out of American scholarship describe an identifiable state of affairs in the Canadian context.

An overview of the studies and literature on agenda-setting proves them to be predominantly American in origin. In the Canadian context, much less empirical study has been undertaken, although media effects research is as applicable in this country as it is in the United States. The American generalizations in this area may well be culturally transferable, however, empirical research into the specificities of media effects in Canada are a necessary pursuit in order to understand how Canadian public policy is

related to the news carried by Canadian news sources. Sufficient volumes of such research are lacking. It is hoped that this study will reveal something about the nature of the symbiotic-antagonistic relationship between politics and the media in Canada.

Hypothesis

Agenda-setting and other media effects models have been adequately studied, both observationally and empirically, to be established as expected outcomes in studies of media effects. Generalized conclusions about media effects tend to use language which is either implicitly or explicitly causal, however, to establish the conclusiveness of findings, researchers should present several kinds of evidence to support their assertions.

Content analyses of the media causing the purported effect should be part of the work. The people supposed to have been affected by the media content should be shown to have actually been exposed to the media in question. Researchers should be able to control for extraneous factors to avoid competing causal explanations for the apparent effects. Finally, researchers should specify the mechanisms or processes invoking the effect.⁶ This means considering media-effects models, like priming and framing, in addition to agenda-setting.

This study aims to empirically illustrate the links between media coverage and audience perception in order to engage in a discussion of the

⁶ Gerald M. Kosicki, "Problems and Opportunities in Agenda-Setting Research," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Spring 1993):107.

embedded public policy implications. It is expected that an analysis of media coverage and audience perception could provide political decision-makers with the tools to gauge and reflect the public's mood when setting a policy course.

Clarification of Terms

Agenda-setting must be understood as part of a larger process designed to make the very complex relationships among media organizations, the public, and public policy makers comprehensible. The agenda-setting model focuses the researcher's attention on a relatively fixed range of issues and specifies a precise manner in which the influence of media should be visible. In other words, the agenda-setting model is essentially limited to measures of the relative salience of issues compared with their relative salience in media content.⁷ The related concepts of "priming" and "framing" are often used to examine the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of media effects not adequately covered by the agenda-setting model.

Through the course of this work, the word *quantitative* will be used to refer to effects measured primarily through assessments of the frequency or intensity of news coverage while the word *qualitative* will refer to assessments based on its content. While this may be an inexact use of formal statistical terms, the aim here is to provide a more generalized empirical description of the effects under study. The two words form a kind

⁷ Ibid., 117.

of shorthand to differentiate between the bases of investigation for each media effect.

Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder see media priming as the result of changes in accessibility. While agenda-setting may be understood as a memory-based process in which the accessibility of topics or issues increase with their availability in the mass media, priming draws a correlation between the attention given by the media to an issue and the importance the issue has in the public's evaluations of political actors. The public's evaluations lean most heavily on issues appearing in the media most often.⁸ For example, if stories about the economy and jobs fill the headlines and the newscasts, the economic policies and performance of the government of the day will be the basis upon which the public judge their overall performance as the country's leaders. Unlike agenda-setting, the priming model posits that the media are responsible for the use the public makes of an issue with respect to judgments of their leaders as well as the ranking of issue importance.⁹

According to Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Jamieson, there is a certain amount of similarity between the concepts of agenda-setting and priming insofar as the two models are primarily concerned with the amount of coverage an issue receives. They write:

Media priming is a robust effect that has been successfully tested in experimental and survey contexts, consistently supporting the claim that media alter the impact issues have on judgements by giving these issues more or less prominence. But media priming, like

⁸ Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 81 - 82.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

agenda setting, is not concerned with how issues are treated in news coverage, only with their relative frequency.¹⁰

Two media stories written from completely opposite points of view, or from philosophically different points of departure, are treated as equivalent from the standpoint of the concept of media priming.

Framing is the qualitatively different model which takes account of the impact of the content of media stories. The way in which the mass media frame issues will support a particular set of inferences to be made from the available information, while at the same time suppressing another set, "cognitively priming some information in the network of knowledge while bypassing other nodes."¹¹ By altering the information that is made available in the mass media, framing works to alter the interpretations of events mediated through the news story's point of view.

While framing seems to have a kind of agenda-setting effect through the selective nature of its treatment of information in a given context, Robert Entman argues it in fact provides a framework for thinking about events. He writes:

Frames, then, *define problems* -- determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; *diagnose causes* -- identify the forces creating the problem; *make moral judgments* -- evaluate causal agents and their effects; and *suggest remedies* -- offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 83

¹² Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 43 (1993): 52, qtd. in Cappella and Jamieson, 45 - 46.

In the course of looking at media effects, researchers can draw on a range of models and perspectives to explain the various implications of media coverage on the political decisions and perception of news consumers. Priming and framing help explain some of the symbiotic-antagonistic interrelationships among the media, politics and public policy not fully explained by agenda-setting.

Literature Review

To position the current study within the overall body of work in this field of inquiry, an overview of the milestone research is useful. In the years following publication of Lippmann's seminal *Public Opinion*, most mass communications research centred on a belief in the profound ability of the media to alert the public about which events were important. This theory was sometimes referred to as the "magic bullet" theory. The magic bullet of media information was apparently accepted virtually unaltered by news consumers.

This is not to suggest, however, that Lippmann viewed consumers as passive receivers of the messages of the news media. He wrote, "...it is clear enough that under certain conditions men respond as powerfully to fictions as they do to realities, and that in many cases they help create the very fiction to which they respond."¹³ He meant that people actively construct their pictures of reality, but they are constrained by the information available to them through the mass media.¹⁴

¹³ Lippmann, 14.

¹⁴ Maxwell McCombs, et al, *Contemporary Public Opinion: Issues and the News* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991)12.

In the inter-war period, research seemed to indicate that the media were indeed pervasive and powerful.¹⁵ The hypothesis posited that media images could dramatically alter the beliefs and perceptions of entire populations. Canadian writer David Taras notes, "[b]ehaviour on all levels -- dress, courtship, language, attitudes toward race and religion -- was being radically altered as the media reshaped society in its own image. There was an Orwellian tinge to these first impressions and considerable anxiety among students of the subject."¹⁶

Starting in the 1940s, however, the paradigm started to shift. Beginning with a benchmark survey conducted in Erie County during the 1940 American presidential campaign, quantitative research on the effects of mass communication in election campaigns, public information campaigns, and on numerous public attitudes began to show a somewhat different picture of media power.¹⁷

In his 1960 book, *The Effects of Mass Communication*, Joseph Klapper summed up the first two decades of empirical research in mass communication with two major conclusions. He found that:

1. Mass communication ordinarily does not serve as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, but rather functions among and through a nexus of mediating factors and influences.

¹⁵ Shearon Lowery and Melvin DeFleur, *Milestones in Mass Communication Research: Media Effects* (New York: Longman Publishers, 1983) 17 - 18.

¹⁶ David Taras, "Television and Public Policy: The CBC's Coverage of the Meech Lake Accord," in *Canadian Public Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1989) 323.

¹⁷ Donald L. Shaw and Maxwell E. McCombs, *The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press* (St. Paul: West Publishing, 1977) 3.

2. These mediating factors are such that they typically render mass communication a contributory agent, but not the sole cause, in a process of reinforcing the existing conditions. ...¹⁸

The early research, according to Klapper, showed the mass media to have limited effects. Any power the media had to influence audience perceptions was first mediated through their own, first-hand social and psychological experience. Audience preconceptions seemed to be hardened by exposure to the media, not radically changed through media use. Researchers saw a pattern of selective exposure and retention of media messages as the consumer's pre-existing beliefs screened out uncomfortable news or that which was incompatible with the audience's personal values.¹⁹

Although Klapper's conclusions eased the collective minds of those media purveyors who felt uneasy shouldering responsibility for the possible harmful effects of uneven news reporting, misleading advertising or violent programming, a renewed shift in the mass communication research paradigm brought the important influence of mass media on public opinion back to the fore.²⁰

Throughout the 1960s, the work of Kurt and Gladys Lang began to specify an agenda-setting function for the mass media on the basis of their analysis of the U.S. presidential campaigns of 1948 and 1953. They rejected Klapper's "limited effects" theory and concluded there was an important role played by the media in defining the limits of political debate,

¹⁸ Ibid., 3 - 4.

¹⁹ Taras, 323.

²⁰ McCombs, et al, 13.

and specifying the issues voters saw as important.²¹ Agenda-setting did not focus on persuasion as the primary factor in audience influence, instead it dealt with the effects of the cognitive element of setting an agenda of issues which the audience would then perceive to be important and worthy of discussion.²²

While the Langs saw evidence of selective exposure and retention in the way the audience viewed the political content -- the partisan elements -- of the media, they argued that the "limited effects" hypothesis did not encompass the whole range of media effects.²³

Their studies focused on the problem of how the media define the real political environment that can be known, whether directly or indirectly, only through the media. They wrote:

Exposure to this mediated environment is almost as difficult to escape as contact with one's immediate world. The main events, the cleavages that develop from them, the line-up of leading personalities on the major issues, and ideas about their personal characteristics somehow get through -- perhaps not literally to everyone but to the vast majority, including the many who pay little attention to news and politics. The very pervasiveness of the news media forces us to look beyond their immediate and direct impact to consider their cumulative effect.²⁴

The Langs saw importance in what the media cover versus what they choose to omit from coverage. This ability to set the agenda for public discussion, according to the Langs, gives the media extraordinary power.

²¹ Oscar H. Gandy, Jr, *Beyond Agenda Setting: Information Subsidies and Public Policy* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing, 1982) 5.

²² Kosicki, 103-104.

²³ Gladys Engel and Kurt Lang, *Politics and Television Re-viewed* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1984) 212 - 213.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

This power stems from the way in which mass communications create an impression of public support for public policy decisions and personalities. Through the routine decisions made everyday in newsrooms about what is considered newsworthy, the media can direct attention to some issues while ignoring others, and build images of political figures so that the general public feel they know them.²⁵

In the 1960s, Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge articulated the criteria used by media to select newsworthy material. It is these criteria that, in the end, determine what is covered in the mass media, and what is perceived by the audience to be important.

Galtung and Ruge determined a set of eight factors which work to facilitate or impede perception. From these they developed a set of hypotheses regarding news selection, which include:

1. An event that takes little time to unfold, for instance between the publication of two successive issues of a daily newspaper, is more likely to be recorded by the media than events that take a long time to unfold.
2. A "bigger" story, for example an extremely violent murder, is more likely to be covered than a less sensational story. There is a certain amplitude an event must surpass before it is recorded in the media at all.
3. An event with a clear interpretation is preferred to the highly ambiguous event.
4. Events that are culturally familiar will be given more attention than those that are culturally distant.
5. News that is too far away from audience expectation -- that which is not easily recognizable -- is less likely to be reported than that which corresponds to what one expects to happen.

²⁵ Ibid., 218

6. As a kind of corrective for the fourth and fifth hypotheses, news that is unexpected or rare within the context of what is meaningful and consonant will be covered. This is the "man bites dog" kind of news.
7. Once something has hit the headlines and been defined as news, it will continue to be defined as news for some time even if the amplitude is reduced.
8. A balanced news product is desirable; too many significant stories of the same type will be dropped in favour of a less significant story of a different type in order to present "balanced" coverage.²⁶

These eight hypotheses explain what and who get covered by the mass media, and by extension, what and who are perceived to be important by the audience.

Due to these norms of decision-making in news coverage, an element of bias is introduced into the reality created by the mass media. According to the Langs, "[t]he news system is forced to operate by selection, and the criteria that govern what is selected inevitably introduce an editorial viewpoint that distorts in some way what is presented as reality, ..." ²⁷ While the bias or distortion is not a deliberate manipulation, at least in the case of the media in democratic countries, it does colour the reality perceived by the audience.

The Langs' work looked at the effect of the symbolic reality created by the mass media's news decisions. They contend that, "[t]his social construction, superimposed on the natural environment, constitutes at once an enrichment (with new vistas opened) and an impoverishment (since much is left out)." ²⁸ The creation of the collective reality is, they say, mostly

²⁶ Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge, "Structuring and Selecting News," extract from *Journal of International Peace Research*, No. 2 (1965): 64-90.

²⁷ Lang, 199.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

a one-way process. The audience can do little more than accept or ignore what is transmitted through the mass media.

The Langs also found that while the flow of information from media to audience is seldom reversed, the media tend to communicate among themselves often. What one outlet considers to be important news is often replicated in other media sources. Consequently, there is a lag in the type of feedback that serves to correct initial errors or misperceptions due to the structuring and selection of news. The Langs write:

To this degree, the symbolic reality becomes self-confirming. It forces those who would participate in public life to orient themselves to the media, even while trying to change the media definition of what is happening. In fact, the public definition of any event is the collective product of the many efforts, from different vantage points, to control -- to exploit and facilitate as well as to impede -- the flow of information to the public about such an event. These efforts are a major part of politics.²⁹

Having set out parameters for research on mass media, public opinion, and political behaviour, the Langs provided the theoretical basis for the agenda-setting research which followed.

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw provided the first empirical verification of the agenda-setting function of the mass media, building upon the previous work of the Langs.³⁰ They applied the theory of agenda-setting to quantitative political data in order to test the hypotheses developed in earlier media effects literature.

During the 1968 U.S. presidential election, McCombs and Shaw carried out a study among the undecided voters of Chapel Hill, North

²⁹ Ibid., 202.

³⁰ Gandy, 6.

Carolina.³¹ Selection of a sample of undecided voters was used to enable McCombs and Shaw to avoid the tendency toward selective exposure and retention attributed to partisan voters by the Langs.

The study found a high correlation between political issues the media treated as important and the issues identified as salient by the undecided voters. They found that, in fact, "[t]he voters' beliefs about what were the major issues facing the country reflected the composite of the press coverage, even though the three presidential contenders in 1968 placed widely divergent emphasis on the issues."³²

McCombs and Shaw also found, however, that there was little empirical evidence to support the model of selective exposure and retention based on partisanship. There was little evidence that undecided voters attended most closely to the information which they found most congenial and supportive. Analysis of the Chapel Hill survey instead found that among those undecided voters leaning toward one of the three candidates, there was less agreement with the news agenda based on the statements of the preferred candidate than with the news agenda based on pronouncements from all three candidates.³³

To this point, the notion of the agenda-setting function of the mass media as a concept emphasizing the causal relationship of topic salience in the media influencing topic salience among the public had been the primary focus of the literature. McCombs and Shaw also identify the saliency of

³¹ Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda- Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Summer 1972): 176 - 187.

³² *Ibid.*, 8.

³³ *Ibid.*

various attributes of topics, issues or personalities in the media as an area for study.³⁴ They cite an argument put forward by Wilbur Schramm in his 1949 article, "The Effects of Mass Communications: A Review," that the public's view of city councils as institutions is influenced by press reports resulting in the councils being perceived to have more expertise and authority than they actually possess.³⁵

In the concept of "attributes," McCombs and Shaw include such ideas as status-conferral, stereotyping and image-making. Status-conferral is concerned with the ability of the media to influence the prominence of a person or object in the eye of the public. Stereotyping is, of course, the characterization of objects through the over-emphasis of a few, select traits. They consider image-making to be the manipulation of the salience of both objects and attributes concerned with increasing public familiarity with personalities, objects or their attributes.³⁶ All of these sub-sets of research return to the primary questions of how public perception is affected or influenced by the messages conveyed by the mass media.

McCombs and Shaw's work began the empirical study of media effects and provided the quantitative articulation of the many ways in which the media can help to form the political opinions of the public. Having helped to form public opinion, the media then necessarily provide the framework within which political actors must operate to respond to the public's interests. Their work was a significant milestone in advancing empirical exploration of the agenda-setting theory.

³⁴ Ibid., 12

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 12 - 13.

Following on McCombs and Shaw's research, Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder produced a series of influential studies in the 1980s supporting the agenda-setting hypothesis with a particular emphasis on the role of television. Iyengar and Kinder's central statement was that, "those problems that receive prominent attention on the national news become the problems the viewing public regards as the nation's most important."³⁷

To test how television news influenced American conceptions of political reality, they devised a series of sequential experiments, assemblage experiments, and a longitudinal analysis of national surveys in their study, *News That Matters*.

A close examination of this set of experiments is useful here in order to illustrate the techniques used in evaluating the agenda-setting effects of the media. Iyengar and Kinder's methods have been copied, criticized and analysed by numerous mass communications scholars and are as significant a milestone in the research as the work of the Langs and McCombs and Shaw was before them.

The sequential experiments were designed to measure participants' beliefs regarding the importance of national issues before and after the experimental sessions. Participants in the test group were shown specially edited newscasts with a heavy concentration of news on specific issues, such as national defence. The control group watched newscasts with no stories reflecting the issue under study.

Evidence of the agenda-setting hypothesis at work in this context would manifest itself in the observation of change over the course of the

³⁷ Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 16.

experiment in the relative importance test participants afforded the issue emphasized in the newscasts. This was, in fact, what Iyengar and Kinder discovered. In the experiment testing national defence, for instance, the researchers found that before they saw any of the newscasts, test participants ranked defence sixth in importance behind other issues such as inflation, pollution and civil rights. However, after the exposure to the specially edited newscasts, test participants ranked defence second only to inflation. There was no corresponding change among the members of the control group.³⁸

In the words of Iyengar and Kinder, "[s]uch a dramatic shift in priorities, induced by such a modest and unobtrusive alteration in news coverage, constitutes a powerful confirmation of the agenda-setting hypothesis."³⁹ They were also able to replicate the sequential experiment, with similar results, several more times. Iyengar and Kinder concluded that issues given steady news coverage grow in importance, at least in the minds of news consumers.

A second tactic used by the researchers to test agenda-setting was a series of six assemblage experiments to learn more about the functional relationship between the amount of news coverage and the size of the agenda-setting effect. Participants in these six experiments were shown collections of fifteen television news stories that gave either moderate or extensive attention (three or six stories) to one national issue, such as defence, energy or inflation. Participants were assigned to either a moderate or extensive test group for any one problem, and were shown no

³⁸ Ibid., 16 - 18.

³⁹ Ibid., 18.

stories regarding the other two issues. This experiment design allowed the measurement of the agenda-setting effect stemming from some exposure to coverage of an issue versus none, as well as the impact of incremental increases in coverage.⁴⁰

In this case, because participants were only tested for the importance afforded certain issues immediately following the viewing of the fifteen selected stories, there is no data regarding attitudes held by participants before exposure to the news coverage. In the assemblage experiment, the test of agenda-setting is to compare the importance participants attach to a given problem across the various experimental conditions and different levels of coverage included in the test design.

Iyengar and Kinder found, as in the sequential experiments, that the agenda-setting hypothesis generally held, with few, explicable variations. The agenda-setting effect was difficult to see only for problems, such as inflation, that were highly regarded at the outset of the experiment. In the case of inflation, for instance, heavy coverage (six stories of fifteen) was required to raise its importance rating above that indicated by viewers who saw no stories about the issue. The researchers also concluded from these studies that an agenda-setting effect can stem from a reasonably low amount of coverage. In several instances they found a single news story had an effect on viewers' rating of a given issue.⁴¹

Iyengar and Kinder found through their series of sequential and assemblage experiments that television news' agenda-setting influence was persistent and detectable twenty-four hours after the experimental viewings

⁴⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁴¹ Ibid., 23-24.

were completed.⁴² This is significant as the news cycle of television is generally set to cover the period from one day to the next, for instance from supper-hour newscast to supper-hour newscast. This frequency and regularity mean that for daily viewers, the agenda-setting process is continuous. The same effect would be expected from the use of other media following a similar cycle, such as the daily newspaper.

A series of follow-up interviews with some of the participants of the previous experiments was undertaken to test the persistence of agenda-setting. These interviews showed participants who had been exposed to a single story on a given issue continued, one week later, to rank the issue as one of society's most important problems more frequently than those who had seen no coverage of the issue. The difference in perception was almost as significant one week after the experiments as it had been immediately following exposure to the news stories. Iyengar and Kinder found the degree of persistence revealed by their experiments to be remarkable.⁴³

To complement their experimental work, the researchers undertook a nonexperimental test of agenda-setting to examine trends in television news coverage over time, and compare them to changes in public opinion over comparable periods.

To test the extent to which the issues perceived to be important by the media are reflected in changes in public opinion, Iyengar and Kinder obtained a measure of the public's estimation of the importance of three national issues over the period of 1974 to 1980 and measured television

⁴² Ibid., 25

⁴³ Ibid.

news coverage of the three problems by recording the number of pertinent news stories appearing on the weekday CBS Evening News.

The researchers found a measure for the importance of energy, inflation and unemployment in the opinion polls of Gallup, Yankelovich and the Center for Political Studies for each two-month period of the study. The number of news stories for each problem was totalled for each month and then averaged for the bimonthly observation.⁴⁴

They found the attention given each issue in the television news underwent dramatic changes between 1974 and 1980. The trends in importance given each issue by the public underwent similar changes. Iyengar and Kinder are careful to point out, however, that the similar movements do not constitute proof of a causal impact of media coverage on problem importance. Conversely, the trends may actually indicate that the news media simply respond to public priorities in order to retain their audience.⁴⁵

Using a statistical procedure which measures an impact of news coverage on public opinion without measuring the reverse effect, Iyengar and Kinder's analysis attempted to remove the effects of unmediated experience and presidential efforts to mobilize public opinion in order to reveal the degree to which public opinion is influenced by television news. In the period under study, the researchers noted changes in the political importance of certain issues among the public and traced them, in part, to changes in patterns of news coverage.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 33.

While the literature reviewed to this point is by no means representative of the totality of the studies conducted on the agenda-setting hypothesis, it represents of the work that has helped to influence the directions taken in the study of this area of mass communications. In the words of Shearon Lowery and Melvin DeFleur, "[a]s is the case in all fields of science, early and classic studies provide the broad map of the territory that needs to be explored as a new discipline comes into existence."⁴⁷

The milestone studies point out the directions that need to be studied in order to understand media effects and provide the empirical generalizations that form the basis of the more focused theories explaining media effects. The agenda-setting model has proved to be a flexible one, capable of guiding studies of audience response, news work, media content and public policy.⁴⁸ In the following chapters, the media effects theories will be applied using data collected from a series of Canadian daily newspapers, public opinion polls and panel studies in an attempt to illustrate the links between the public, the media and policy makers.

Chapter Two lays out the methodology employed. Chapter Three will examine public issues including national unity, healthcare, education and the environment in terms of the relative frequency in which they are covered in the media and how important the issues are deemed to be by respondents of public opinion polls. This should provide an illustration of the agenda-setting effect in the Canadian context. The fourth chapter will examine the framing concept by looking at changes in the public's relative attitudes toward the Canadian Forces compared with the qualitative

⁴⁷ Lowery and DeFleur, 394.

⁴⁸ Kosicki, 117.

attributes of media coverage. Chapter Five will look at the attitudes of a panel of respondents toward several national issues to test the concept of priming. Their relative responses to the importance of the issues over time will be mapped and compared with the intensity with which the issues are covered in the media. The final chapter will provide a summary of the findings of the previous sections, explore how they fit with the previously outlined tenants of media effects, and discuss the public policy uses and implications of this type of research.

Chapter Two

Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to lay out how the media effects models will be operationalized for the purposes of the study. The core assumption is that a series of interrelationships among the public, the media, and policy makers work to set the public agenda. This assumption is based firmly on the body of work outlined in the previous chapter. Specifically, the amplitude and attributes of media impacts on audience perception and the policy-making process will be targeted.

There is no expectation here that the causation of media effects will be quantified, nor is it expected that direct causal links will be established. The operationalization of the models used leads simply to an empirical examination and description of the symbiotic-antagonistic nature of the relationships among our three actors. Much of the literature in this field has been drawn from American sources. The quest here is to illuminate the Canadian experience through both experimental and nonexperimental methods.

Everett Rogers and James Dearing have proposed the possibility of nine relationships among the media, the public and policy makers. The nine include: "The media's influence upon itself, the public, and policy makers; the public's influence upon itself, the media and policy makers; and policy makers' influence upon themselves, the media and the public."¹ Figure 1

¹ Everett Rogers and James Dearing, "Agenda-Setting Research: Where Has It Been, Where Is It Going?" James Anderson, ed, *Communications Yearbook II* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1988) 569.

Figure 1: Agenda-Setting Matrix

<i>Reactors</i>	<i>Actors</i>		
	media	public	policy makers
media	media media	public media	policy makers media
public	media public	public public	policy makers public
policy makers	media policy makers	public policy makers	policy makers policy makers

depicts the matrix describing these relationships. It has been argued that the Rogers-Dearing model does not fully account for the interdependence of all of these parts, nor does it address the social and economic forces involved in shaping the interrelationships.² It is useful, however, for visualizing and organizing the areas under study here. This work attempts to examine many of these interrelationships, although clearly the focus is on the media as an actor with respect to both the public and policy makers.

News Data

In order to examine media effects in the Canadian context, a data set using four major Canadian daily newspapers was constructed. The *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, the *Ottawa Citizen* and *La Presse* were each examined over the five year period from January 1993 to December 1997. Stories regarding national unity, healthcare, education, the environment and the Canadian Forces appearing on the prominent first and third pages of each paper were targeted. Both the headlines and the number of words in

² David Taras, *The Newsmakers: The Media's Influence on Canadian Politics* (Scarborough: Nelson, 1990) 32.

each of these stories were recorded. The number of words in each story provide a measure of the intensity of coverage given each national issue. The headlines are used to gauge the audience perception of various issues.

The four newspapers were chosen as representatives of the Canadian media as a totality. The *Globe and Mail* is, of course, the most national of the country's dailies and is the political newspaper of choice. The *Ottawa Citizen* represents the large Southam chain as its flagship newspaper. Both the *Toronto Star* and *La Presse* were chosen because of their large circulations.

It was indicated in Chapter One that Canadians use television as their primary source for information about politics and political decisions, followed by the media of newspapers, and then radio. Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, among many others, have made powerful arguments for the agenda-setting power of television. The medium is unusually nation-centred by virtue of the central images and sounds it conveys.³ Canadian news television focuses on Ottawa and international events that touch on the national interest. It would seem to follow that a data set constructed through an examination of television news would provide a better sample to measure national media effects.

However, John Robinson and Mark Levy have conducted several audience studies in the United States which show that television news continues to be a relatively weak predictor of long-term information gain among media users, while newspapers provide readers with a better source

³ Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 124-25.

of public affairs information.⁴ In Canada, newspapers remain the primary public affairs information source of policy makers and the politically attentive public. The preeminent newspapers, such as the ones used here, and the print-oriented news services such as Canadian Press and Reuters tend to set the political agenda.⁵

The concept of media content convergence made it possible to design the study in order to take advantage of the relative availability of the medium of print, as opposed to securing the access and infrastructure necessary to carry out a study based on television viewing. The idea of media content convergence posits that the use of rapidly changing technologies has the tendency to erode many of the distinctions that previously distinguished one form of information medium from another.

Kevin Robins and Frank Webster's work in the area of media convergence notes the transformation of broadcasting and the mass media is part of the larger restructuring of society and social relations made possible by the exploitation of new technologies, including microelectronics.⁶ Reasons of economic and labor efficiency drive the various media toward a kind of accommodation where the effort involved in producing and disseminating information is pooled.

The common values of newsworthiness shared among the various journalistic media lead to a relative correlation of the stories and issues

⁴ John P. Robinson and Mark R. Levy, "News Media Use and the Informed Public: A 1990s Update," *Journal of Communications*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring 1996) 135.

⁵ Robert Hackett, *News and Dissent: The Press and the Politics of Peace in Canada* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing, 1991) 98.

⁶ Kevin Robins and Frank Webster, "Cybernetic Capitalism: Information, Technology, and Everyday Life," V. Mosco and J. Wasko, eds, *The Political Economy of Information* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1988) 47.

presented by each. In *Newsmakers*, David Taras articulates the idea of "pack journalism". Journalists tend to move in the same circles, hear the same speeches, and develop many of the same sources. With access to almost identical information, journalists then tend to attach importance to many of the same issues and report similar stories as a result. Taras also cites Michel Vastel of *La Presse*, who believes that the media feeds off itself. He feels that stories often originate with leaks to major newspapers who run the stories in morning editions, then the reactions of major political players make the television news in the evening, helping to guarantee the story reemerges in the newspapers the next morning.⁷

For all of these reasons, coupled with the relative availability of newspaper accounts versus the infrastructure and access problems associated with television stories, this study was designed to take advantage of the stories contained in some of Canada's major dailies.

Public Opinion Polls

Having obtained the media data, this study of media effects then requires a timeseries of public opinion data obtained over the five years in order to compare public attitudes with the media coverage of issues over the same time period. In the case of the national unity, healthcare, education and environment issues, the Angus Reid Group's periodic national issues poll, titled "The Federal Political Scene and the Public Agenda," was used. The sample of respondents to these polls numbers above 1,500 and the data is statistically weighted to reflect the regional and age/sex composition

⁷ Taras, 89.

of Canada. The margin of error is reported to be plus or minus 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of twenty.

The question asked of respondents was, "Thinking of issues presently confronting Canada, which one do you feel should receive the greatest attention from Canada's leaders? What other issues do you think are important for Canada right now?" Respondents were not given a list of possible issue choices, so the answers reflect the concerns upmost in their minds. These polls will be used to gauge the agenda-setting effect.

For the examination of the Canadian Forces (CF), a Louis Harris/Thompson Lightstone poll tracking Canadians' confidence in various public institutions was used. The samples in this case counted over 2,000 respondents and were weighted to reflect the population distribution of Canada by age within each region. The reported margin of error was plus or minus 2.2 percentage points, 19 times out of twenty. The question posed was, "Now I'd like you to think for a moment about the people who are in charge of running the Canadian Armed Forces. Would you say that you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence in them?" These polls will be used specifically in the examination of the framing model.

Study Design

This study attempts to examine the amplitude and attributes of media effects through an examination of the three models put forth in Chapter One. The idea of media effects, to be fully investigated, needs to take account of the elements of agenda-setting, priming and framing. In order to test these

three effects, a series of exercises was performed using the data collected over the 1993 to 1997 period.

The first of these, the agenda-setting test, is a nonexperimental one drawn from the work of Iyengar and Kinder. Agenda-setting is essentially limited to measures of the relative salience of issues compared with their relative salience in media content. For the period under study, the number of words devoted to each issue was totalled for each month and then averaged for a bimonthly observation. A series of graphical representations of the intensity of coverage of the various issues was prepared and then compared with similar illustrations of the changes in public opinion regarding the issues deserving the highest attention from Canada's leaders.

A positive indication of the agenda-setting effect at work would be a similarity in the shapes of the graphs corresponding to a given issue. Sharp increases in the intensity of coverage would be matched by a similar increase in the priority given each issue among respondents. Conversely, it is expected that decreased intensity in media coverage would result in a lower priority rating. Any large disparity between the two graphs would indicate problems with the applicability of the agenda-setting model. This study tests the agenda-setting model through an examination of the national unity, healthcare, education and environment data.

The second test is designed to investigate the framing model. Framing takes account of the impact of the content of media stories. By altering the information that is made available in the mass media, framing works to alter the interpretations of events mediated through the news story's point of view. In this test, the framing concept is examined by looking at the

public's relative attitudes toward the CF compared with a qualitative assessment of the media coverage over the same period of time.

To obtain a measure of how media stories affect public attitudes toward this institution, a panel of three was given access to all of the pertinent headlines found on the first and third pages of the first section of each of the four newspapers over the 1993 to 1997 period. The panel tests were conducted in April 1998. Panelists were asked to register a score on a scale of one to five based on how positively or negatively they felt the headline reflected on the competency of the CF. The scoring system was laid out as follows:

1	Very negative
2	Somewhat negative
3	Somewhat positive
4	Positive
5	Very positive

For ambiguous headlines, and those for which panelists did not wish to register an opinion, a score of zero was entered and the headline was omitted from the calculations.

To try and reflect some of the diversity of Canadian society in such a small panel, gender and political preferences were taken into account. The panel consisted of two women and one man. Panelist A is a self-described Liberal in her early thirties, married with no children. She has a Master's degree and is employed in the public sector. Panelist B is a woman in her early forties, divorced with two school-aged children. She is a self-described New Democrat with an undergraduate degree and is also employed in the public sector. Panelist C is a self-described conservative in

his mid-fifties, married with two grown children. He has some college education and is employed in the private sector. Any significant differences in the scores registered by each of the panelists will be highlighted in the course of the study.

To examine the framing model, a graphical representation of public opinion polling gauging the public's confidence in the CF was juxtaposed with the scores depicting the tone of the media stories as scored by the panelists. A positive indication of the framing model at work would be a relative match in the highs and lows of public opinion confidence from the polling and the scores registered by the panelists. A relative lack of similarity between the two graphs would indicate a lack of evidence to support the framing model in this case.

A third test examines the concept of priming through a look how the panel rates the importance of the issues of national unity, healthcare, and education based on what they read in the collection of newspaper headlines. Iyengar and Kinder describe agenda-setting as a memory-based process in which the accessibility of topics or issues increase with their availability in the mass media. They see priming, like agenda-setting, as essentially a quantitative assessment of media effects. Priming draws a correlation between the attention given by the media to an issue and the importance the issue rates in the public's collective assessment of political leaders. The public's evaluations of their performance then leans most heavily on issues appearing in the media most often.

The panel was given a collection of headlines concerning the issues of national unity, healthcare, and education. They were asked to score these headlines on a scale of one to five, this time in order to gauge how

important they estimated the issue to be in terms of its reflection on governmental performance. The scoring system in this case was laid out as follows:

1	Unimportant
2	Somewhat unimportant
3	Somewhat important
4	Important
5	Very Important

Again, any ambiguous headlines or ones for which panelists had no opinion were registered as a zero and omitted from the calculations.

The panel's assessments were then compared with the graphs depicting the intensity of media coverage. A positive signal of priming would be a match between high levels of media coverage and assessments of the relative importance of the issues.

In all of the tests performed for this study, graphical representations of the data and statistics will be presented, however, detailed tables containing the numbers are not included. The graphs, contained in the various figures of this paper, sufficiently illustrate the underlying quantitative patterns for the purposes of this study. The written text will explain all of the pertinent data and statistics, so full tables summarizing data and statistics should not be necessary to the arguments set forth.

As the results of each of these tests are presented in the following chapters, it is hoped that a clear notion of a role for media effects research in describing the symbiotic-antagonistic interrelationships among the media, the public and policy makers will emerge. Once these interrelationships can

be articulated in a precise manner, the implications for public policy are more easily discerned and discussed.

Chapter Three

Agenda-Setting

In order to test the agenda-setting model in the Canadian context, four issues were identified and studied for signs of a correlation between the intensity of coverage in the four newspapers and the public opinion levels measured by the Angus Reid Group. Using the data collected for this study, the issues of national unity, healthcare, education and environment all seem to fit the criteria of the agenda-setting model in this nonexperimental test.

To illustrate the correlation between the salience of issues in media coverage and the public's ranking of its importance, each of the four issues will be examined separately in this chapter. The discussion will then conclude with a look at how the interplay between the media and the public can impact on public policy choices. What emerges from a comparison of media coverage over the 1993 to 1997 period and the public opinion polling of the same time frame is a rather clear indication of the agenda-setting effect at work. While it must be carefully noted that this nonexperimental data does not constitute proof of the causal impact of media coverage on issue importance, the distinct correlation does shed light on the interrelationships among the media, public opinion and policy makers.

National Unity

The period between 1993 and 1997 provides a good selection of both media coverage and measures of public opinion relating to national

unity in Canada. During this period, the Bloc Québécois entered the federal political scene, the Parti Québécois regained provincial power, the second referendum on sovereignty was held, Lucien Bouchard took the reins of the provincial government, and the Calgary Declaration was proposed by the premiers in the rest of Canada. It was an extremely active period of events surrounding this issue, and the media coverage was similarly intense.

Figure 2 on page 37 illustrates the relative correlation between the public opinion polling and the media coverage over the period. To begin the discussion of the manifestation of the agenda-setting model in this context, a graphical representation of the total average number of words recorded daily in all four newspapers together, averaged on a bimonthly basis, is compared with a bimonthly public opinion rating.

The major peak in both media coverage and the public opinion ranking of the importance of the issue of national unity is seen in the September-October 1995 period -- the time of the sovereignty referendum campaign and vote. In the graphs, a peak of 72 per cent of respondents indicated the issue to be highly important, while the daily average number of words on pages A1 and A3, the front pages, of the four newspapers reached just over 443. Over the two month period, each paper ran an average of 83 stories about national unity on the front pages, ranging from a high of 116 in the *Ottawa Citizen* to a low of 60 in the *Toronto Star*.

This is hardly a surprising result. The events, personalities, rallies and conflict of this period made for widespread news coverage as the national unity campaign fits with many of Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge's eight newsworthiness criteria outlined in Chapter One. Because of the national upheaval and importance attached to the issue, the

concrete manifestation of the interrelationship between media and public opinion is seen. A heightened anxiety among respondents regarding national unity occurs at the same time as the increased media coverage linked to events in the national unity fight.

Figure 2: National Unity and the Agenda-Setting Model

The post-referendum period also shows an interesting trend. While coverage of the national unity issue fell off significantly after the referendum, except for brief periods linked to the 1997 federal election and the Calgary Declaration, respondents continued to rate national unity as an important issue. In fact, the post-referendum period sees the public rating national unity much higher in importance than in the pre-referendum period.

Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder's work revealed the remarkable degree of persistence of the agenda-setting effect in their series of experiments. One week following exposure to news stories about a particular issue, participants in the study continued to rank the the issue as an important one.¹ The high, sustained level of media attention surrounding the Quebec sovereignty referendum appears to have resulted in the same kind of persistence, as respondents continued to rate the issue highly over subsequent months. The brief periods where attention was refocused on the national unity file following the referendum probably served to keep the issue at the forefront of many respondents' minds.

To this point in the examination of agenda-setting and national unity, the newspaper coverage has been treated as a homogenized block. There were in fact significant differences in the ways the four newspapers covered the issue. Figure 3 on pages 39 and 40 shows how the four newspapers differed in the intensity of coverage of national unity.

¹ Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 25.

There was relatively intense coverage seen in the *Citizen* throughout the pre-referendum and campaign periods. The *Citizen* also maintained a relatively higher level of coverage in the post-referendum period than did any of the other three newspapers. As the largest daily circulated in Eastern Ontario and the Outaouais, this attention was probably driven by the sensibilities of its target audience. The *Citizen* is distributed in a federalist area where residents would be visibly and negatively affected the day after a declaration of Quebec sovereignty in terms of its impact on their job and lifestyle situations.

The intensity of coverage in *La Presse* and the *Star*, the two large metro newspapers, exhibits the same pattern of coverage as the others, but at a much lower intensity. Crime and city news continued to be seen on the front pages, even during the highest periods of national unity coverage. The *Globe and Mail* and *Citizen* both devoted much more of their prominent space to coverage of the referendum debate than did the other two papers. The graphs indicate that both the *Globe and Mail* and *Citizen* averaged almost 600 words per day devoted to national unity on pages A1 and A3 during September and October 1995.² This was roughly twice the approximately 300 words seen on the same pages of the *Star* and *La Presse*.³

As noted earlier, however, it is evident that all four newspapers followed a similar pattern of coverage regarding this issue over the course of the 1993 to 1997 period. It is a pattern that fits with the agenda-setting

² The *Globe and Mail* averaged 577.21 words per day during this period, while the *Ottawa Citizen* averaged 599.74.

³ The *Toronto Star* averaged 285.74 words per day during this period, while *La Presse* averaged 311.07.

model set out for discussion in this paper and a confirmation of its applicability in terms of the Canadian political agenda.

Healthcare

At the March 1998 federal Liberal party convention in Ottawa, pollster Michael Marzolini warned delegates that the most pressing issue emerging on Canada's public agenda is healthcare. Healthcare, he said, heads the list as a public concern and an area where respondents expected matters to get worse.⁴ Marzolini is but one of many to identify this trend in the public's agenda.

Angus Reid, chief executive of the Vancouver-based Angus Reid Group, told a group of Ottawa business, community and political leaders that his polling shows Canadians are extremely proud of their healthcare. Over the last decade, though, a growing segment of the population is becoming more and more concerned about the system. He said that in 1990, 63 per cent of Canadians felt the quality of their healthcare was excellent or very good. As he spoke in late April 1998, however, that number had dropped to 37 per cent.⁵

A poll taken by Compas Inc. in late 1997 showed the dominant paradigm in health circles to be at odds with the public's view. Policy makers see the system as inefficient and over-budgeted, while the public exhibits a desire to see healthcare protected. This discrepancy, the report

⁴ Edward Greenspon, "Don't ignore healthcare, Liberals warned: It's issue No. 1, party pollster says," *Globe and Mail* 21 Mar. 1998: A1.

⁵ Mohammed Adam, "Healthcare ills can rip Canada apart, pollster Reid predicts," *Ottawa Citizen* 23 Apr. 1998: A4.

noted, should be taken as a sign of the need for more public discussion of what shape future health policy should take.⁶

An examination of the public opinion data and newspaper coverage confirms the issue to be on a gradual upward trend. As federal and provincial debt- and deficit-cutters look for areas to trim, healthcare appears to have been targeted. Both the media and the public have taken note. Figure 4 on page 44 shows the correlation between the intensity of newspaper coverage over the 1993 to 1997 period and the public opinion measures for the same period.

The period of the greatest healthcare coverage in the sample came in the second half of 1996. In the intensity graph, a six month period of increased attention toward healthcare in the newspapers coincides with a period of upheaval in the healthcare system. Ontario, Quebec and many other provinces across the country were seeing cuts to their health sectors. *La Presse* wrote "Health: more cuts and it's speeding up!" on Oct. 29, 1996. Similarly, the *Star* said "Cuts leave health system bleeding" on Nov. 16, 1996, and the *Globe and Mail* warned "Dingwall rejects privatizing medicine: Ottawa stresses one tier of health care as CMA faces vote on extra charges" on Aug. 20, 1996. At the same time, several labor disputes with doctors, nurses and specialists were taking place in many provinces. These factors together worked to place healthcare on the front pages of the newspapers and high on the public agenda.

⁶ Compas Inc., "Healthcare -- Policy Establishment at Odds with Public: Evidence from a Large Sample, National, Southam/Compas Survey" downloaded from <http://www.compas.ca> 10/12/97, dated Monday, December 8th, 1997.

Figure 4: Healthcare and the Agenda-Setting Model

Coinciding with the increased coverage of health-related issues, the public opinion ranking of the salience of healthcare begins to rise. By November-December 1996, 20 per cent of respondents named healthcare as an important concern, and by May-June 1997 that number had risen to 27

as an important concern, and by May-June 1997 that number had risen to 27 per cent of respondents. This would seem to indicate that the increase in coverage over the latter part of 1996 raised the profile of the healthcare issue on the public's agenda into 1997.

Again, there were differences in the intensity with which each newspaper covered healthcare. Figure 5 on pages 46 and 47 depicts the various ways the issue was covered by the newspapers in the sample.

The highest intensity coverage of healthcare is seen in the *Star* at the end of 1996, reaching a peak of an average of 134.84 words per day on the front pages in the November-December period. During this time, a total of 27 stories about healthcare appeared on pages A1 and A3 of the Toronto paper. The bulk of this coverage was devoted to doctors' labor strife as negotiations between the Ontario government and physicians over pay and working conditions were often given prominent play. At the same time, the Ontario government was firming up plans to close or merge many of the province's hospitals with the aim of making the system more efficient. These two different healthcare problems combined to provide for increased coverage and to push the issue high on the public agenda. The *Globe and Mail* and *Citizen* also ran relatively intense coverage of the issue over this period, peaking at an average of 98.06 words per day in July-August and 114.18 words per day in September-October respectively.

On the other hand, *La Presse* saw its average coverage peak at just over 50 words per day (50.41) in the May-June 1995 period. As a francophone newspaper read primarily by Quebeckers, this difference reflects the earlier attempt to reshuffle and downsize the health sector by the

Figure 5: Coverage Devoted to Healthcare By Newspaper

Quebec government. In fact, the *La Presse* sample, reflecting the importance of healthcare in media coverage and public opinion as the Quebec government began to cut funding in 1995, serves as a sort of harbinger of the pattern duplicated in the Ontario-based papers in late 1996.

Again, it is evident that all four newspapers followed a similar upward pattern of coverage regarding this issue over the course of the sample which was then reflected in the polling data. The pattern again fits with the agenda-setting model set out for discussion in this paper and is another confirmation of its applicability in terms of the Canadian political agenda.

Education

The issue of education is one close to the hearts of the parents of today's school-aged children -- a generation which forms the largest group to hit the education system since the baby boomers in the 1960s and early 1970s. The 1996 census showed there were slightly more children under 15 for the second consecutive five-year period, totalling 20.5 per cent of the total Canadian population.⁷ This, added to the recent, large year-over-year increases in the cost of education born by students and their parents, works to place the issue high on the agenda of the public and the media. Figure 6 on page 49 shows the correlation of the intensity of coverage and the public opinion ranking of education.

⁷ Statistics Canada, "The Daily," 29 Jul. 1997: 9.

Figure 6: Education and the Agenda-Setting Model

Again, the education issue demonstrates a clear increase in both the intensity of media coverage and the public perception of the issue's importance. For the majority of the bimonthly periods in the sample, fewer than 10 per cent of respondents felt education to be one of the most important issues facing Canadians. There is, however, a rapid increase in its importance ranking starting in the later months of 1996. By September-October 1997, the issue was felt to be an important national issue by 20 per cent of respondents.

This increased saliency again coincides with a rapid increase in the coverage of education by the four newspapers in the sample, however, the public opinion ranking increase seems to precede the increased coverage in this case. This may signal an instance of the media responding to public interest as opposed to setting the public agenda. This switching of roles is probably due to the fact that most Canadians have at least some first-hand knowledge of the education system, as opposed to issues such as national unity where most information necessarily comes from media sources.

After a long period of relative stability in the intensity of education coverage, September-October 1997 sees a significant jump. This increase in words devoted to the issue can be traced directly to the two-week Ontario teachers' strike in late October and early November. At this point, coverage on the front pages of the four newspapers jumps to an average of 163.59 words per day. One hundred and eighty-eight education stories appeared on pages A1 and A3 of the four newspapers in the period from September 1997 to December 1997.

Returning again to the news criteria of Galtung and Ruge, the intense coverage surrounding the Ontario teachers' strike is easily explicable.

Rallies and pickets make good focal points for stories, the issue hits home with many readers -- especially those with school-aged children, and the two sides -- the government and the teachers -- are easily identifiable. With the sheer amount of coverage of the strike, education coverage follows the same pattern seen with respect to the national unity debate. Large scale, easily interpreted events get covered and thereby become part of the public's agenda.

Figure 7 on pages 52 and 53 illustrates the similarities among the four newspapers. With the exception again of the Quebec-based *La Presse*, a distinct pattern of coverage is revealed.

For the *Star*, the *Citizen*, and the *Globe and Mail*, a relatively stable level of coverage over most of the sample increases significantly in late 1997. It is clear that among the Ontario-based newspapers, the teachers strike resulted in much more intense coverage than education usually receives. Over much of the rest of the sample, stories regarding issues such as school taxes, tuition hikes, student achievement and curriculum change worked to give education a presence on the front pages, albeit on a much smaller scale than during the teachers' strike. At the peak of strike coverage, in the September-October 1997 period, education coverage in the *Citizen* averaged 377.54 words per day, while it averaged 150.41 words in the *Star* and 118.85 words in the *Globe and Mail*.

Coverage in *La Presse*, on the other hand, peaked at an earlier date. This disparity again reflects the sensibilities of the newspaper's audience. In November-December 1996, *La Presse* devoted an average of 54.10 words on the front pages to education. In this case, the increased coverage coincided with a strike of a different kind. To protest increased education

costs, Quebec's post-secondary students rallied and called for walk outs in a bid to stop the rising tuition fees.

Figure 7: Coverage Devoted to Education By Newspaper

The familiar pattern of relatively similar coverage among the media is seen in the case of the education sample, although the issue of changes in public opinion preceding changes in media coverage weakens the evidence of agenda-setting in this case.

Environment

The final issue to be discussed in this section is the environment. It is a problem that has received little attention in the 1990s. Over the 1993 to 1997 period of this study, environmental stories were few, and the public opinion ranking of the issue's importance was low. There does, however, seem to be a trend toward the end of the sample indicating environmental issues may be making gains in terms of the public agenda.

In his address to the Liberal convention, Marzolini said that, along with healthcare and other issues, the environment was coming back into the public focus. In July 1989, Angus Reid polling found as many as 31 per cent of respondents felt the environment was a major national concern. By July 1992 in the middle of the economic recession, that number had dropped to 9 per cent.⁸ As the era of economic concerns dominating the Canadian political scene draws to a close, issues like the environment begin to surface.⁹ Recent violent weather conditions, such as the flooding in Quebec and Manitoba or the eastern Canadian ice storm of 1998, have also worked to bring the environment to the top of the public's mind.

⁸ Angus Reid Group, "The Angus Reid Report," Vol. 13, No. 1 (January/February 1998): 5.

⁹ Greenspon.

In both the public opinion graph and the intensity of coverage graph, a small but noticeable rise in the public profile of the environment is seen. In the period from September to December 1997, public opinion jumped from 4 per cent to a steady 7 per cent. Over the same time frame, a rise in the intensity of newspaper coverage of environmental issues is apparent. By November-December 1997, the average number of words per day devoted to the environment on pages A1 and A3 of the sample newspapers reaches 47.89. In many of the months and years previous to this period, there is often very little coverage at all.

There are probably two factors at work helping to raise the environment's position on the public agenda. First of all, there is the aforementioned economic upturn resulting in a change of public attention. It is much easier for people to worry about long-term, global problems such as climate change when they feel progress toward ameliorating economic issues such as employment, debt and inflation is being made.

The second factor is the reemergence of environmental events which provide the news "pegs" necessary for stories to hit the front pages. The higher public opinion rating of the environment at the beginning of 1993 came at the end of a cycle of more prominent coverage of the issue following the 1992 Rio Summit. Similarly, the December 1997 Kyoto Summit on the environment refocused media attention on the problem. Returning again to the principles articulated by Galtung and Ruge, it has been noted that once an issue hits the headlines and been defined as news, it continues to be so defined for some time, even if the amplitude is reduced. Related stories on carbon gases and governmental policy followed on the heels of Kyoto. A similar effect followed the news of the floods.

As the economic and national unity files wane, there is more room in the public sphere for discussion of issues such as the environment. In order to be sure of a long-term raising of environmental issues on the public agenda, a sample taken several months or years beyond the end of 1997 would be necessary. However, the recent profile of the environment taken in addition to the more recent work cited above makes it plausible to conclude the environment is beginning to draw public concern again.

Figure 9 on pages 58 and 59 outlines some of the differences in coverage across the group of newspapers sampled. The most striking feature of this series of graphs are the large gaps with little or no record of environmental coverage, especially in the *Star* and *La Presse*. The *Globe and Mail* and *Citizen* contain fewer gaps in coverage, however, the daily average number of words devoted to environment on the front pages is relatively low. The most intense coverage seen across the entire sample is recorded in the *Globe and Mail* in September-October 1997 at 74.11. Compared with some of the other issues discussed in the chapter, there is significantly less coverage of the environment.

The agenda-setting effect is in evidence for this issue, despite the low coverage. Public opinion of the importance of the environment rises just as all of the intensity graphs show a marked upward trend at the end of the sample. The possible exception to this is *La Presse* where the peak in intensity is preceded by a long period with no prominent coverage of the environment at all. It is difficult to draw any conclusion from this data.

The examination of this issue probably would have benefited from a sample including the entire newspaper in each of the four cases. As the issue of the environment often lacks the high-profile events that result in

Environment - Intensity, Ottawa Citizen

Year	Ave. # words/day
1993	14
1993	22
1993	15
1993	29
1993	9
1994	43
1994	27
1994	22
1994	23
1994	26
1994	9
1995	20
1995	17
1995	19
1995	17
1995	20
1995	10
1996	0
1996	5
1996	7
1996	5
1997	27
1997	9
1997	0
1997	20
1997	11
1997	14
1997	28
1997	67

As the final examination of issue importance and media coverage in this chapter, the environment adds to the total accumulation of evidence of the agenda-setting effect at work.

Agenda-Setting and Public Policy

Having examined some of the prominent features of the intensity with which each of the target issues has been covered in the four newspapers and the relative public opinion ratings over the same time periods, it is possible to turn to the third element of the symbiotic-antagonistic relationship. By demonstrating the concurrent peaks and valleys in public opinion and media attention, the ways in which public policy enters the picture are put into perspective.

The Rogers-Dearing model outlined in Chapter Two describes the nine relationship permutations among the media, the public and policy makers. The nonexperimental test in this chapter works to illuminate the relationship between the media as actor and the reactive public. This is the foremost relationship described by the agenda-setting effect.

To understand the place of policy makers in this equation, the essential goal of the political process must be kept in mind. Policy makers must design programs which reflect not only what they believe to be in the best interest of constituents, but also that which is politically feasible within the context of current debate in the public sphere. In other words, unpopular policy is essentially counterproductive if democratically elected governments intend to retain power. To be reelected, governments must act on the issues voters are thinking about. If, going back to the work of Walter Lippmann,

much of the information used by the public to form political opinions comes from the media, policy makers can also look to the media to gauge the hierarchy of issues on the public agenda.

In the case of national unity, the highest points of media attention and public interest in the issue occur in the 1995 period. Toward the end of the sample, however, interest appears to wane. Policy makers could take this as their cue that the file is no longer the most important issue on the public's mind and that high-profile attempts to resolve the problem might serve only to draw the attention of a public no longer intent on focusing on secession issues. While it might be imprudent to completely abandon national unity efforts from a policy standpoint, policy development is probably best undertaken quietly as public and media attention are focused elsewhere.

Healthcare quite obviously is on its way up as an issue the public wants governments to resolve. Education and the environment also show signs of becoming increasingly important to both the media and the public. It would probably be politically beneficial to concentrate high-profile policy attention to these issues as the media coverage signals an increased saliency of the issues in the public arena.

In *News That Matters*, Iyengar and Kinder note that through agenda-setting, and the related concept of priming which will be further explored in Chapter 5, the political process is affected in three major ways. First, the problems a government must take up and those which it can safely ignore are determined; second, a leader's capacity to govern is either facilitated or undermined; and third, the media can intrude, to varying degrees, on the direction and outcome of campaigns and elections.¹⁰

¹⁰ Iyengar and Kinder, 120.

While the quantitative assessment of issues typified by the agenda-setting model does not provide the whole picture for policy makers, it certainly acts to signal which issues the public is thinking about. The symbiotic-antagonistic nature of the interrelationships among the media, policy makers and the public mean that news organizations are not the only player with the power to effect change in the public agenda, however.

Political actors may work to provide journalists with only the information which may best frame the story they hope the audience will be told. News conferences, high-profile reports and commissions, or staged photo opportunities are only some of the ways policy makers can define what becomes news, and thereby part of the public agenda. Conversely, journalists may support, consciously or unconsciously, the issues which they feel most comfortable with, or those which are in line with the views of their news organization. The public may work to place an issue on the media agenda in order to press for policy action through demonstrations, events or personal impact statements. In any case, the issues receiving news play are those foremost in the minds of news consumers, policy actors and the media themselves. Once an issue is ensconced at the top of the public agenda, public policy action is often called for, politically speaking. These permutations are only a few of the possible interactions among political leaders, the media and the public. They serve, however, to indicate how each player is involved in the process of symbiosis-antagonism and how the agenda-setting effect can be manipulated for these purposes.

Conclusion

The evidence of agenda-setting as it has been outlined in this paper is fairly strong. Chapter One detailed how Iyengar and Kinder see the concept as a memory-based process in which the accessibility of topics of issues increase with their availability in the mass media. The graphical representations of the data collected over the 1993 to 1997 period show a clearly similar trend in the public opinion rankings and the corresponding newspaper coverage.

It must be reiterated that the similarity of trends does not, in fact, constitute causal proof of the impact of media coverage on problem importance. However, the evidence presented here, taken within the context of the more statistically exhaustive research in the field, demonstrates the agenda-setting effect rather clearly.

The one problem with the agenda-setting model in this study is seen with regard to education. Iyengar and Kinder noted that predicaments of personal life can contribute directly and powerfully to the priority the public assigns to national problems. Their experiments found that when problems flare up and capture the attention of the media, the agenda-setting effect shows up most immediately among those personally affected by the problem. If the coverage continues, however, the problem stays at the top of the media agenda and will begin to register among media consumers not directly affected by the issue. In other words, while those with a direct stake in education may react more rapidly to new developments, the rest of the public will take notice as the issue is covered by media sources.¹¹ Because

¹¹ Iyengar and Kinder, 52 - 53.

so many Canadians have first-hand knowledge of educational issues, the possibility that public opinion worked to change news patterns is significant. As the issue gained currency in the media, however, those not personally affected were alerted to the issue's importance.

One final aspect of this assessment of the agenda-setting effect bears mention. This is the constant tendency of the Quebec-based *La Presse* to differ from the rest of the news sources. While the similarity among the Ontario-based newspapers might reasonably be attributed simply to their readership and base of operations, the agenda-setting model works to explain the similar patterns of coverage intensity and public opinion ranking in Quebec as well. The geographical influence on coverage patterns should not, therefore, be confused with the underlying agenda-setting effect.

This study confirms much of what has been learned over the course of decades of agenda-setting research. The interplay between media coverage and public opinion withstands empirical examination. Being cognisant of this fundamental quality of media action and public opinion as it operates in public sphere affords policy makers the opportunity to gauge, or manage, the political feasibility of the issues they confront.

This chapter began to examine the symbiotic-antagonistic interrelationships among the three actors using the quantitative agenda-setting model. The next chapter attempts an investigation of the concept of framing, a qualitative assessment of the links among media sources, the public and policy makers.

Chapter Four

Media Framing

This fourth chapter will examine the framing concept by looking at the public's relative attitudes toward the Canadian Forces (CF) compared with the qualitative attributes of media coverage. Unlike the agenda-setting and priming effects, framing is described by qualitative differences in media coverage.

Framing is different from both the agenda-setting and priming models in that it takes account of the impact of the content of media stories. The way in which the mass media frame issues will support a particular set of inferences to be made from the available information, while at the same time suppressing another set. By altering the information that is made available in the mass media, framing works to alter the interpretations of events mediated through the news story's point of view.

While framing seems to have a kind of agenda-setting effect through the selective nature of its treatment of information in a given context, Chapter One outlined Robert Entman's argument that it in fact provides a framework for thinking about events. He said that the frame works to define a problem, identify the actors involved, and infer judgments and remedies for resolving the issue.¹

¹ Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 43 (1993): 52, qtd. in Cappella and Jamieson, 45 - 46.

In this test, the framing concept is examined by comparing public opinion data with a qualitative assessment of the media coverage over the same period. The panel of three selected for this study was given access to all of the headlines found on the first and third pages of the first section of each of the four newspapers. They were asked to register a score based on how negatively or positively they felt the headline reflected on the competency of the CF. The scoring system described in Chapter Two ranged from 1 to 5, very negative to very positive. For ambiguous headlines, and those for which panelists did not wish to register an opinion, a score of zero was entered and the headline was omitted from the calculations.

For the examination of the CF, a Louis Harris/Thompson Lightstone poll tracking Canadians' confidence in various public institutions was used. The question posed was, "Now I'd like you to think for a moment about the people who are in charge of running the Canadian Armed Forces. Would you say that you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence in them?"

To examine the framing model, a graphical representation of public opinion polling gauging the public's confidence in these institutions was juxtaposed with the scores depicting the tone of the media stories as scored by the panelists. A positive indication of the framing model at work would be a relative match in the highs and lows of public opinion confidence from the polling and the scores registered by the panelists. A relative lack of similarity between the two graphs would indicate a lack of evidence to support the framing model in this case. After outlining the relative attributes of the tone of media coverage and the corresponding public opinion, a

discussion of the public policy considerations implied by this branch of media effects research will conclude the chapter.

Media Framing and the CF

Public confidence in the CF declined dramatically over the February 1994 to August 1996 period. The Louis Harris/Thompson Lightstone poll registered a drop from 41 per cent in February 1994 to 26 per cent in August 1996 in the number of respondents who had a great deal of confidence in the Forces. Figure 10 illustrates this decline in popular opinion.

Figure 10: Respondents Indicating a Great Deal of Confidence in the Canadian Forces

This rapid decline in public opinion is linked to the incident in Somalia involving several members of the Canadian Airborne Regiment (CAR) and the subsequent inquiry. At the beginning of April 1993, the news that some Canadian soldiers were being held in connection with the beating death of a Somali civilian broke. The trials and an *in camera* military inquiry held in 1993 and 1994 were followed by revelations of racists in the military, graphic photographs of the fatal beating, and video tapes of disgusting hazing rituals performed on new recruits. In the wake of the outrage expressed over the hazing videos, the CAR was disbanded in March 1995. That same month, a civilian panel was set up to examine the CF participation in the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Somalia in 1992-93. The civilian inquiry examined the testimony of 116 witnesses and continued until March 1997, when the Minister of National Defence imposed a deadline for the completion of its work. The multi-volume report, released at the beginning of July 1997, contained 160 recommendations regarding training, military justice, accountability, and openness and disclosure for the military, among others.

The panel selected for this study scored news surrounding the killing of Somali teen Shidane Arone and the Somalia Inquiry primarily with marks of 1 or 2, indicating either very negative or somewhat negative opinions of the competency of the CF and the Department of National Defence (DND). All three panelists -- the Liberal, the New Democrat and the conservative -- registered rather strong negative opinions of the CF when reading headlines connected to the CAR and the Somalia mission.

However, news regarding the inquiry, the courts martial and the CAR were not the only defence-related stories to appear in the newspapers over

the 1993 to 1997 period. Canadian peacekeepers were on active duty in Bosnia, Haiti and in Africa, while forces stationed in Canada were visibly involved in aiding the civilian population during the major floods in Quebec and Manitoba. The panel scored news surrounding these events rather differently. For the most part, this news tended to be scored at or above a 3, indicating at least a somewhat positive attitude concerning the competency of the CF and DND.

The figures on the following pages show the overall average bimonthly scores for defence-related issues recorded by each panelist by newspaper. These averages include both the rather low scores surrounding the Somalia incident and the somewhat more positive scores described above. The differences among newspapers and among the three panelists are illustrated by these graphs.

Figure 11: Panelist A - Scores for Defence-Related Stories

Figure 12: Panelist B - Scores for Defence-Related Stories

Figure 13: Panelist C - Scores for Defence-Related Stories

The ability of the media to frame events is particularly pronounced in the case of issues like the military and defence. According to Robert Hackett, "people are more likely to accept media messages about subjects for which they lack direct experience or strong predispositions. For most North Americans, that is the case with most aspects of international affairs."²

In his work on the Somalia affair, David Bercuson also makes the point that few Canadians have sufficient contact with the military on a day to day basis in order to form opinions without the messages contained in media reports playing a major role. He writes that a public reluctance to support the military varies from country to country, "but it is almost always strong in nations like Canada, where people have a hard time understanding the connection between their personal well being, national interests, and armed force. That lack of understanding may have serious consequences."³

The data gathered in this study supports this assertion. When the CF is involved in humanitarian or peacekeeping missions, Canadians seem to feel a sense of pride in the accomplishments of the armed forces, however, that pride is quickly diminished in the face of evidence of wrong-doing, even when it appears that few of 60,000 regular forces and 30,000 reservists are actually involved. The incident in Somalia and the related events had a devastating impact on Canadians' perception of the CF and DND, and the vast majority of the information used to form this negative attitude came from media sources.

² Robert Hackett, *News and Dissent: The Press and the Politics of Peace in Canada* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing, 1991) 98.

³ David Bercuson, *Significant Incident: Canada's army, the Airborne, and the murder in Somalia* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996) 25.

The preceding graphs, for the most part, show a gradual decrease in the average scores recorded by the panelists over the sample period. This effect was most pronounced among scores recorded while reading headlines from the *Globe and Mail* and the *Ottawa Citizen*. Panelist C showed the most remarkable change in attitude, made more significant by the fact that his scores tended to be higher initially than those recorded by the other two panelists. Panelist A also showed a gradual, but distinct, decline in confidence over the course of the 1993 to 1997 period, although her scores tended, on average, to be lower.

The framing effect of news stories regarding the armed forces is best illustrated by an examination of the differences among the newspapers. As was pointed out earlier, the decline in the average scores recorded by panelists was most pronounced when reading headlines from the *Globe and Mail* and *Citizen*. The change in scores is less certain when examining the graphs produced from the *Toronto Star* and *La Presse*. This was true of all three panelists, regardless of socio-economic, gender or education factors.

The framing effect works well to explain this apparent discrepancy among the four newspapers. While many of the stories on the front pages of the *Globe and Mail* and *Citizen* focused on the Somalia incident, the inquiry, and other unsavory elements of the Canadian military, the stories in the *Star* and *La Presse* tended to focus on peacekeeping action in Bosnia, departmental news and CF mobilization inside Canada in aid of civilians. The following tables show the number of stories regarding more troubling subjects versus the number of stories about peacekeeping and more positive aspects of CF and DND operations in the four newspapers for each bimonthly period of the sample.

Table 1: Breakdown of Defence Story Types in the *Globe and Mail*

Date	Unfavorable Coverage	Favorable Coverage
Jan.-Feb. 93	0	1
Mar.-Apr. 93	2	7
May-Jun. 93	2	1
Jul.-Aug. 93	3	1
Sep.-Oct. 93	5	3
Nov.-Dec. 93	1	6
Jan.-Feb. 94	2	9
Mar.-Apr. 94	10	4
May-Jun. 94	0	2
Jul.-Aug. 94	1	1
Sep.-Oct. 94	1	3
Nov.-Dec. 94	3	8
Jan.-Feb. 95	13	0
Mar.-Apr. 95	2	1
May-Jun. 95	0	3
Jul.-Aug. 95	1	1
Sep.-Oct. 95	6	1
Nov.-Dec. 95	3	1
Jan.-Feb. 96	4	2
Mar.-Apr. 96	12	1
May-Jun. 96	9	2
Jul.-Aug. 96	13	0
Sep.-Oct. 96	11	3
Nov.-Dec. 96	4	3
Jan.-Feb. 97	14	1
Mar.-Apr. 97	8	0
May-Jun. 97	4	0
Jul.-Aug. 97	3	0
Sep.-Oct. 97	3	1
Nov.-Dec. 97	1	2
Bimonthly Average	4.7	2.3

Table 2: Breakdown of Defence Story Types in the *Ottawa Citizen*

Date	Unfavorable Coverage	Favorable Coverage
Jan.-Feb. 93	0	8
Mar.-Apr. 93	15	9
May-Jun. 93	11	4
Jul.-Aug. 93	15	4
Sep.-Oct. 93	9	4
Nov.-Dec. 93	7	4
Jan.-Feb. 94	14	15
Mar.-Apr. 94	12	6
May-Jun. 94	25	12
Jul.-Aug. 94	1	2
Sep.-Oct. 94	17	5
Nov.-Dec. 94	11	11
Jan.-Feb. 95	23	3
Mar.-Apr. 95	21	4
May-Jun. 95	13	17
Jul.-Aug. 95	1	3
Sep.-Oct. 95	15	6
Nov.-Dec. 95	6	2
Jan.-Feb. 96	10	3
Mar.-Apr. 96	23	3
May-Jun. 96	19	2
Jul.-Aug. 96	22	7
Sep.-Oct. 96	25	7
Nov.-Dec. 96	14	5
Jan.-Feb. 97	43	4
Mar.-Apr. 97	21	9
May-Jun. 97	15	3
Jul.-Aug. 97	11	3
Sep.-Oct. 97	5	1
Nov.-Dec. 97	3	7
Bimonthly Average	14.2	5.8

Table 3: Breakdown of Defence Story Types in the *Toronto Star*

Date	Unfavorable Coverage	Favorable Coverage
Jan.-Feb. 93	0	8
Mar.-Apr. 93	8	5
May-Jun. 93	7	2
Jul.-Aug. 93	2	3
Sep.-Oct. 93	4	0
Nov.-Dec. 93	1	4
Jan.-Feb. 94	4	7
Mar.-Apr. 94	7	6
May-Jun. 94	3	2
Jul.-Aug. 94	2	0
Sep.-Oct. 94	4	0
Nov.-Dec. 94	2	7
Jan.-Feb. 95	9	0
Mar.-Apr. 95	3	0
May-Jun. 95	3	12
Jul.-Aug. 95	2	2
Sep.-Oct. 95	4	3
Nov.-Dec. 95	1	3
Jan.-Feb. 96	4	3
Mar.-Apr. 96	11	1
May-Jun. 96	4	0
Jul.-Aug. 96	16	1
Sep.-Oct. 96	16	1
Nov.-Dec. 96	4	8
Jan.-Feb. 97	18	0
Mar.-Apr. 97	4	3
May-Jun. 97	2	2
Jul.-Aug. 97	6	0
Sep.-Oct. 97	1	4
Nov.-Dec. 97	0	0

Bimonthly Average	5.1	2.9
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Table 4: Breakdown of Defence Story Types in *La Presse*

Date	Unfavorable Coverage	Favorable Coverage
Jan.-Feb. 93	0	0
Mar.-Apr. 93	1	1
May-Jun. 93	1	4
Jul.-Aug. 93	0	0
Sep.-Oct. 93	2	3
Nov.-Dec. 93	0	2
Jan.-Feb. 94	1	10
Mar.-Apr. 94	0	4
May-Jun. 94	0	1
Jul.-Aug. 94	0	0
Sep.-Oct. 94	0	0
Nov.-Dec. 94	0	3
Jan.-Feb. 95	1	0
Mar.-Apr. 95	2	0
May-Jun. 95	0	6
Jul.-Aug. 95	0	0
Sep.-Oct. 95	0	2
Nov.-Dec. 95	0	0
Jan.-Feb. 96	0	2
Mar.-Apr. 96	4	0
May-Jun. 96	0	1
Jul.-Aug. 96	1	0
Sep.-Oct. 96	0	0
Nov.-Dec. 96	0	0
Jan.-Feb. 97	1	1
Mar.-Apr. 97	0	1
May-Jun. 97	0	0
Jul.-Aug. 97	1	0
Sep.-Oct. 97	0	2
Nov.-Dec. 97	1	0

Bimonthly Average	0.5	1.2
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The tables for the *Globe and Mail* and *Citizen* show that prominent coverage tended to be heavier concerning issues such as the Somalia courts martial and inquiries than it was concerning peacekeeping or operations inside Canada. On pages A1 and A3 over the five year period of the study, the *Globe and Mail* carried on average nearly twice as many negative stories -- 4.7 negative stories versus 2.3 positive stories for each bimonthly period in the sample. The *Citizen* carried an average of 14.2 negative stories compared with 5.8 positive stories -- a ratio of almost 2.5 to 1. When examining the figures depicting changes in the panelists' confidence in the CF and DND, the framing model explains much of the decline in average score over the five year period with regard to these two newspapers.

On the other hand, the coverage was qualitatively different in the two large metro newspapers. On pages A1 and A3 of the *Star*, there were on average 5.1 negative stories and 2.9 positive stories for each bimonthly period of the sample -- a ratio of about 1.75 to 1. *La Presse* carried an average of 0.5 negative stories and 1.2 more positive stories.

The point to be made here is not that the amount of coverage given the various defence issues helps to shape the panel's attitudes, but that the overall frame provided by each media source colors the interpretation of the panelist looking at the events, issues and personalities involved. In other words, the frame is providing the information the audience uses to assess the CF and DND. The panel's reactions to defence-related stories tended to conform to the frame provided by the media in each case. When the tone of the stories is primarily negative, as in the case of the *Citizen*, the panel's perception tended to be increasingly negative, while in the case of *La*

Presse, the absence of a predominantly negative frame meant the panel's perception of the CF and DND was not nearly so pessimistic by the end of the sample period.

In *La Presse* particularly, there was a dearth of stories about the entire Somalia affair. This is probably due in part to the demonstrable lack of interest in the military shown by most Quebecers. In a 1995 Insight Canada survey, Quebecers were the least enthusiastic about Canada's need for a military with only 25 per cent saying the CF is needed a great deal.⁴ *La Presse* did, however, cover the participation of the CF in Bosnia frequently. Many of those stationed in Bosnia were from the Royal 22e Régiment, the famed "Van Doos", at Valcartier, Quebec. The defence-related stories in the Montreal paper were not, on the whole, critical of the CF and DND, but rather praised the peacekeeping participation of Canadian soldiers. The panelists' scores reflect this by the overall lack of a downward trend in their confidence in defence organizations over the course of the sample period.

It was noted earlier in this chapter that the way in which the mass media frame issues will support a particular set of inferences to be made from the available information, while at the same time suppressing another set. By altering the information that is made available in the mass media, framing works to alter the interpretations of events mediated through the news story's point of view. The rapid decline in the panelists' confidence in the CF while reading the *Citizen* and the *Globe and Mail*, juxtaposed with their less dramatic reactions to coverage in the *Star* and *La Presse*, illustrates the framing model well.

⁴ Insight Canada Research, *Canadian Opinions on Canadian Foreign Policy, Defence Policy and International Development Assistance* (Toronto: Government of Canada, 1995) 23.

The qualitative assessment of the coverage attempted here provides evidence of the strength of the effect of media framing. Having shown here that the media frame was a persuasive instrument in the formation of this panel's opinions regarding issues for which they had little or no personal experience, the public policy implications can be explored.

Framing and Public Policy

To understand the ultimate impact of framing on public opinion and the policy process, it is necessary to understand the fundamental truth of journalistic story-telling -- that it is, in fact, the telling of a story. Once an issue or event becomes news, it is subject to the conventions of journalism in terms of the way the story gets framed. Maxwell McCombs, et al, make the point that news is often framed from the perspective of what makes a good story. The news, by its nature, emphasizes those facts which advance the story in the narrative tradition of journalism.⁵

This structural feature of the news sits at the centre of how framing enters the public policy picture. Having established that the frame works to influence the perceptions of the public, policy makers are then faced with the task of providing the media with stories that can be favorably framed in order to ensure popular support. In the case of defence-related stories over the five-year sample examined here, this has proven to be a difficult task.

The Somalia affair combined many of the attributes that make a story news. Returning to the eight newsworthiness criteria of Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge outlined in Chapter One, the killing, the trials, the identifiable

⁵ Maxwell McCombs, et al, *Contemporary Public Opinion: Issues and the News* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991) 38-39.

personalities and the daily feed of news from the civilian inquiry made the issue fit for extensive and continual news coverage. In Ottawa particularly, the combination of the proximity of the CAR's home base at CFB Petawawa and the location of the inquiry made the Somalia story one which received abundant and regular coverage.

In order to take advantage of the symbiotic-antagonistic relationships among the media, the public and policy makers in order to influence the kind of discussion undertaken in the public sphere, communications professionals not only have to understand how a news story is constructed, but also how to provide the media with the elements necessary to develop stories framed in accordance with the desired policy direction. Conversely, policy makers must also devise ways of keeping less desirable news from conforming to the criteria that describe good stories.

In the case of the Somalia Inquiry, it is probable that the decision of then-Minister of National Defence Doug Young to shut it down was motivated, at least in part, by the continued coverage afforded the daily sessions. This approach was effective because as soon as the commission's final report was released in early July 1997, the issue quickly disappeared off the front pages after having been a fixture in three of the newspapers in this sample from the spring of 1993 on.

Efforts to re-frame coverage of the CF and DND were aided significantly by troop participation in combating the Eastern Canadian ice storm in early 1998 and the continued floods across the country. An examination of the frames of more recent news coverage and public opinion would probably result in a markedly positive change from that seen over the 1993 to 1997 period.

For its part, the public needs to be aware that the news it consumes is influenced by structural forms that influence the frame of the stories. This is not to say necessarily that the audience must guard against the frames provided by the media. The audience must, however, understand that a story is a representation of selected bits of information if they are to be aware of the meaning of the conclusions they draw solely from media accounts. Without additional sources of information to consult, the public invariably reflects the point of view, or frame, dominant in the media they use.

Conclusion

The framing model applies well to newspaper coverage of defence-related issues in the 1993 to 1997 period. As a qualitative assessment of the interaction between the media and public opinion, framing explains a further dimension of the complex web of media effects and public reaction within the public agenda.

In the previous chapter, the effect of media in terms of setting the agenda for the public and policy makers was examined. The addition of the framing model improves understanding of the series of symbiotic-antagonistic relationships among the actors by showing that the media may also tell the public how to think about what it is thinking about. In other words, once the public agenda is set, the tone of coverage influences how the public reacts to an issue. Looking at the evidence presented here regarding the CF and DND, framing works to explain the downward trend in public opinion seen in Figure 10.

An understanding of the fundamental processes involved in shaping the news frame is necessary to allow policy makers to maximize their efficacy in devising and implementing policy. To ensure the public receives the message they are intending to send, policy makers must provide information and events that will fit within the overall structure of journalism. Conversely, policy makers must avoid creating negative images or events that do not fit the Galtung-Ruge newsworthiness criteria, as was seen in the protracted Somalia Inquiry process.

This chapter compared the qualitative attributes of media coverage with measures of public opinion. Next, a return to quantitative assessment is necessary to test the concept of priming and complete this examination of media effects models.

Chapter Five

Priming in News Media

This fifth chapter will examine the final of the three media effects models tested in the course of this study. By reexamining the issues of national unity, healthcare and education from a slightly different perspective, an attempt to explore the priming model will be undertaken.

Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder say that while agenda-setting may be understood as a memory-based process in which the accessibility of topics or issues increase with their availability in the mass media, priming draws a correlation between the attention given by the media to an issue and the importance the issue has in the public's evaluations of political actors. The public's evaluations lean most heavily on issues appearing in the media most often.¹ However, unlike agenda-setting, the priming model posits that the media are responsible for the use the public makes of an issue with respect to judgments of their leaders as well as the ranking of issue importance.²

Priming is primarily concerned with the amount of coverage an issue receives. Two media stories written from completely opposite points of view, or from philosophically different points of departure, are treated as equivalent from the standpoint of the concept of media priming. Priming is essentially a quantitative assessment of media effects.

¹ Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 81 - 82.

² *Ibid.*, 52.

This test examines the concept of priming through a look how the panel rated the importance of national unity, healthcare and education based on what they read in the collection of newspaper headlines. Panelists were asked to record a score on a scale of one to five, from unimportant to very important. The goal this time was to gauge how salient they estimated the issue to be in terms of their evaluation of policy makers. Again, any ambiguous headlines or ones for which panelists had no opinion were registered as a zero and omitted from the calculations.

The panel's assessments were then compared with graphs depicting the intensity of media coverage. The point of departure for this test, and a positive signal of priming, would be a match between the timing of higher coverage intensity and higher issue importance scores recorded by each panelist.

A major conclusion of much of the research in psychology and psychological theory is that audience attention is highly selective and therefore only particular features of consequence are noticed. Because of this, the impressions formed by media use tend to be organized around a few central themes.³ For example, if stories about the economy and jobs fill the headlines and the newscasts, the economic policies and performance of the government of the day will be the basis upon which the public judge their overall performance as the country's leaders.

Each of the three issues will be examined separately in this chapter. A graphical representation of the overall intensity of coverage will be juxtaposed with each panelist's average scores for the importance of issues.

³ Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 64.

National Unity

In the case of national unity, Chapter Three outlined how the intensity of coverage translated into a high public opinion ranking in terms of the public agenda. Public opinion rankings of national unity were extremely high in the period of leading up to and immediately after the Quebec sovereignty vote in October 1995. The agenda-setting model was clearly illustrated.

However, the concept of priming is not at all discernible in the data collected for this study. It was expected that a substantial increase in the average scores of each panelist would coincide with the higher intensity of newspaper coverage over the 1995 referendum campaign. What an examination of the panel's scores indicates is instead a relatively stable assessment of the importance of national unity as an issue needing to be addressed by policy makers. If there is any movement in the scores at all, there seems to be a gradual downward trend from the beginning of 1993 to the end of 1997.

Figure 14 on pages 88 and 89 shows the differences between the intensity of coverage and the scores recorded by the three panelists. While there is a large discrepancy between the intensity of coverage and the importance each panelist indicated for the national unity issue, there was a distinct similarity among all three panelists' scores.

National Unity - Panelist B

National Unity - Panelist C

Panelist A's scores for the importance of national unity averaged just above 2.1, signifying the issue to be somewhat unimportant to her for the majority of the sample. Panelist B tended to score the issue slightly higher at just under 2.7, indicating she felt the issue fell between being somewhat unimportant and somewhat important. Panelist C recorded the issue at about 2.3 over the course of the sample, also indicating the issue as somewhere between somewhat unimportant and somewhat important.

In this test of priming it was expected that, given the pattern of newspaper coverage, the panelists would have indicated national unity to be more important in the fall of 1995, when the highest intensity coverage occurred, than over the rest of the sample. The relatively flat graphs indicate very little movement across the sample period. In this case, then, priming was undetectable using the method set out in this study.

Healthcare

The second issue used to test priming was healthcare. As with the issue of national unity, Chapter Three outlined the successful test of agenda-setting through the correlation of public opinion ranking and coverage intensity. According to the graph of healthcare coverage intensity, it would be expected that panelists would rank healthcare highest in their assessment of policy makers in late 1996, coinciding with the highest intensity coverage.

Figure 15 on pages 91 and 92 shows that, as with national unity, priming among the three panelists on the issue of healthcare was undetected by the method used in this study.

Figure 15: Intensity of Healthcare Coverage and Panel Importance Scores

All three panelists recorded relatively similar and consistent scores for healthcare across the five-year sample. Panelist A gave healthcare an average score of 3.0, indicating the issue to be somewhat important to her. Panelist B gave the issue an average of 3.3, indicating it to be slightly more important to her than to panelist A, while panelist C gave it a slightly lower average score of 2.9.

The differences among the three panelists can probably be attributed to the age and gender differences outlined in Chapter Two. Panelist A is the Liberal, panelist B is the New Democrat with two school-aged children, but significantly both are women. The Angus Reid Group public opinion polls consistently find that women are more concerned about healthcare than men. For "top-of-mind" mentions of important issues in the public agenda survey conducted in late January 1998, they found 22 per cent of women cited healthcare as opposed to 13 per cent of men.⁴

As the older of the two women, panelist B's higher ranking of healthcare could also be attributed to her being in her early forties. Public opinion polling also consistently shows that as people age, their concern for the issue of healthcare grows. As the care-giver to two children, panelist B also has family considerations that panelist A does not.

Panelist C, the conservative in his mid-fifties, probably ranks healthcare as a more important priority than would a younger man. However, as the only male included in the panel, his importance score for healthcare was the lowest, reflecting the tendency of men to rank healthcare as a less serious concern than do women.

⁴ Angus Reid Group, "The Angus Reid Report: The Canadian Public Opinion & Public Affairs Journal For Decision Makers," Vol. 13, No. 1 (January/February 1998): 6.

The partisan distribution of the panel may have also influenced their scores regarding healthcare. The average score of the New Democrat was highest, followed by the Liberal, and then the conservative. The most left-leaning was most concerned by healthcare; the most right-leaning slightly less concerned about healthcare. It is unclear, however, whether their partisan leanings are reflected in their stance on healthcare, or whether their partisanship is reflective of other attributes, such as age, gender and socio-economic status, which also influence their feelings about healthcare.

So while the amplitude of the importance of healthcare in the panelist's assessment of policy makers is explicable in terms of the norms of public opinion polling, the initial goal of assessing the priming effect with respect to this issue was again unsuccessful by the method employed here. There was no increase in the panel's collective assessment of the issue's importance in the late 1996 period as would have been indicated by the coverage intensity graph.

Education

The intensity of education coverage was highest in the fall of 1997, coinciding with the Ontario teacher's strike. A positive indication of priming in this case would show an increase in the panelists' scores reflecting the importance of education toward the end of the sample period. As with the two previous cases, however, it is clear that the study design does not illustrate priming in the way the pattern of coverage would have indicated. Figure 16 on pages 95 and 96 illustrates education coverage intensity and the corresponding scores recorded by the panel.

Figure 16: Intensity of Education Coverage and Panel Importance Scores

Once again, the scores recorded by the panelists produce rather flat, consistent graphs. There is no correlation between the peak in education coverage seen in the intensity graph and the results of the panel's assessment. The relative attributes of the three panelists in this case did explain the differences in their average scores for education across the sample period. Panelist A recorded, on average, a score of 2.8, while panelist B assessed education at 3.2, and panelist C registered an average score of 2.6.

The highest average score for education was recorded by panelist B, the only one with school-aged children. In the January 1998 Angus Reid public agenda survey, 14 per cent of women mentioned education as an important issue compared with 8 per cent of men who felt the same.⁵ The panel's relative assessments reflect this tendency. The poll also showed that the tendency for respondents to rank education as important goes down among older respondents, explaining panelist C's scores.

In this study's final examination of the priming effect, however, the attempt was again unsuccessful. Increased coverage of education failed to predict a higher ranking for education among the panelists by the method employed.

Test Conclusions

It is clear, contrary to what the hypothesis of priming effects would have indicated, that this study was unable to discern priming at work over

⁵ Ibid.

the sample period. This in no way, however, should be construed as evidence refuting the priming model.

In retrospect, it is possible that the design of this study was flawed with respect to its examination of priming in two specific ways. First, the issues employed are currently high on the public's agenda. Secondly, the panelists are all politically aware media users. The reasons why each of these conditions posed a problem in this test will be examined separately.

For many Canadians, the issues of national unity, healthcare and education are issues for which they have firmly established opinions. As the public opinion graphs in Chapter Three show, these issues have appeared on the public's agenda over much of the five years under study. The design of the test did not take into account preexisting attitudes and made no provision to control for these conditions. Had issues that did not appear regularly at the top of the public agenda been used, the test might have been more successful in detecting a priming effect.

In *News That Matters*, Iyengar and Kinder found that the issue of unemployment was substantially less affected by priming than issues like defence and inflation. Their study was conducted at a time when concern over unemployment was pervasive even without experimental intervention. The more statistically sensitive methods employed in their study were, however, able to detect enhanced concern for unemployment in the test-subjects' evaluation of political actors.⁶

If this test had taken the currently high importance ranking of healthcare and education into account and chosen less prominent issues, the failure to detect the priming effect may have been avoided. In the case of

⁶ Iyengar and Kinder, 67.

national unity, it is possible that the current overwhelming referendum-fatigue, measured by many popular opinion studies of the issue, precluded the panelists from finding the issue to be of significant importance in their evaluations of political actors in the spring of 1998 when the test was conducted. It is highly unlikely that when coverage of the issue peaked in October 1995 they would have responded the same way. With the comfort of hindsight and new issues emerging on the public agenda, however, they were unable to apprehend national unity as a significant consideration in their evaluations of Canadian politicians.

The second reason this study design was ineffective in detecting priming is related to the panelists chosen for participation. All are politically aware and frequent media users. Because the panelists used in this study were not tested in isolation from their normal day-to-day media use, it is possible the messages they were subjected to in the course of the test were not sufficient to undermine the external conditioning received from media coverage contemporaneous with the test period in the spring of 1998. In other words, the test succeeded only in measuring their current criteria for evaluating political actors, not the changes in criteria over time.

This supposition is supported by the evidence gathered. All three panelists ranked healthcare as the most important issue, followed by education and then national unity. This rank-ordering is consistent with the public opinion climate in Canada at the time of the test. Pollsters note that healthcare is heading the list of emerging concerns on the public agenda, with education also on its way up. National unity, on the other hand, is on its way down the public's agenda.⁷

⁷ Angus Reid Group, 6. (Also see Chapter Three.)

In order to successfully explore priming, then, this test has shown that researchers must carefully consider the information environment in order to see the effect at work on the sample panel. The implications of the non-findings of this particular study are consistent with the work of Robert Goidel, et al. They found that a closer examination of the external media environment and political context would be necessary in order to overcome the inconsistent findings of research with respect to individual differences in the priming effect.⁸

The failure here was a lack of recognition that the timeseries of headlines would be insufficient to recondition the panelists' attitudes toward the issues being explored in the study. Measuring panelists' attitudes prior to and after exposure to the test sample might have provided the essential benchmark necessary to identify the priming effect in this study. An increase in panelists' attention to target issues when assessing the performance of leaders after the test would give a positive indication of the priming effect at work.

Priming and Public Policy

While no applications of media priming can be drawn directly from this test, the external validity of the majority of priming research allows for a discussion of the ways policy makers can turn an understanding of priming into political advantage.

⁸ Robert Goidel, et al, "Priming Theory and RAS Models: Toward an Integrated Perspective of Media Influence," *American Politics Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (July 1997): 309.

Priming, as was noted, helps define the standards an audience uses to measure political performance by raising the accessibility of certain issues in their memories. The information that becomes accessible is largely determined by context-specific factors such as the actors, images, and messages presented in media.⁹ For policy makers, this is an advantage if attention can be drawn to successful ventures, and away from the more problematic aspects of administration.

To draw attention to those aspects of policy that will draw favorable appraisals from voters, the creation of news-catching events is key to successful use of the priming effect. Providing reporters with stories which fit the Galtung-Ruge newsworthiness criteria described in Chapter One and cast a favorable light on the government are important aspects of manipulating the information which primes news consumers.

A good example of the current use of priming in the Canadian context is the focus placed on economic success. Years of stories about the debt and deficit have given most news consumers the tools they need to understand these economic terms and to be concerned about national economic performance and its effect on their lives. Goidel, et al, note the economy is likely to be primed by the media when it is in decline.¹⁰ In fact, a Michael Marzolini poll taken for the federal Liberal government in February 1998 found that 80 per cent of respondents were surprised to find that the federal deficit was gone.¹¹

⁹ Goidel, et al, 293.

¹⁰ Ibid., 312.

¹¹ Edward Greenspon, "Don't ignore healthcare, Liberals warned: It's issue No. 1, party pollster says," *Globe and Mail* 21 Mar. 1998: A1.

Giving this information a high profile works to cast a favorable light on the federal government because voters have been preconditioned to worry about the economy. Recent declines in the unemployment rate also bode well for favorable coverage of the government's handling of economic affairs.

It can, and has, been argued that economic success often is difficult to manage through policy choices, and that economic upturns are no more the result of good fiscal management than downturns are the result of poor policy. However, incumbent governments are able to reap the rewards of strong fiscal performance and a public primed to use economic criteria to measure policy success. This is true at both the federal and provincial levels in Canada. The provincial governments that have balanced their books have reaped the same benefits resulting from a public primed to form opinions based on economic criteria seen at the federal level.

Conversely, political opponents can look to areas not positively affected by governmental policy and draw news attention to these issues in order to create a negative priming effect. Issues can be manipulated to create this negative priming effect if adequate attention is drawn to policy areas where the government is ill-prepared or unsuccessful.

By the same token, issues receiving high levels of media coverage cannot be ignored by governments hoping to be assessed positively. The current information climate described in this chapter means that policy makers will have to begin looking seriously at ways to address social issues, healthcare in particular, if they are to garner the support of news consumers. Assessing the lead of the media is another way in which an understanding

of priming allows policy makers to react to the concerns gaining public salience.

Like agenda-setting and framing, priming can be used by those who understand the underlying structure of media and media effects for partisan purposes. The symbiotic-antagonistic relationships among the public, the media and policy makers are thereby reflected in the functioning of the priming effect as they were in the previous examinations of agenda-setting and framing.

Conclusion

The lack of supporting evidence for the priming model demonstrated in this chapter should be seen as a failure of study design, not a refutation of the effect. Other research has found the effect to be a significant and quantifiable one with wide-reaching ramifications for the study of interactions among actors in the public sphere.

The data produced in the course of this test did, however, allow for a examination of the various attributes and reactions of the panelists. The panelists in this study reacted very much in the manner expected in terms of their partisan, social and gender classifications. Their relative reactions to the issues of healthcare and education fell among the norms of most public opinion studies. Healthcare was shown to be a significant issue in the panel's assessment of policy makers, as was education. National unity was shown to be of relatively little interest to this panel, especially in comparison with the other issues examined.

Had the current information climate been taken into account in the design of this study, the external priming effect of the panel's regular media use would have predicted the outcome. In the test as it was conducted, the priming effect detected was simply the one measurable in the press in the spring of 1998.

As the final look at media effects in this study, the value of the research is over-shadowed by the technical problems encountered. However, the failures are instructive for future research in terms of the pitfalls inherent in a lack of attention to contemporary information climates.

Having completed the examination of three media effects models, the final chapter will provide a summary of the findings of the previous sections, and explore how they fit with the previously outlined tenants of media effects. The study will conclude with an examination of the interrelationships among the public, the media and policy makers -- the actors in the symbiotic-antagonistic web -- and the illumination provided by media effects.

Chapter Six

Conclusions

The first objective of this study was to explore the quantitative and qualitative attributes of media effects in the Canadian context. Looking at several prominent issues taken from the headlines of the five-year period from 1993 to 1997, the agenda-setting, framing and priming effects were explored. Secondly, by empirically illustrating the media effects models, the analysis attempted to clarify some of the interrelationships among three actors: the public, the media and policy makers.

By examining each of the three media effects models separately, an attempt was made to explain the impact of news media on discourse in the public sphere. The various ways each of the other two actors responds to media effects was the primary target of analysis, however, the other possible relationships also entered into the discussion. The public and policy makers also can work as actors in the web of interrelationships illuminated in this study.

Summary

In order to understand the nature of the effect of news media on the public and policy makers, all three media effects models must be examined together. Looking at one effect at the expense of the others leads to an

underestimation of the impact of the media on the way we construct our individual views of reality -- what Walter Lippmann called the "pictures in our heads."

The impact of the media on national issues is amplified because we do not witness directly much of the information needed to assess political choice. We respond politically to a pseudoenvironment which is built almost exclusively through the information we receive as consumers of mass media. The way information is presented to us was the focus of this study.

The first test was designed to look at agenda-setting. This is a simple quantitative effect which describes the correspondence between increases in the salience of a national issue and its availability in the media. In order to test the agenda-setting model in the Canadian context, four issues were identified and studied for signs of a similarity between the intensity of newspaper coverage and public opinion levels. According to the data collected for this study, the issues of national unity, healthcare, education and environment all seemed to fit the criteria of the agenda-setting model.

Peaks in the graphs of coverage intensity were matched by the issue's increased public salience. While no causal link was implied, the correlation between the two measures demonstrated the agenda-setting effect rather clearly. This study's findings with respect to agenda-setting fall within the tradition of the research in this field.

This study confirmed much of what has been learned over the course of decades of agenda-setting research. The interplay between media coverage and public opinion withstands empirical examination. Being cognisant of this fundamental quality of media action and public opinion as it

operates in the public sphere affords policy makers the opportunity to gauge, or manage, the political feasibility of the issues they confront.

The second media effect studied here was the framing model. Framing is different from both the agenda-setting and priming models in that it is an effect which takes account of the impact of the content of media stories as opposed to their empirical attributes. The way in which the mass media frame issues will support a particular set of inferences to be made from the available information, while at the same time suppressing another set. By altering the information that is made available in the mass media, framing works to alter the interpretations of events mediated through the news story's point of view.

In this test, the framing concept was examined by comparing public opinion data with a qualitative assessment of the media coverage over the same period. The panel of three selected for this study was given access to a data set of headlines from four newspapers. They were asked to register a score based on how negatively or positively they felt the headline reflected on the competency of institutions.

A positive indication of the framing model at work in this study was discovered through the relative match in the highs and lows of public opinion confidence from the polling and the scores registered by the panelists. The qualitative assessment of the coverage provided evidence of the strength of the effect of media framing. The test showed that the media frame was a persuasive instrument in the formation of the panel's opinions.

In the first test, the effect of media in terms of setting the agenda for the public and policy makers was examined. The addition of the framing model improves understanding of the series of symbiotic-antagonistic

relationships among the actors by showing that once the public agenda is set, the tone of coverage influences how the public reacts to an issue.

The impact of the tone of coverage on the attitudes of news consumers proved to be a second empirically demonstrable media effect. Taking the concepts of agenda-setting and framing in tandem allows for a broadened understanding of the impact of media on the way discourse in the public sphere is shaped, although they do not together provide the entire picture.

A third test was undertaken in order to examine a second quantitative effect -- the priming model. By reexamining the issues of national unity, healthcare and education from a slightly different perspective an attempt was made to explore the effect of priming on audience perception.

While agenda-setting may be understood as a memory-based process in which the accessibility of topics or issues increase with their availability in the mass media, priming draws a correlation between the attention given by the media to an issue and the importance the issue has in the public's evaluations of political actors. The public's evaluations lean most heavily on issues appearing in the media most often. However, unlike agenda-setting, the priming model posits that the media are responsible for the use the public makes of an issue with respect to judgments of their leaders as well as the ranking of issue importance.

The goal of this test was to gauge how salient the panel estimated each issue to be in terms of their evaluation of policy makers. The panel's assessments were then compared with graphs depicting the intensity of media coverage.

In this case, however, the test design was found to be flawed with respect to its examination of priming in two specific ways. The issues employed were already high on the public's agenda and the panelists were all politically aware media users. The result of this failure to take the contemporaneous information environment into account resulted in the test measuring only the priming effect at work in the spring of 1998, when the test was conducted, as opposed to the changes in media priming over the course of the sample period. Measuring panelists' attitudes prior to and after exposure to the test sample would have enabled identification of any increase in panelists' attention to target issues when assessing the performance of leaders.

It was noted, however, that the evidence gathered in this study did nothing to refute the essential theory of the priming model. The addition of priming to the previously examined media effects adds to the overall picture of how media affect audience perception and the political environment in which policy makers must operate.

Robert Goidel, et al, found that, at least for a portion of the news audience, media effects occur independent of one another. This means that any one approach, considered alone, would fail to describe the full effect of the media on audience perception. The implication is that an integrated approach is necessary to fully appreciate the amplitude and attributes of media effects on a specific target issue or group.¹ For the most complete understanding of the context in which public discourse of national issues

¹ Robert Goidel, et al, "Priming Theory and RAS Models: Toward an Integrated Perspective of Media Influence," *American Politics Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (July 1997): 312.

takes place, an attempt to account for each of the media effects models is required.

Having examined media effects from an empirical standpoint, the second goal of the study was to enter into a discussion of how the interrelationships among the public, the media, and policy makers are affected by the outcome of agenda-setting, framing and priming.

Reexamining the Interrelationships

The Rogers-Dearing model outlined in Chapter Two proposed the possibility of nine relationships among the media, the public and policy makers. The nine include the media's influence upon itself, the public, and policy makers; the public's influence upon itself, the media and policy makers; and policy makers' influence upon themselves, the media and the public. This work attempted to examine many of these interrelationships, although clearly the focus of the empirical tests was on the media as an actor with respect to both the public and policy makers.

The discussion of how an understanding of media effects is essential to the political success of policy was the second major task of this study. This means an examination of the impact of policy makers as an actor on the media and the public.

Once an issue or event becomes news, it is subject to the conventions of journalism in terms of the way the story gets framed and what gets covered. This often results in an unbalanced weighing of the elements of an issue which tips the scales towards those aspects that make a good story.

The news, by its nature, emphasizes those facts which advance the story in the narrative tradition of journalism.

Political actors may work to provide journalists with only the information which may best support the story they hope the audience will be told. News conferences, high-profile reports and commissions, or staged photo opportunities are some of the tools at the disposal of policy makers. Conversely, journalists may support, consciously or unconsciously, the issues which they feel most comfortable with, or those which are in line with the views of their news organization. The public may work to place an issue on the media agenda in order to press for policy action through demonstrations, events or personal impact statements. Once an issue is ensconced at the top of the public agenda, public policy action is often called for, politically speaking.

The public needs to be aware that the news it consumes is shaped by structural forms that influence the way in which news reports are constructed. The audience must understand that a story is a representation of selected bits of information if they are to be aware of the meaning of the conclusions they draw solely from media accounts. Without additional sources of information to consult, the public invariably reflects the point of view, or frame, dominant in the media they use.

The information that ultimately becomes accessible is largely determined by context-specific factors such as the actors, images, and messages presented in media. For policy makers, this is an advantage if attention can be drawn to successful ventures, and away from the more problematic aspects of administration.

What is clear is that each actor has a role in the eventual outcome of the interplay among them. The study of media effects simply looks at the role of the media in shaping audience perception. Policy makers and the public also have key parts to play in determining which subjects are discussed in what context in the public sphere.

When Lippmann wrote that the world we deal with politically has to be explored, reported and imagined, he was referring to the nebulous and artificial construct that is conveyed through media of communication to the public at large. By drawing attention to the myriad of ways the construct itself is subject to the interplay of several actors, it is hoped that this study has helped to illuminate the symbiotic-antagonistic nature of the relationship between politics and the media. None of the actors involved can dominate or define the discussion in the public sphere by themselves. The tensions among their various goals can be either complementary or contradictory, but in the end, the public, the media and policy makers need to coexist in order to allow for the meaningful exchange of ideas in the public sphere.

This study was designed to illustrate some of the interactions among these actors in order to add to the understanding of how the process unfolds in the current Canadian context. Using this branch of mass communications research, an understanding of the relationship between politics, the public and the media can be approached. However, as this study has shown, the relationship is complex, comprising elements of both symbiosis and antagonism. There is little that resembles a linear causality in the relationship. The web drawn by the interrelationships among the public, the media and policy makers must be navigated in order for significant public discourse to take place.

Kurt and Gladys Lang noted that exposure to the environment mediated by news coverage is often as difficult to escape as contact with one's immediate world. The political world is defined, whether directly or indirectly, by the media -- this is often the only way most constituents will ever know policy makers, issues and national events. As such, it is imperative that the nature of the environment built by the media is understood. A clear delineation of the multiple relationships involved in the process of media effects is the first step in achieving this goal.

This discussion has examined the development of the agenda-setting theory and its related elements. As an active area of research since the 1920s, media effects are likely to remain central to mass communications research for some time to come. The challenge is the continued refinement of the theory and further testing of impact of media effects on public opinion and the way in which this opinion is translated into public policy action.

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