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**The Contested Framing of Canada's Military
Mission in Afghanistan: The News Media, the
Government, the Military and the Public**

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MSc in Politics and Communication

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Dissertation submitted to the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, August 2009, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MSc in Politics and Communication. Supervised by Dr. Nancy Thumim.

Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

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The Contested Framing of Canada's Military Mission in Afghanistan:

The News Media, the Government, the Military and the Public

Brooks Decillia

ABSTRACT

This research examines the Canadian news media's coverage (TV, print and radio) of Canada's military mission in Afghanistan between February 2006 to January 2009. Combining both quantitative and qualitative research, as well as using the conceptual frameworks of hegemony, indexing and framing, it analyzes how military and government elites attempted to frame the news media's coverage of Canada's combat operations in the volatile southern region of Afghanistan. While considerable scholarly analysis¹ has evaluated the media's coverage of the U.S. "war on terror", assessments of the Canadian news media's coverage of Canada's military mission in Afghanistan are decidedly less conspicuous. This research responds to that deficit. Specifically, this work assesses, critically, what role journalists played in the contested dynamic of framing Canada's military mission in Afghanistan, and how that may have potentially influenced public opinion. Applying the theoretical frameworks of Entman (1991, 1993, 2003, 2004) concerning framing and Bennett's (1990, 1993) indexing hypothesis, this research assesses the complex framing dynamic of Canada's military mission. While this study's content analysis quantitatively shows the Canadian media largely indexed their stories to official sources, it also argues that journalists largely challenged the government's sponsored frames inserting what this work calls "reality checks" into their reporting. Data from qualitative interviews with senior Canadian correspondents offers possible explanations – ranging from journalistic professional norms to poor media management by elites – for this journalistic agency. This research concludes that Canadian journalists – for the most part – resisted the military and government leadership's preferred or sponsored frame(s) concerning Canada's military mission in Afghanistan.

¹ See: Lewis *et al.* (2003); Schechter (2003); Kellner (2005); Jackson (2005); Kamalipour and Snow (2004); Thussu and Freedman (2003); Louw (2007); Bennett *et al.* (2006); Thussu (2007).

1. Introduction

"There will be some who want to cut and run, but cutting and running is not my way and it's not the Canadian way." – Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, March 13, 2006.

"Quite frankly, we are not going to ever defeat the insurgency." – Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, March 1, 2009.

Just as the United States stepped up its combat operations in Afghanistan in 2009 by increasing its military forces by 10,000 troops, Canadian political and military leaders repeatedly – and steadfastly – vowed to pull their military forces out of the volatile south Asian country. Public opinion about Canada's combat operations in Afghanistan has shifted considerably over the last seven years. When Canadian soldiers first went to Afghanistan in 2002, polls found only 20 per cent of Canadians disapproved of the mission (CBC News 2009: 1). In the intervening years, Canada's combat operations in southern Afghanistan have exacted a deadly toll, killing Canadian soldiers at a higher rate than that of any other NATO country involved in the International Stabilization Assistance Force (CTV News 2008:1). By the summer of 2009, a poll found a majority (84 per cent) of Canadians wanted the mission to end (CBC News 2009a: 1). This study assesses the mediated debate and its potential influence on public opinion.

With little understanding of the tough multi-year fight ahead of it, Canada "slipped into a war" in Afghanistan in 2006 (Lang, Gross Stein 2007: 185). In keeping with many other UN-sanctioned missions involving Canada's military, most Canadians initially believed their forces would be "keeping the peace" in Kandahar (Lang, Gross Stein 2007: 185). Canada's combat operations in Afghanistan, however, are definitely not peacekeeping – and military and government leaders have amplified that point. In 2006, Canada's top soldier at the time, General Rick Hillier, called Afghan insurgents "detestable murderers and scumbags" (Shniad: 2006: 1). Criticized by some as demagoguery, the communication efforts of military and government elites surrounding Afghanistan have elicited considerable controversy and criticism (HarperIndex.ca 2007: 1). An independent commission of eminent Canadians tasked with studying the military mission in 2008, in fact, concluded the government "failed to communicate with Canadians with balance and candour" about the role and rationale for combat operations in Kandahar (Independent Panel on the Future of Afghanistan 2008: 24).

To be certain, the Canadian media is the site of much of the public debate about Afghanistan – and this study asserts that it should be examined “as both an agent and a venue” with an eye to understanding how journalistic practices shape public policy and a site where political actors “contest the way in which we think and talk about public policy issues” (Kosicki and Pan 1997 in Caragee and Roefs 2004: 221). Gitlin (1980: 9) rightly explains that the media is:

...a significant social force in the forming and delimiting of public assumptions, attitudes and moods... They sometimes generate, sometimes amplify a field of legitimate discourse that shapes the public's definition of its situation.

This dissertation examines, critically, the news media's role in challenging elite sponsored frames concerning Afghanistan. The evidence presented here suggests military and government leaders failed to control – exclusively – the framing of Canada's combat operations in Afghanistan. While this study's content analysis (CA) quantitatively demonstrates that journalists, in line with indexing theory (Bennett 1990, 1993), largely relied on official sources, it also found that Canadian reporters resisted or challenged elite sponsored frames about Afghanistan, often weaving oppositional readings into their news stories. The data from qualitative interviews with five² senior Canadian journalists offers insight into the potential causes of this journalistic agency, ranging from normative professional roles to an acrimonious relationship between the news media and the government.

To begin, this discussion canvasses the existing knowledge concerning the nexus of media, politics and international relations. This work adopts Denzin's systematology, triangulating theory with a mind to placing several concepts “side by side to assess their utility and power” so as to better inform this study's findings, discussion and conclusion (Denzin 1989 in Flick 2006: 389). To that end, the theoretical chapter highlights the key aspects of hegemony, indexing and framing, building the conceptual foundation for Entman's (2003; 2004) “cascading activation” paradigm, which underpins this research's theoretical approach. Furthermore, Gramsci's (1971) thinking about hegemony, it will be argued, is useful for understanding the Canadian political context given its propensity to elect minority governments since 2004. As the theoretical chapter also makes clear, this *layered*

² Given the combination of both a content analysis and qualitative interviews, it was determined in consultation with my supervisor that five interviews with elite journalists represents an appropriate sample for this work's scope and purpose.

conceptual framework, folding together hegemony, indexing and framing, offers a considered analytic for assessing how the Canadian media did not passively accept the government's preferred framing of Canada's military mission in southern Afghanistan.

There are limits to this study, though. This research's theoretical base is largely derived from U.S. studies and examples. Arguably, though, U.S. theory applies well to the Canadian context given the two countries' similar cultural and political practices. Moreover, both sides in the so-called "Americanization" phenomenon debate suggest the growing global homogenization of politics means an investigation of political communication in both the U.S. and Canada are likely similar (Hallin and Mancini 2004).

As well, this research's quantitative content analysis (n = 245) and qualitative interviews (n = 5) are by no means exhaustive. Still, the CA's random sample is statistically significant and represents a manageable data set given the scope of this research and its time requirements. Finally, this study makes no definitive conclusions about the media's effect on Canadian audiences. Still, it does contend, based on this work's findings and theoretical assumptions, that the Canadian news media's coverage of Afghanistan *may* have influenced public opinion (Lewis 2001; Entman 2005; Zaller 1992).

2. Theory

This chapter aims to outline the relevant research literature concerning the contested dynamic between elites and journalists over defining and shaping news coverage. This discussion leads to a research question. As noted, this work's conceptual framework relies on Entman's (2003, 2004) "cascading activation" model, which draws its understanding from the theoretical knowledge surrounding the fields of hegemony, indexing, framing, public opinion and media effect. In order to fully inform this study's theoretical approach and findings, the following section considers each school of thought, and their strengths and weaknesses.

Hegemony

For proponents of a hegemonic understanding, mediated representations of foreign policy are narrowly constructed in an ideological frame constraining substantive debate about policy – and preventing fundamental questions about the very nature of advanced democracies' political and economic structures (Augelli and Murphy 1988; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Rachlin 1988; Thussu 2003, 2007). This perspective is informed by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci's thinking about hegemony. Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* envisions both direct – and most importantly, indirect – domination of subalterns by elites (Gramsci 1971). Gramsci advances that hegemony involves a "process of moral, philosophical, and political leadership that a social group attains only with the active consent of other social groups" (Gramsci 1971 in Artz and Yahya 2003: 10). Essentially, hegemony occurs when a ruling class successfully constructs a "common sense", exerting a "consensus that makes the power of the dominant group appear both natural and legitimate" (Watson and Hill: 2003:126).

Cultural institutions, such as churches, schools and the media, are at the centre of much of this dynamic, often re-enforcing the constructed meaning and social reality preferred by elites (Carragee and Roefs 2004). This "lived" hegemony is constantly "renewed, recreated, defended and modified..." and perpetually "resisted, limited, altered, and challenged" by forces sometimes outside of the ruling class's control (Williams 1977 in Carragee and Roefs 2004: 222). In democracies, hegemony essentially involves an ongoing contest, whereby competing groups of elites (partisan politicians, usually) vie to convince voters their "common sense" is more preferable to their opponent's version (Jones 2006). Arguably, this competition can be particularly pronounced during minority parliaments. Moreover, this

interplay (or negotiation) is often facilitated through communicative practices, making the media a critical means to that end (Artz and Yahya 2003).

Media and Hegemony

Elites rely on the media to systematically perpetuate its dominant discourse or perceived “common sense” (Artz and Yahya 2003). Gitlin holds “the mass media produce fields of definition and association, symbols and rhetoric, through which ideology becomes manifest and concrete” (Gitlin 1980). In doing so, a reality, even a collective “consciousness,” is shaped (Gans 1979: 39; Hallin 1994: 26). This phenomenon – this ability of the news media to shape what Lippmann (1922: 4) called “the pictures in our heads” – is further compounded by the increasing power of modern public relation specialists, spin doctors and self-promoting elites (Blumler and Gurevitch 1996; Mannheim 2007; Meyers 2002; Street 2001; Schorr 1997; Bennett 1990; Louw 2007; Curran 2006). Moreover, this hegemonic production becomes decidedly pronounced during war or times of crisis (Hallin 1986: 219-221).

Other theorists go further, suggesting the mainstream media are propaganda tools for economic, political and military elites (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Thussu 2003; 2007). In contrast to Lasswell’s (1933) top-down conceptualization of propaganda, Herman and Chomsky offer a diffused model, theorizing that economic and ideological filters supposedly control (and even manipulate) news coverage. This school of thought asserts that binary dialectics, such as anti-communism or the so-called “war on terror”, are internalized by the news media, leading to self-censorship for fear of offending powerful corporate or political elites (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Critics of the propaganda model contend it is too simplistic, lacking any evidence pointing towards a conspiring and unified elite – and fails most crucially to fully appreciate the independence journalists and audiences possess (Laughey 2007).

In stark contrast to the limited agency accorded to the news media in the propaganda model, the “CNN Effect” ascribes considerable power and influence to media organizations. At its core, the theory holds that compelling television images of a humanitarian crisis, such as the 2005 Tsunami that devastated much of south Asia, for example, actually shape (and sometimes drive) foreign policy, even forcing the hand of U.S. policymakers to intervene in situations sometimes at odds with American national interests (Feist 2001). Livingston’s comprehensive content analysis of U.S. media concludes the ubiquitous nature of 24-hour

cable news manifests itself in three ways: (1) as a *policy agenda-setting agent*; (2) as an *impediment* to foreign or military policy objectives; and (3) as an *accelerant*, speeding up the decision-making process (Livingston 1997: 2). Still, as Robinson contends, "...when policy makers are set on a particular course of action they are unlikely to be influenced by the news media coverage" (Robinson 2002: 119). Yet, he concedes emotionally compelling news stories *may* lead decision-makers to alter their actions.

Indexing

Considerable research highlights the actual (and potential) agency journalists possess to shape their stories and even the news agenda (McCombs and Shaw 1972; McCombs and Estrada 1997; Rogers and Dearing 2007; McCullagh 2002; Entman 2003, 2004). Alternatively, other media scholarship (Zaller 1992; Hallin 1986; Bennett 1990; Bennett *et al.* 2003 and 2006) holds that indexing means journalists – for the most part – echo and amplify the agreement or disagreement amongst elites. Bennett's pioneering work about indexing stressed that news organizations "tend to 'index' the range of voice and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate" (Bennett 1990: 106). In particular, Bennett stresses news organizations closely mirror elite discourse concerning military, foreign and economic policy (Bennett 1990). Essentially, particular groups of people have "privileged access to (and greater claims on) media coverage" because of their "status", or "claims to expert knowledge" (McCullagh 2002: 68). This journalistic propensity to gravitate towards authoritative or "credible" sources allows those possessing what Bourdieu (1984) termed social, political and economic capital to largely shape and "define" the dominant discourse (Bennett 1990: 125).

A close study of media texts reveals considerable elite domination and important clues to understanding hegemonic meanings and power (Carragee and Roefs 2004). For instance, Bennett *et al.*'s (2006) content analysis of U.S. news media coverage of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal found that the news media largely "conformed" to the official consensus – and White House public statements, in particular – that dismissed allegations of torture at the Iraqi prison; instead labeling the incident as "isolated abuse" (Bennett *et al.* 2003: 366). In line with Donahue *et al.*'s (1995) "guard dog" perspective, Bennett *et al.* concluded the media failed to live up to its normative watchdog conception often championed by free press proponents.

Framing

Goffman (1974) initially conceptualized frames as tools of definition or a means of constructing reality. He defined frames as “an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences and sequences of action within one’s present or past environment” (Goffman in Snow and Benford 1992: 137). Incorporated into media scholarship, Tuchman (1978) and Gitlin (1980) linked the framing process to how journalists and news agencies sort out the world with familiar narrative constructions (Caragee and Roefs 2004; McCullagh 2002). Gitlin, informed by a Gramscian perspective, defined frames as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse” (Gitlin 1980: 7). Similarly, Gamson and Modigliani (1987) posit that frames are essential reference points for interpreting media. “The use of particular words to describe events and issues,” contends McCullagh, “represent not merely the choice of a descriptive phrase but also the choice of an attitude towards the event or issue” (2002: 23). As a result, the “maps” or common narrative constructions used by journalists often shape public debate about issues and events (Callaghan and Schnell 2001: 187).

The contested territory of framing power involves multiple actors and social phenomenon. Framing can be thought of as a site of “struggle over the definition and construction of social reality” (Gurevitch and Levy 1985 in Caragee and Roefs 2004: 219). Whilst Gramsci makes no explicit reference to counter-hegemony in his writings, he does identify the media as a principle actor in civil society, suggesting the media are a key battleground in the shaping of different or revolutionary realities (Baylis and Smith 2001). Framing is at the heart of “both the production of hegemonic meanings and the development of counter hegemonic ways of seeing” (Carragee and Roefs 2004: 227-228). To that end, politicians, in hopes of advancing their agenda, devote considerable attention to trying to shape media frames, even according the media more influence than it deserves (Schudson 1995).

Often viewed negatively or manipulatively, frames evoke “nefarious possibilities” of “freewheeling exercises in pure manipulation” (Druckman 2001: 1041). Conversely, Druckman posits framing happens because citizens look to “credible elites” for “guidance” to sort out complicated events or issues (Drukman 2001: 1061). Others pose a more ontological critique of framing, contending, similar to Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality, that frames have little affect or effect in a modern, media saturated environment (McCullagh

2002: 47). Nevertheless, the literature suggests frames can resonate and even shape public opinion (Zaller 1992; Lewis 2001; Druckman and Chong 2007). "Frames," Entman emphasizes, strip away "the imprint of power," exposing "the identity of actors or interests that competed to dominate the text" (Entman 1993: 53).

While this study assesses how Canadian elites tried to frame combat operations in Afghanistan, George W. Bush's ability to shape the news coverage of the so-called "war on terror" after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001 illustrates well the power of frames and the power elites have to dominate this dynamic. The U.S. media closely echoed Bush's binary discourse, which highlighted "good" versus "evil" and "freedom" versus "tyranny", in 2001 and 2002 (Entman 2003; Kern *et al.* 2003; Coe *et al.* 2004; Moeller 2004; Jackson 2005). The "war on terror" became a "linguistic staple" of the administration and news organizations after 9/11 (Munishi 2004: 54). This type of "antagonistic" speech "becomes very quickly hegemonic, defining the horizon of our thought and excluding other discourses" (Carpentier 2007: 2). Stripped of its ideological tone and endowed instead with a "common sense" value, the struggle becomes neutral and "power derived from it takes on a hegemonic form" (van Dijk 2008: 34). In a **Foucauldian** sense, Bush's discourse ruled in and "ruled out" how topics were constructed, limiting the range of discussion (Hall 2007: 44).

Media Effects

What *effect* the "war on terror" discourse had on audiences is a matter of considerable scholarly debate. "The entire study of mass communications is based on the premise there are effects from the media, yet it seems to be the issue on which there is the least certainty and least agreement" (McQuail 1987: 251). Recent research, however, points to a wide range of media influences. Callaghan and Schnell assert minimal effects research is discredited, arguing the media shape the way the public thinks about politics and "alter[s] the criteria by which political players are judged" (Callaghan and Schnell 2005: 2). Entman (2005), too, contends framing research neutralizes the minimal effects paradigm. Similarly, Zaller (1992) dismisses "minimal effects" thinking, arguing public opinion is often shaped by elite, mediated discourse (Zaller 1992). Even qualitative research suggests "audience *consent* to dominant media frameworks" (Lewis 2001: 86). Moreover, Lewis stresses hegemony is not "seamless domination" either – and that media influence "is not something that is *experienced* as oppressive – on the contrary, it may be experienced as fun" (Lewis 2001: 87).

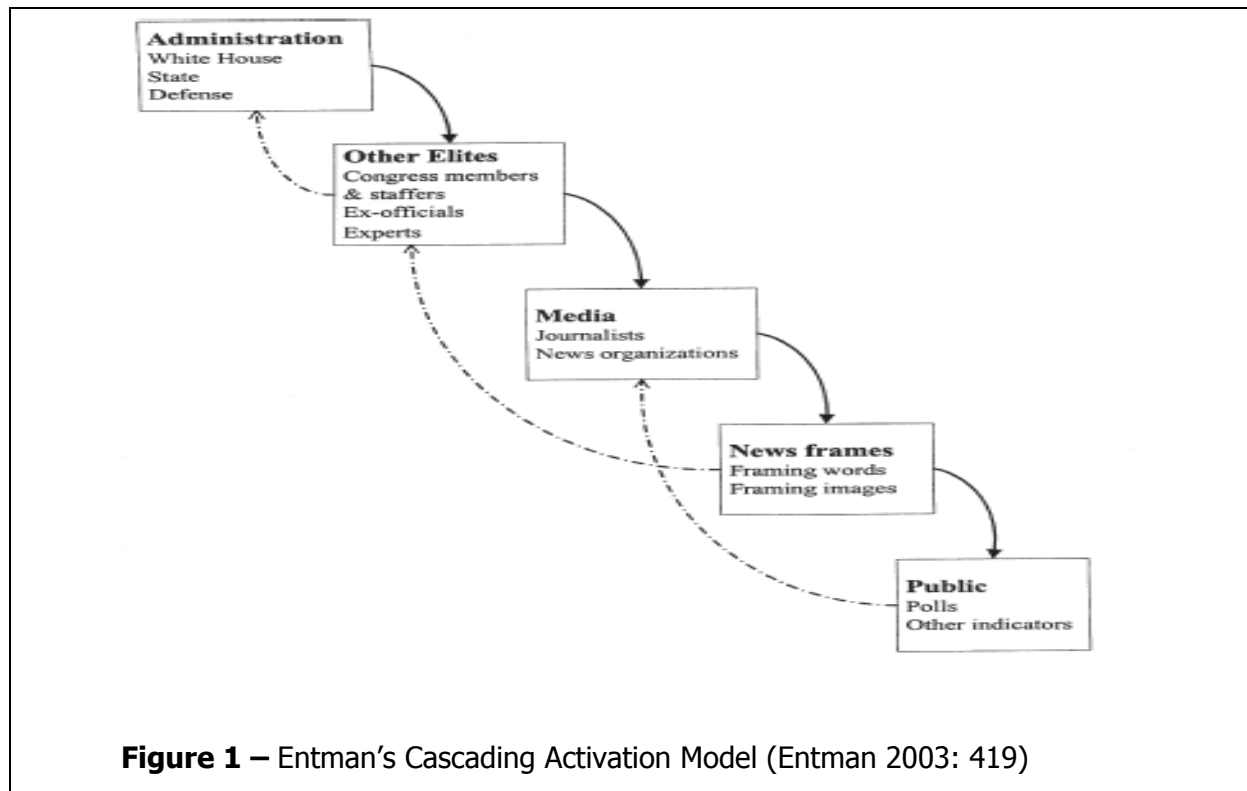
Framing, in particular, is often singled out for its effect on audiences (Riker 1986; Druckman 2004). Certainly, the research is inconclusive about the degree of the effect or how to even assess the scope of framing effect (Druckman and Chong 2007a). Nevertheless, narratives can have a “significant impact on the ways individuals evaluate and judge issues” (Tadlock *et al.* 2008: 196). As well, agenda-setting research, whereby the media’s agenda influences the public agenda, suggests that messages emphasized in news become important to the public (McCombs and Shaw 1972; McCombs *et al.* 1991; Page *et al.* 2007). Media, as Cohen asserted, “may not be very successful much of the time in telling people what to think... it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen 1963: 13). Yet, epistemological questions about media effects persist and any “actual effect” is, arguably, “less significant than the *perceived* effect” (Watson and Hill 2000: 93).

Cascading Activation Model

Adopting the metaphor of a waterfall, Entman’s “cascading activation” model (see Figure1) envisions that frames often “spread from one location on the network to others, often quickly and with little trouble”, moving, for example, from government officials to other elites such as legislators and then to journalists where common narrative constructions are often imposed (Entman 2003: 419). Entman’s thinking builds on the theoretical foundations of hegemony, indexing, framing and media effect, arguing that his model “accounts” for the dramatic changes in international relations since the end of the Cold War (Entman 2003: 416). Moreover, he contends the major schools of thought concerning the nexus of foreign affairs and media fail to adequately define “the precise mechanisms by which government’s preferred interpretations of foreign events and issues get translated into specific choices of politically consequential words and images in the news” (Entman 2003: 416).

According to Entman’s (2003, 2004) model, ideas often begin at the White House and are then communicated to members of Congress. Administration officials and members of congress talk regularly with journalists. Moreover, administration officials and legislators often maintain personal relationships with journalists. Ideas spread – back and forth – through this network and can originate at any node in the model (Entman 2003). Reporters, as well, talk with their colleagues and editors. Ideas are debated and discussions reverberate through the network. Public opinion, often a dependent variable, flows in both directions in this model, sometimes shaping what elites do and think (Entman 2003, 2004).

Everyone involved in this real-world waterfall “operate under uncertainty, with mixed motives and varying levels of competence and understanding” (Entman 2003: 420).



Akin to indexing, Entman’s model envisions how elite discontent can shape the framing process and how disagreement “triggers” or “suppresses” news that deviates from frames supported by officials (Entman 2003: 421). “By highlighting interactions among cultural congruence, motivations, power and strategy, the cascade model produces new insight,” Entman offers, “about the relationship between the White House’s preferred framing and the frames that actually appear in the news” (Entman 2004: 17).

Entman highlights five important considerations concerning his model:

1. The President’s ability to shape and control a preferred frame depends on “cultural congruence of the message”;
2. Journalists have strong professional motivations to include oppositional readings into their stories about foreign policy;
3. Other elites (such as Congressional leaders) are silent or vocal based on political considerations and the public mood;

4. Since the end of Cold-war, “if the White House mismanages its relationship with other elites and journalists, especially if it cannot find compelling schemas that support the frame, a president can lose control of the frame”; and
5. The end of the Cold War freed journalists from narrowly indexing elite discourse concerning foreign policy, allowing reporters the ability to resist the government’s preferred frame (Entman 2004: 17-21).

3. Conceptual Framework

Similar to Entman’s model, this work builds on the knowledge of hegemony, indexing, framing, media effect and public opinion to inform its conceptual framework. As illustrated by this theoretical chapter, framing comprises a symbolic contest, whereby a complex confluence of actors and social structures shape the news narratives produced by journalists. For this work, the theoretical underpinnings of hegemony offer important insights into the competition between elites to frame and shape news coverage to their preferred “common sense”. Indexing also informs this study by revealing the immense power elites often possess to construct and control news given the journalistic tendency to privilege “credible” or official sources. Framing, as the literature shows, also represents a crucial media phenomenon, revealing important power relationships. Entman’s “cascading activation” model combines both an appreciation for dominant discourse and individual agency – journalists, politicians and the public – to explain how frames are contested. In line with Giddens’s (1984) “Theory of Structuration”, social structures or rules govern the framing phenomenon, but agency allows actors to shape frames and even the social rules surrounding their construction. Similarly, this research’s conceptual framework envisions the framing exercise as an ebb and flow amongst elites, but also decidedly influenced by journalists and the public.

4. Research Questions

This study proposes to assess how Canadian government and military leaders tried to frame Canada's military mission in Afghanistan and how journalists reacted to that elite sponsored frame. Building on previous U.S. studies about framing, this research aims to contribute to the empirical gaps in the research concerning mediated discourse about Canada's combat operations in south Asia. This study proposes one overall research questions:

What role did the news media play in the contested dynamic of framing Canada's military mission in Afghanistan?

Two sub-groups of research questions are also proposed. A content analysis is used to quantify journalistic production and answer the first series of sub-question. The data from qualitative interviews is offered to answer the second sub-group's questions about the motivations of journalists and the potential effect of their work on audiences:

- (1) In what ways has Canadian news media (TV, Radio and print) over time (36 months) indexed and framed Canada's military mission in Afghanistan? Has the news media – if at all – contested the government's dominant frame?
- (2) Why – if at all – did journalists contest the government's frame? Plus, what role – if any – did this mediated debate play in public opinion?

5. Methodology

In order to fully examine the framing of Canada's military mission in Afghanistan – and how and why those frames may have been contested – this study combines both a quantitative content analysis (CA) of Canadian news media and qualitative interviews with five elite Canadian journalists possessing extensive experience reporting about the Canadian military and Afghanistan, in particular. In keeping with this discussion's theoretical triangulation, a two-pronged methodological approach is adopted to validate results and overcome "the (always limited) epistemological potentials of individual method" (Flick 2003: 390).

CA, for the purposes of this research, allows conclusions to be drawn from the identification of media phenomenon across a statistically valid sample of texts (Mattes and Kohring 2008; Bauer 2007). A systematic CA "distill[s] a large amount of material into a short description" so as to construct "maps of knowledge" (Bauer 2007: 132 and 135). Simply put, CA provides a snapshot of journalistic efforts. Still, CA only counts media output. It fails to explain *how* journalists produce media texts. Qualitative, focused interviews, however, attempt to explain the so-called *whys* of the craft of journalism. "Interviewing," stresses Weiss, "can inform us about the nature of social life" (Weiss 1994: 1). By considering the data from both CA and qualitative interviews, this study endeavours to explain both *how* – and *why* – Canada's military mission in Afghanistan was framed. Nevertheless, despite the intersubjectivity of combining methods, neither research tool (nor their combined synergy) can fully appreciate the media contents' influence on audiences (Bauer 2007). The following section will analyze both method in detail, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses and justification(s) for this study.

Content Analysis

Content analysis merges both qualitative and quantitative features, allowing for a thorough examination and identification of common phenomenon in media texts. In particular, CA provides an effective tool for identifying and quantifying frames across many media samples (Mattes and Kohring 2008). Several scholarly examinations of framing (Bennett *et al.* 2006; Entman 1991; 1993; 2003; Woolley 2000) have, for example, systematically quantified how elites and journalists frame media messages. By canvassing large samples, CA can identify and provide a count of variables such as tone, source, frames and oppositional readings, enabling researchers to infer larger meaning and potential statistical inferences (Fico *et al.*

1998; Bauer 2007). Moreover, if we accept audiences are affected – even minimally – by the new media, then a systematic assessment of media texts for patterns and trends ideally predicates effects research so as to better inform audience studies (Bauer 2007).

Given its subjective nature, questions do persist, however, about CA's reliability, specifically with respect to assessing media frames (Gamson and Modigliani 1987; Gandy 2001; Hertog and McLeod 2001; Miller 1997; Scheufell 1999; Tankard 2001; Mattes and Kohring 2008). In order to overcome such methodological deficiencies, this study employed a cluster analysis, whereby the coding process searched for combined words such as "war on terror" or "making Afghanistan safer", so as to improve its reliability and validity with respect to identifying and quantifying frames (Mattes and Kohring 2008). Robinson's (2002) CA of the "CNN Effect", similarly, found that keyword analysis proved "the toughest test" for identifying frames (138-139). This research's coding paid particular attention, for instance, to moral speech devices, such as "brave" or "evil" that officials often evoked in their media messages about Canada's military efforts in southern Afghanistan. Using Entman's conceptual framework, Mattes and Kohring found, that "single frame elements group together in a systematic way, thereby forming unique patterns" that can be labeled and quantified (2008: 274). "[A] frame is, in fact," stress Mattes and Kohring, "the sum of its parts – that is, a sum of frame elements" (2008: 274). Furthermore, this study's validation is enhanced by identifying clusters of frames in a divergent sample of three years of media texts (Mattes and Kohring 2008: 262-63).

Drawn from 36 months (February 2006 – January 2009) of Canadian news media coverage of Canada's military mission in southern Afghanistan, this study's text-based samples were randomly³ harvested from *Infomart.ca* – an Internet news archive⁴. The statistically significant population (n = 245), which includes news stories, current affairs and commentary, was split amongst four national media organizations – CBC National Radio News, *The Globe and Mail*, *The National Post* and CTV National News. *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post* are Canada's two national newspapers. CTV and CBC broadcast

³ A computer random number generator was used to choose the samples from the thousands of news samples identified by a key words ("Afghanistan and Canada") search of the archive. Aware that a valid sample can contain repeats of randomly chosen numbers, this study decided to ignore repeats (given that the statistical significance is so minimal). It was also decided beforehand to eliminate any of the researcher's reporting from Afghanistan if selected so as to eliminate any concerns about bias.

⁴ *Infomart.ca* is a comprehensive web-based news archive, providing the largest electronic resource of Canadian news and business information products.

nationally. This study's sample, arguably, represents larger phenomenon from which inferences can be drawn about the Canadian media in general because it was systematically selected (Stempel 1952 in Bauer 2007: 137). There are, of course, limits to text-based analysis of media samples. Drawn from an Internet-based archive, the stories are devoid of pictures and their position in the newspaper or newscasts, preventing an understanding of their prominence in the media. Transcripts of the two broadcasters' stories are also stripped of the emotion often conveyed in electronic news, thus precluding a detailed semiotic analysis to identify larger meanings (Penn 2007). This study, however, focuses on quantifying framing and indexing – and *all* the samples (print and broadcast) were reduced equally to texts for evaluation.

Content analysis is often confined to newspapers given their pronounced "facility to communicate rather more complex ideas" (McNair 2000: 136). This work, however, purposely included two national broadcasters (CTV News and CBC National Radio New) because most people get their news from television (Curran 2006: 188). As well, CBC National Radio News – the Canadian equivalent of BBC Radio 4 – is, it is argued here, an agenda-setting news organization often shaping the editorial agenda of many other Canadian news organizations (Riley 2006:1).

Mirroring other content analysis studies (Entman 1993, 2003, 2004; Bennett and Livingston 2005, 2006; Dixon and Linz 2000) examining framing, this work began with developing a coding frame and schedule. A close examination of other CA studies informed this work's coding frame, which assessed 42 variables (see Appendix I for coding frame). A pilot project conducted in the spring of 2009 revised and refined the coding schedule to better reflect this study's research question and theoretical underpinnings. Moreover, the so-called "dry run" enhanced the definitions in the coding schedule (see Appendix II), effectively improving the reliability of this research's content analysis and inter-coder reliability. The coding schedule's variables range from information about the type, date, and length of the media content to an assessment of focus and tone. The code divides samples into four quarters (9-month periods) so as to easily demonstrate any correlations between time and focus and time and tone. Most importantly, V9 to V15 assesses whether the media sample contains government and military leaders' sponsored frames concerning Canada's combat operations in Afghanistan and whether the samples also contain challenges to those frames in the text.

Coding/Inter-coding Reliability

Two independent coders were recruited and trained to assess a random sample of 20 per cent of the media articles ($n = 49$) in an effort to validate this research's coding (Neuendorf 2002). That process produced a very high overall inter-coder reliability – $r = \text{agree} / (\text{agree} + \text{disagree})$ – of 96 per cent for all variables. The most subjective or highly evaluative codes assessing frames and challenges to frames all possess an inter-coder reliability higher than 83 per cent (see Appendix III for an inter-coder reliability percentage for each variable). Reliability higher than 80 per cent is considered high and indicates a well-defined coding frame and a robust sampling validity that can stand the test of being replicated (Bauer 2007; Fico *et al.* 1998; Krippendorff: 2004).

Qualitative Interviews

Building on what was learned from this study's content analysis, qualitative interviews with five senior Canadian journalists were conducted in hopes of producing "deeper interpretation" of the CA (Flick 2006: 150). Qualitative interviews are "like night-vision goggles, permitting us to see that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is often looked at but seldom seen" (Rubin and Rubin 2005: vii). Simply put, interviews construct a description of events and phenomenon that is not known (Kvale 1996). With that methodological consideration in mind, semi-structured interviews were conducted with journalists in hopes of eliciting their "expert knowledge" about framing and its potential effect on audiences (Flick 2006: 165). Of note, an interpretive constructionist philosophy informed this research's interviewing method. That is, this study was cognizant of the "cultural assumptions" that influenced and informed what questions were asked and how they were interpreted (Rubin and Rubin 2005: 29-30).

Meuser and Nagel warn that so-called "expert interviews" can be problematic because the expert "lectures" the researcher or does not deviate from their agenda (2002: 77-79). A strong and well-reasoned topic guide can mitigate such pitfalls, though (Meuser and Nagel 2002). This study's topic guide was informed by this work's content analysis, theoretical underpinnings and research questions concerning journalistic agency. The guide's design process was conscious of question flow, structuring it with easy questions at first and harder questions at the end.

Having worked as a journalist for more than a decade – and having conducted hundreds of journalistic interviews – my familiarity with the process, I believe, facilitated the smooth flow

of questioning. Moreover, my professional reputation as a correspondent with “hot zone” experience in Afghanistan, I believe, added to my credibility with the journalists I interviewed, endowing me with an equal footing with my interview subjects. I, like them, was not merely a sterile academic probing them for information – but a colleague who had spent my “time in the trenches,” if you will, covering the conflict in Afghanistan. As a result, though, the interviewees often talked in shorthand, ending sentences often with “you know.” Cognizant of this potential pitfall and my journalistic tendency to listen for so-called “sound-bites” or “clips”, I worked hard to ask open-ended, neutral questions and allowed for expansive answers. Moreover, I endeavoured to follow-up questions where interviewees ended with “you know” so as to ensure I did not make assumptions about what they were talking about. My topic guide (see Appendix IV) moved from general questions about the media’s efforts in Afghanistan to more specific questions about frames and their efficacy. Only at the end, did I ask interviewees to react to my CA’s findings. Admittedly, my concluding questions were not neutral. Still, such questions can “arrive at new interpretations” (Rubin and Rubin 2005: 200).

Interview Sample and Recruitment

Five senior Canadian journalists were interviewed for this study. The sample was carefully chosen because of the journalists’ *extensive* experience reporting on the military and Afghanistan, in particular (Rubin and Rubin 2005). The interviewees included:

- **Sally Armstrong** – a journalist, author and human rights activist who has reported on and from Afghanistan since the mid-1990s.
- **Arthur Kent** – a journalist and author who has reported from Afghanistan for nearly 30 years.
- **Brian Stewart** – a senior correspondent with CBC News who has been the public broadcaster’s lead reporter on Canada’s military mission in Afghanistan since 2006.
- **Graeme Smith** – *The Globe and Mail’s* Afghanistan correspondent since 2005.
- **Dr. Robert Bergen** – long-time journalist and research associate with the University of Calgary’s Centre for Military and Strategic Studies. His PhD research focused on the Canadian media’s role in the Kosovo War.

This sample was also chosen, in part, because of its manageability and recognizing that “more interviews do not necessarily imply better quality or more detailed understanding”

(Gaskell 2007: 43). In addition, this study's cadre of reporters represents three print reporters and two broadcast journalists.

For the sake of convenience and cost, all five journalists were interviewed using the audio or video Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) software *Skype*. While Shuy (2003: 181) suggests face-to-face interviews provide for "more thoughtful" and "more accurate" responses than telephone interviews, all five of the interviewees are no strangers to the interview or the dynamic, having often been interviewed or interviewed others themselves. Moreover, the superiority of in-person interviews compared to phone interviews is a contested and longstanding academic debate (Colombots 1969). Jackle *et al.*, for instance, found "no support for the hypothesis that telephone respondents were more likely to satisfice" (2006: 3).

The interview lengths ranged from 40 minutes to 70 minutes. All of the participants signed waivers submitting to having their names and quotes used in this research. Complete transcripts of all the interviews were produced and checked and proofread against the audio recording. Participants were provided transcripts of their interview for verification and correction.

Data Analysis – Thematic Analysis

Supporters of thematic analysis hold the method allows researchers to systematically scour data, constructing descriptions, themes and meaning (Rubin and Rubin 2005; Braun and Clarke 2006). Often accused of being "airy fairy" or not "real research," those who are critical of interviewing, contend the method is essentially unscientific (Laubschange 2003 in Braun and Clarke 2006: 95). With that criticism in mind, a lengthy period of reflection and contemplation followed the transcription process. In line with much qualitative research, a grounded theory model informed this process (Rubin and Rubin 2005). With my conceptual framework and research questions in mind, I read and re-read the interviews, scribbling notes, memos and coming up with codes to assess the data for focuses and topics.

In addition, the qualitative data analysis computer programme *Atlati.ti* was used to systematically analyze and code the interviews. Dozens of codes, ranging from terrorism, to deadlines (see Appendix V for a list of codes) were used to divide the interviews into manageable data units (Rubin and Rubin 2005). Essentially, this process scoured and re-scoured the data so as to construct themes (Straus and Corbin 1998 in Flick 2006: 296). As

Flick explains, “coding leads to the development of theories through a process of abstraction. Concepts or codes are attached to the empirical material” (Flick 2006: 296). Thematic analysis is best conceptualized as a “recursive process” that involves moving from coding the material to identifying themes (Braun and Clarke 2006: 86). In line with Braun and Clarke’s systematic thematic analysis process, the themes were then reviewed and defined (Braun and Clarke 2006). Ultimately, three dominant themes emerged from the analysis – frames, framing efficacy and media effect on public opinion (see Appendix VI for theme-related data concerning frame effect). Finally, I synthesized the themes and data into a coherent narrative or “broader overall ‘story’” (see Appendix VII) so as to inform this work’s findings and discussion sections (Braun and Clarke 2006: 92). (See Appendix VIII for a complete transcript of one interview.)

There are, no doubt, limits to this study’s methodological procedures outlined in this chapter. Nevertheless, the combination of the two methods and their rigorous application offered the best means of answering this work’s research questions. While this study is small-scale in nature, its CA’s findings are statistically significant. As well, the interview data rounds out the statistical information gained from the CA, shedding light – I am confident – on why journalists challenged elite sponsored frames.

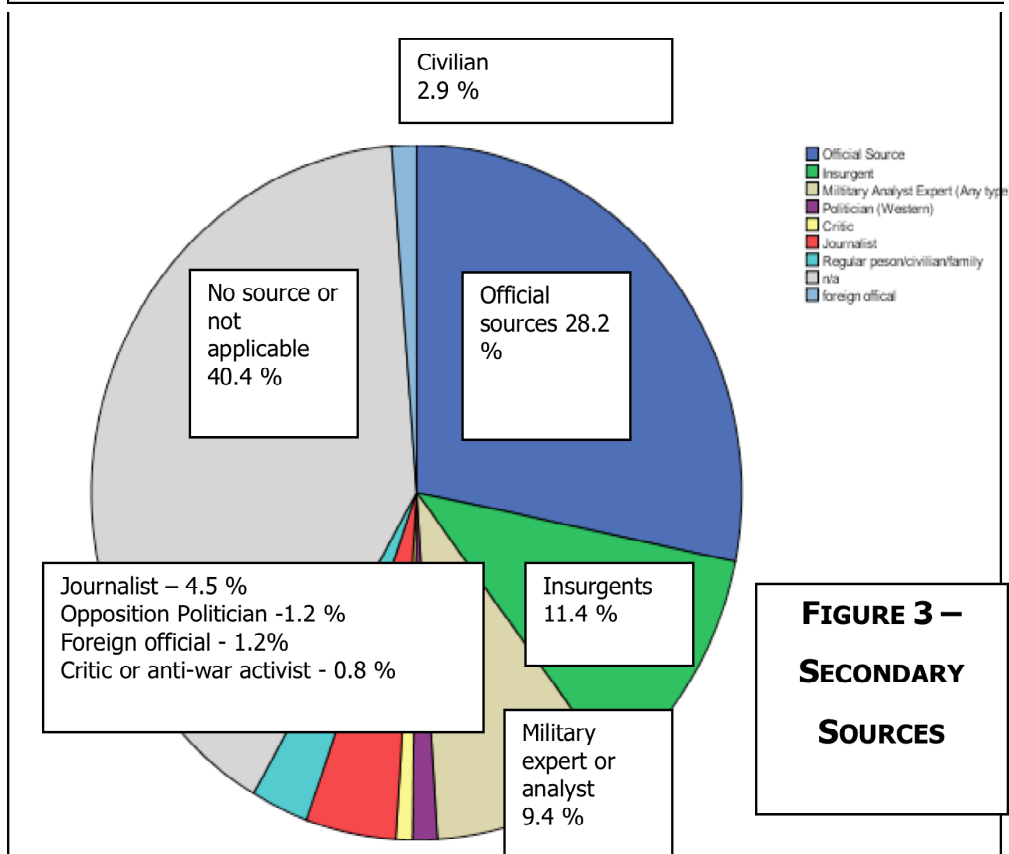
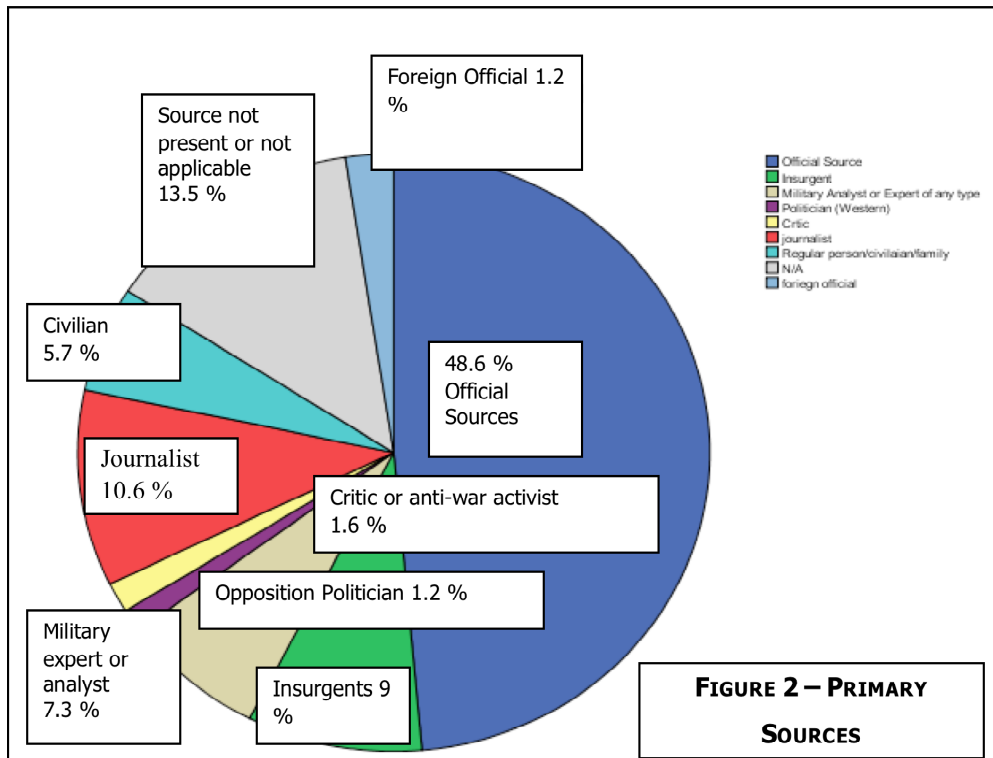
6. Findings: “Resisting” the Powerful Frame

This chapter breaks up this study’s findings in two sections. The data from the content analysis is presented first. After outlining this work’s empirical data, an overview of its qualitative findings is summarized. Key elements from the interviews are woven into the discussion. Specific attention will focus on framing and indexing. The coding reveals that journalists largely indexed their stories to government and military officials. The sponsored – or preferred – frames of elites were detected in nearly two-thirds of the stories. Despite the heavy reliance on official sources, however, 68 per cent of the samples possessing a military or government sponsored frame, also contain a challenge to that frame in the samples, suggesting elite sponsored frames were resisted. The general trends emerging from the thematic analysis are presented in the discussion with the aim of better illustrating the so-called *whys* of journalistic production.

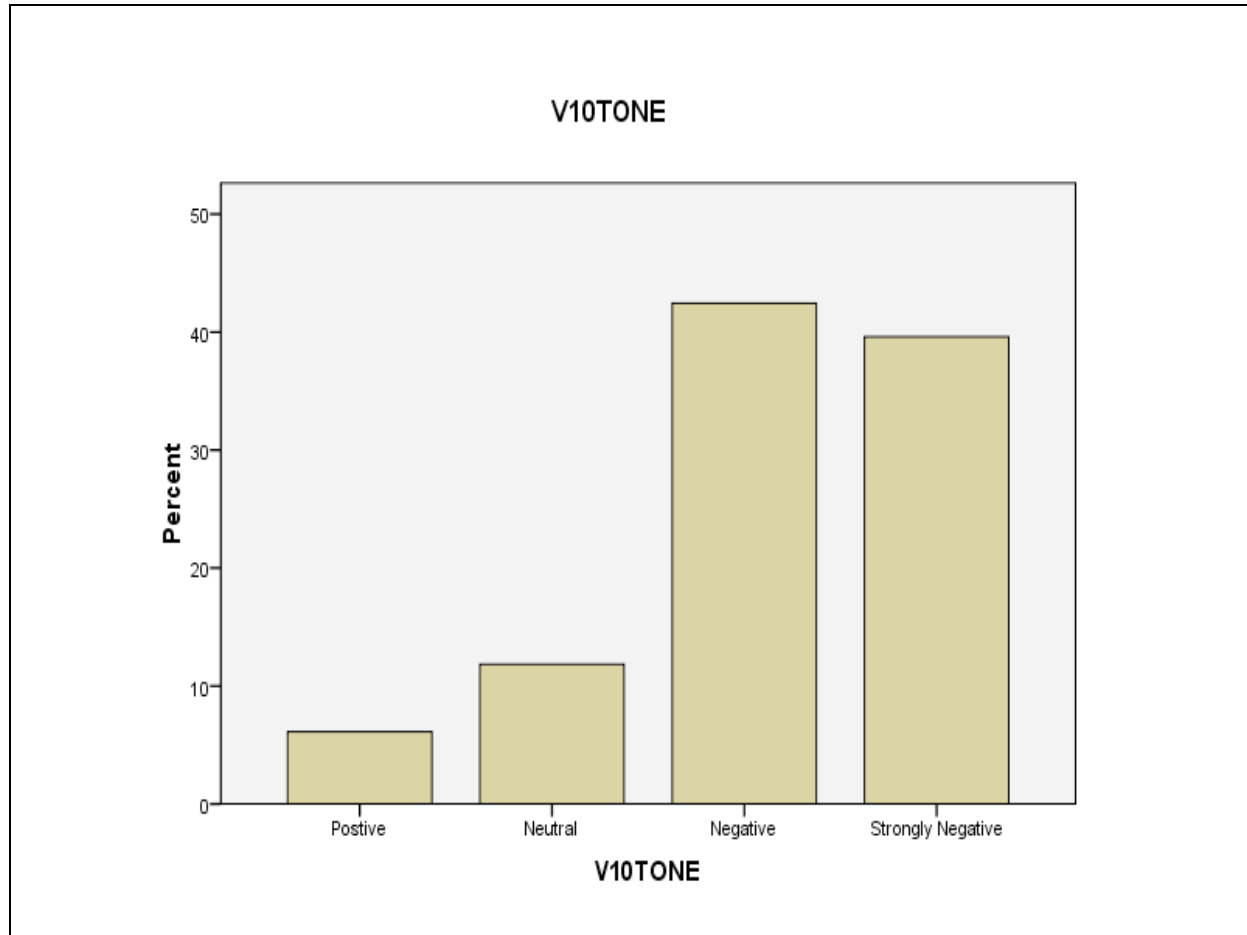
Content Analysis

Military or government officials comprised nearly half (48.6 per cent) of the primary sources in the samples (see Figure 2). Journalists are the main source in 10.6 per cent of the material coded. Often, in these samples, journalists reported live from Afghanistan about breaking news such as the deaths of soldiers or suicide attacks. Military analysts or experts were identified as the primary source in 7.3 per cent of the samples. Civilians, critics/anti-war activists and opposition politicians (combined) comprised 8.5 per of primary sources in the coded samples.

Opposition politicians, anti-war activists and civilians are quoted less frequently than officials. Yet, there is a strong association (Chi-Square p-value < 0.00)⁵ between their inclusion in a sample and the sample containing a critique of the military mission. More than 40 per cent of the samples did not include a secondary source (see Figure 3). When samples did contain a secondary source, official sources – government or military – again comprised the largest percentage at 28.6 per cent. Purported spokespersons for the insurgents were often quoted as a rebuttal to military officials, comprising 11.4 per cent of all secondary sources.



⁵ See Appendix IX for a complete list of this research's cross tabulation tables.



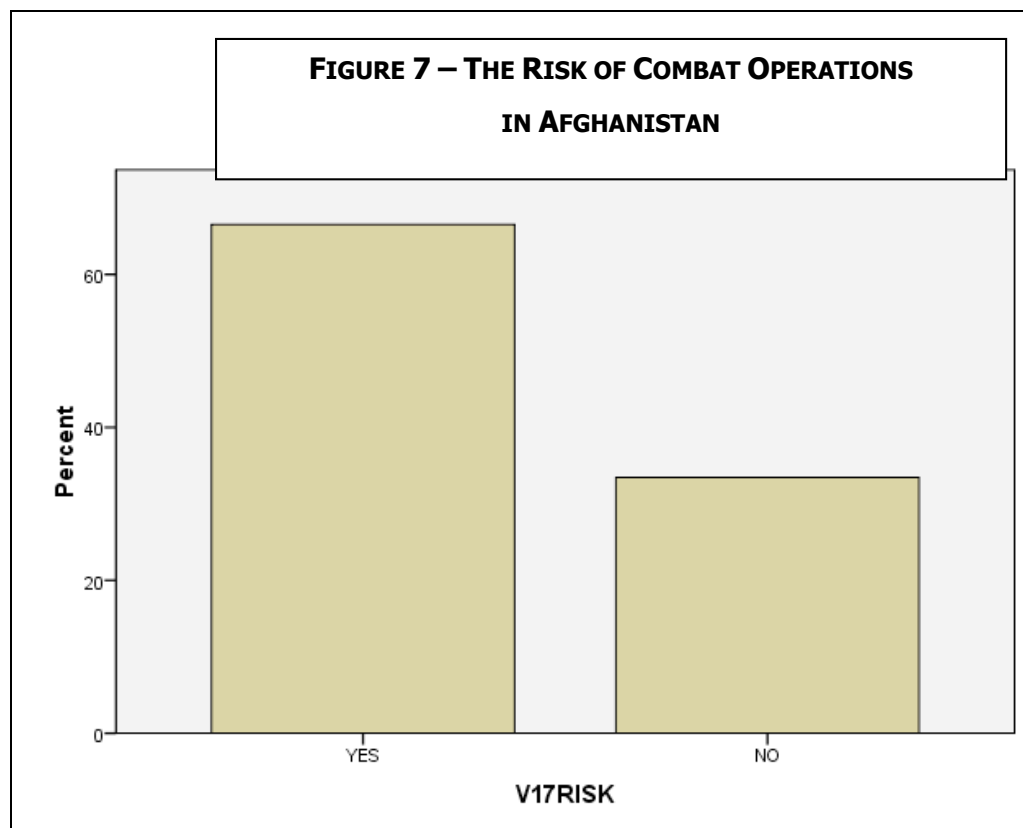
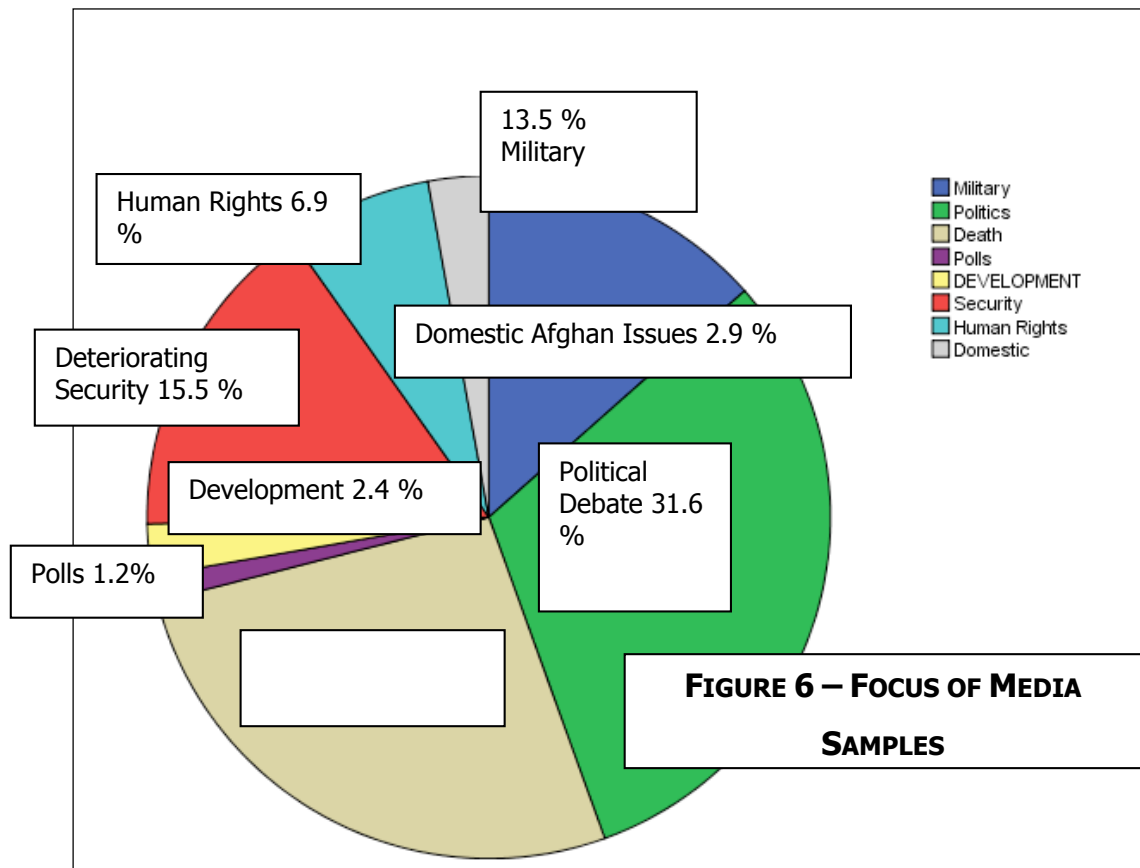
The vast majority of the samples coded were either negative (42.4 per cent) or strongly negative (39.6 per cent), whereby they focused, for instance, on the death of soldiers or the increasing volatility of Afghanistan (see Figure 4 above). Conversely, only 11.8 per cent of the media content was found to be neutral and only 6.1 per cent was assessed as positive.

A cross tabulation (Chi-Square p -value < 0.015) found an association between time and tone (see Figure 5). The tone of the news coverage was more negative in the first 18 months of the military mission than in the last half. Sample 195 published in *The Globe and Mail* a month after combat operations officially began in 2006, for instance, opines that Canada's military mission would produce few results and was fuelled by "national self-delusion of the kind that morally superior Canadians are especially prey" (Simpson 2006: A15). Similarly, sample 9, published nine months later, contends Canadian officials turned a blind eye to evidence suggesting prisoners of war faced "extra judicial executions, disappearances, torture and detention without trial" (Koring 2007: A1).

FIGURE 5 - V3 – TONE – Cross tabulation							
Count							
		V10TONE					
		Positive	Neutral	Negative	Strongly Negative	Cannot Determine	Total
V3 PERIOD	FIRST 9 MONTHS	1	10	35	22	1	69
	SECOND 9 MONTHS	4	4	20	36	0	64
	THIRD 9 MONTHS	6	11	24	14	0	55
	FOURTH 9 MONTHS	4	4	25	24	0	57
	Total	15	29	104	96	1	245

Nearly a third of the news, opinion and current affairs content (31.6 per cent) focused on political matters such as parliamentary debates about deadlines or pulling Canadian forces out of Afghanistan (see Figure 6). More than a quarter (26.5 per cent) of samples concentrate on the death and injuries of soldiers. Deteriorating security came third, comprising 15.5 per cent of the coded material's central theme, followed by a focus on military matters at 13.5 per cent. Nearly seven per cent (6.9 per cent) of the media content involved human rights issues such as prisoner treatment and detainee rights.

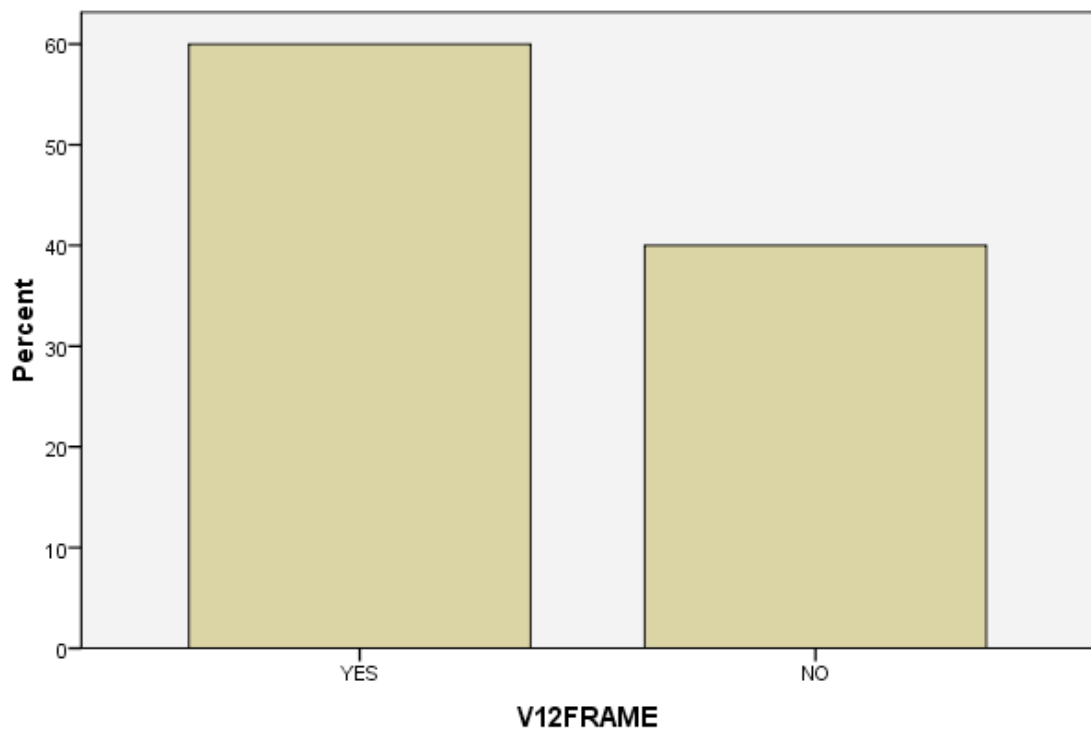
It is also worth noting that two-thirds of the samples coded (66 per cent) stress the risk associated with the combat mission (see Figure 7). Similarly, 55 per cent of the coded material highlights the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, often noting the increase in terrorist tactics by insurgents. Sample 82, for example, stresses that violent attacks, for instance, are up 15 per cent over the previous year and that the insurgency appears to be gaining strength (Smith 2008: A1).



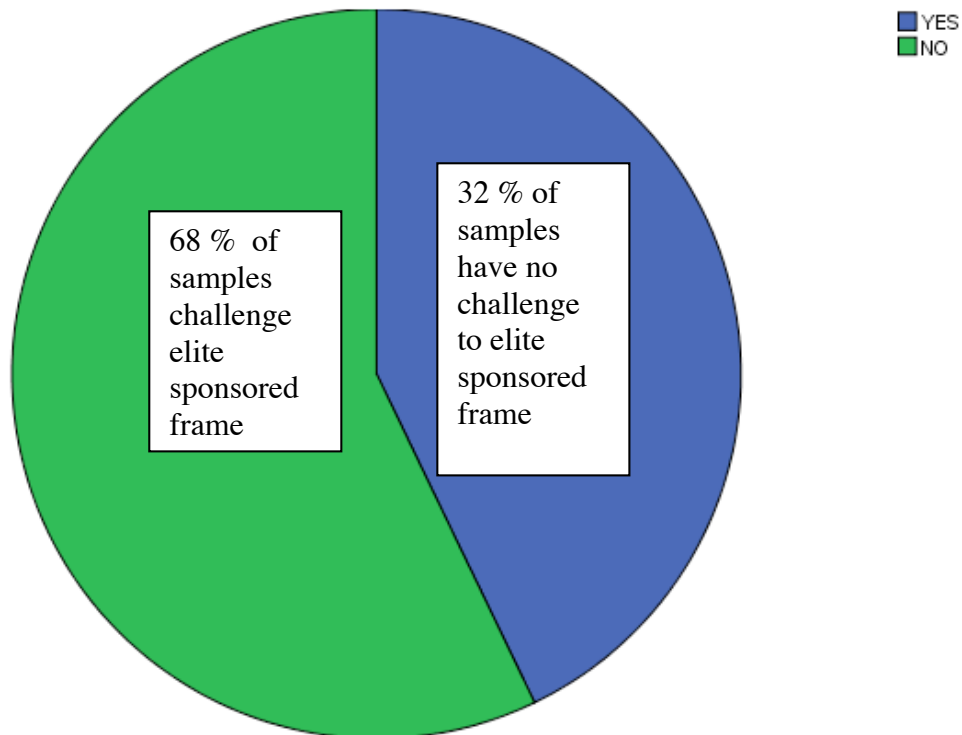
Sixty-six per cent of all the media samples also noted or stressed the risk associated with Canada's military mission in Afghanistan. The source of information about risk is strongly associated (Chi-Square p-value < 0.00) with the journalist or author of the sample (see Figure 8). That is, reporters were predominantly the source of information highlighting the volatility of Canada's combat operations in the Kandahar region. Instead of quoting opposition politicians, experts or critics of the mission, reporters tended to include what this research calls "reality checks", whereby information about Afghanistan's deteriorating security, appear alongside official media messages and sponsored frame(s). Sample 13, for example, characterizes Canada's defence minister as being optimistic about stemming the resurgent insurgency. However, the news story, citing no sources, also stresses the rise of suicide attacks and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).

FIGURE – 8 – V17 RISK – RISK SOURCE Cross tabulation										
Count										
		V18RISKSOURCE								
		Author/ Journalist	Government/ Military Official	Expert Academic Critic	Opposition Politician	Foreign Official	Civilian	Non- Governmenta l Organization	N/A	Total
V17RI SK	YES	103	22	19	7	1	3	7	0	162
	NO	1	0	0	0	0	0	78	1	80
	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	2
	8	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Total	104	23	19	8	1	3	86	1	245

Sixty per cent of the media content contained or adopted one of the government or military leadership's sponsored frames about combat operations such as "making Afghanistan safer" or part of the "war on terror" (See Figure 9).

FIGURE 9 – ELITE SPONSORED FRAME PRESENT IN SAMPLE

In contrast to previous content analysis of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and what indexing theory suggests about elite influence on framing, 68 per cent of samples that contained government or military sponsored frame(s) also included a challenge to the frame (see Figure 10). Samples that contain a challenge to the elite frame are strongly associated (Chi-Square $p\text{-value} < 0.00$) with its source. Journalists again sponsored 59 per cent of the challenges to the preferred frame(s) of government or military leaders, followed by experts at 17 per cent and opposition politicians at 18 per cent. The focus of these critiques range from the handling of the mission (43 per cent) to a combination (38.5 per cent) of the handling of the mission and the decision to begin combat operations.

FIGURE 10 – CHALLENGE TO ELITE SPONSORED FRAME

Qualitative Interview Data

While this study's CA quantified journalistic production, qualitative interviews attempt to explain this work's second group of research questions. That is, why – if at all – did journalists contest the government's frame? Plus, what role – if any – did this mediated debate shape public opinion and how might have public opinion influenced the framing process?

Patterns were obvious in the interview data (Braun and Clarke 2006). All of the interviewees criticized the military and government's framing efforts, often arguing that they were weak or ineffective. Similar to the criticism leveled against the Harper Government by the **Independent Panel** on Canada's **Future** Role in **Afghanistan**, all of the interviewees pointed to flaws in the government and military's communication strategy, ranging from not being frank with Canadians to capriciously trying to manipulate the public debate. As well, all of the interviewees contended the acrimonious relationship between the news media and the Harper Government factored into the contested dynamic of framing Afghanistan. The

interviews revealed a range of opinion about the motivation of journalists with respect to framing and public opinion. The quotes included in this paper's discussion were selected because they descriptively reflect the key themes identified during the thematic analysis of the qualitative interview data.

7. Discussion and Qualitative Interview Results

Indexing and Framing

Similar to U.S. studies (Bennett *et al.* 2006; Entmam 1991,1993, 2003, 2005; Hallin 1986, 1994), Canadian journalists largely indexed their stories about Afghanistan to elite and official sources. Bennett (1990: 25) concluded this journalistic propensity to privilege elite sources ascribes immense power to shape and even "define" the dominant discourse. Similarly, Hallin's (1986) analysis of the Vietnam War found the U.S. new media's coverage largely echoed and amplified elite debate and that elites tried to use the media to shape their preferred hegemonic "common sense" about the war. The Canadian context is likely further compounded by the proclivity of journalists to be embedded with Canadian forces. The source of much derision, embedding is criticized for blurring the lines between journalism and propaganda, losing "all distinction between warrior and correspondent" (Keeble 2004: 50). Often one sided and even jingoistic, news media are accused of "myopia", tending to cover war from the "point of view" of their country, relying on official sources or military "experts" to interpret the conflict (Allan and Zelizer 2004: 29-30). Journalist Sally Armstrong observes that indexing was likely more pronounced in the Canadian media's coverage of the Afghan mission because so many journalists covered the war as embedded reporters.

...ever since Hannibal came over the mountains, the Generals have wanted to control the message. So, I think there is an element of talking more to Generals and politicians than talking to the people, and I am aware that it is more difficult to talk to the people when you are confined to the [Kandahar Airfield] Base, but I think there is a tremendous absence of talking to enough people... The people that I talk to, who are the women,... have a very, very, very different story to tell. (Interview with Sally Armstrong, May 26, 2009.)

To be sure, the military's stated public affairs strategy aims to promote a positive image (Canada. Department of National Defense 2008: 1). Journalist Brian Stewart observes Defense officials shrewdly and sophisticatedly set about trying to "manipulate" news coverage.

I don't say that in a harsh judgmental sense because I think that's what they're probably supposed to do if they're in the public affairs unit. But it was a very, very clever strategy.... It became a populous campaign almost, which was played to the hilt... And I think a lot of the media were scrambling to do exactly what [the Chief of Defense Staff] wanted them to do which was all the stories they could find on Joe Average Privates and many junior soldiers who the officers were convinced gave much better interviews.... All again part of a very well thought out strategy that was talked about, discussed, organized back in Defense Headquarters in Ottawa, on a daily basis. (Interview with Brian Stewart, June 4, 2009.)

Despite the prominence of official sources in the news media, a significant amount of the coverage can be classified as negative, focusing on military deaths or injuries, Afghanistan's deteriorating security and contentious political questions such as withdrawing Canadian forces. Moreover, 68 per cent of the stories that contain an elite sponsored frame also include a challenge to that frame. Indexing theory holds that "elite discord" predicates the challenge of powerful frames (Entman 2003: 415). Canada's minority parliament is split over the question of Afghanistan. The Quebec nationalist party, the Bloc Quebecois, and left-leaning New Democrats want to pull Canadian forces out of Afghanistan immediately. Controversial parliamentary motions extending the mission have largely been brokered political arrangements between the ruling Conservatives and the official opposition Liberal Party (BBC News 2008: 1). While it was a Liberal government in 2005 that initially committed Canadian troops to Kandahar, the party is now largely divided over the issue (Radio Nederlands 2008: 1).

This dynamic illustrates well Gramsci's sense of hegemony with elites battling for supremacy to construct a "common sense". As well, since no party has a majority, journalists are more likely to accord more prominence to opposition politicians and their criticism of the military mission. As this study's CA shows, critics of the military mission (opposition politicians, anti-war activists, experts) were quoted as primary source 8.5 per cent of the time. While not as significant as official sources, their counter arguments – or counter frame(s) – were present in the public debate, giving journalists, in a sense, permission to echo and amplify their criticism about the mission.

As well, Entman's "cascading activation" model predicts legislators are "vocal" or "silent" often based on public mood. Canadian opposition politicians and other elites were, arguably, emboldened to speak critically about combat operations and its efficacy given public opinion polls suggesting Canadians were divided about the military mission in Afghanistan. Schlesinger – building on Bourdieu's thinking about "doxa" argues that elite domination is not inevitable (McCullagh 2002). "When issues are not part of the doxa there can be

contests over whose frames will shape media coverage” (Schlesinger in McCullagh 2002: 42). Essentially, if elites are in disagreement, there can be moments of counter-hegemonic discourse represented in media.

By 2006, the Bush Administration’s framing power of the “war on terror” had deteriorated significantly (Cziesche 2008). Arguably, the violent insurgency in Iraq and the failure to find weapons of mass destruction or (WMD) largely discredited the resonance and effectiveness of the “war on terror” narrative. After “largely privilege[ing]” the Bush Administration’s framing of the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. media became increasingly critical and questioning (Kellner in Munishi 2004: 51). This increasingly aggressive reporting, arguably, spilled over into Canada and the coverage of Canadian combat operations in Afghanistan. Journalists are by nature critical, offers Brian Stewart, suggesting reporters became increasingly pointed after the invasion of Iraq.

As... the calamity in Iraq became more and more evident, the media was more inclined all the time to start questioning the whole war on terror... I think a fair bit of cynicism existed about the effect that would have... you know the connection between soldiers in the distant south west province of Afghanistan being involved in the “war on terror” and somehow protecting Canada from that point. (Interview with Brian Stewart, June 4, 2009.)

In addition, Entman’s thinking suggests journalists possess a strong motivation to include oppositional readings in foreign policy stories. Hallin also posits that the media has increasingly challenge U.S. foreign policy, albeit in a narrow ideological band since the 1970s (Hallin 1987 in McCullagh 2002). While journalist Brian Stewart suggests the news coverage was initially positive – even glowing – about the Canadian military and its combat operations because so many journalists were embedded, that changed:

“...it’s incredibly easy to get trapped within the military... because [journalists] find themselves surrounded by extremely likable young soldiers who are witty, fun to hang around with, and you can see their point of view, you’d rather they survive the war and not get themselves blown up, by these characters up in the hill. So it’s very easy to take on a kind of, we’re all in this together at first, a rah-rah attitude. I think that settles down after you know a couple of weeks sitting around with the incredible boredom of Kandahar and realizing good God how many stories like this are we going to do...” (Interview with Brian Stewart, June 4, 2009.)

This challenge in the news coverage may have also been fuelled by the, arguably, acrimonious relations between the Harper Government and the news media (Wilson 2006). Entman contends that politicians need to carefully manage their relationship with the media and other elites in order to have its preferred frame(s) adopted (Entman 2004). In a similar way, Habermas’s pragmatics of human communications suggests all communication (no

mater how asymmetrical) is “essentially derived from the basic form of dialogue and must be seen as relationships between active human subjects” (Habermas in Hallin 1994: 20). To that end, journalists walk a delicate balance of appealing to sources for information but not wishing to appear to be co-opted (Hallin 1994: 20). “They must maintain the integrity of their relationship with their audience,” writes Hallin, “and also the integrity of their own self image and of the social relationships that make up the profession of journalism. Maintaining these relationships requires a certain minimum of honesty” (Hallin 1994: 32). This relationship is likely more difficult when relations between the media and officials are conflictual. Arthur Kent – who has reported from Afghanistan for three decades – suggest the tense relationship between the government and the media played a role in shaping the media coverage.

The Harper team’s clutch, or coven, of advisors and un-elected spin doctors that control the Prime Minister’s Office have practiced a kind of information control that is not only alien to good government in Canada, but also militates against any kind of relationship with the news media. And ultimately this has damaged the Harper government’s relationship with the Canadian public. It’s one of the reasons that he is profoundly unloved. With regard to the mission, not surprising lots of many Canadian journalists understood that we have got to get away from this government’s narrative. We have got to do critical reporting because we know that there is tension between [Chief of Defence Staff] General Hillier and Stephen Harper. We know that there is tension between [Defence Minister] Peter MacKay and Stephen Harper. (Interview with Arthur Kent, May 29, 2009.)

Despite the advantage elites possess to frame news coverage, according to indexing theory, 68 per cent of the stories that contained the military and government’s sponsored frames also contained challenges to those frames. For the most part, scholarly analysis suggests journalists are viewed as gatekeepers instead of sources of opposition with scant recognition “that journalists might be making independent contributions to critical policy discourse” (Althaus 2003: 385). As made apparent, however, by this study’s CA, journalists (Chi-Square p -value < 0.00) are strongly associated with the source of the challenges to elite media messages concerning Afghanistan. The form of these *oppositional readings* most often involved, for instance, including “reality checks” about Afghanistan’s deteriorating security when military or government leaders’ advanced so-called “talking points” about “making Afghanistan safer”. Graeme Smith – who covers the conflict in Afghanistan for *The Globe and Mail* – recalls his response to a briefing by a senior military official who claimed the level of violence had not increased significantly since Canadian forces arrived in Afghanistan.

“I called them liars and I did it to their faces and they didn’t like that very much.... that was just patently false we had statistics that showed that that was false and we also had reams of anecdotes showing that this is wrong and we wrote a big story on the front of The Globe and Mail calling [them] liars. (Interview with Graeme Smith, July 7, 2009)

Jackson stresses the powerful “war on terror” discourse “is vulnerable and full of instabilities... contradictions, moral hypocrisies, deliberate deceptions, fabrications and misconceptions” (2005: 188). Moreover, frames couched in fear are apt to backfire (Hammond 2007). As a result, alternatives to the dominant frame are possible.

We are never, after all, for long the subjects of single discourse, even if we accept a strong version of individual subjection. Choices have constantly to be made between competing versions of reality. This is especially likely to be true in a media and information-rich age, where access to the Internet adds considerably to the diversity of accessible perspectives. (Macdonald 2003: 24)

In order for frames to resonate – or have power – they must produce results or be seen to be competent (Brown 2003). Corman *et al.* (2006), for instance, contend the U.S. lost credibility and its ability to dominate news coverage in the wake of what they called the failed Bush “war on terror” frame. Journalist and media scholar Robert Bergen contends frames must match reality in order to be effective or retain their power. Similar to Smith, he recalls being briefed by a Canadian commander while in Afghanistan.

We were told point blank... that the Taliban was defeated, the insurgency was defeated. They could no longer work in large numbers. They couldn't mount an Op[eration] Medusa kind of [conventional combat] operation anymore.... I got back to Canada and two weeks later they blew up the Serena Hotel in Kabul, and maybe about a month or two later they blew up the Sarposa Prison and allowed members of the insurgency and just plain criminals to escape... So, there are some very, very bad mixed messages coming out of there when they try to spin it and tell us this is the way that it is, and then have something like those two incidents show us that's not the way it is. (Interview with Robert Bergen, July 23, 2009.)

Public Opinion

In addition to elites and journalists contesting frames, Entman’s “cascading activation” theory also incorporates public opinion in framing effect. The ability to shape and construct reality can influence how public opinion is formed (Tadlock *et al.* 2008: 196). “Mass media,” argues McQuail, “have a strong impact by constructing... [or] “framing images of reality... in a predicable and patterned way” (McQuail 1997 in Scheufele 1999: 105). A review of public opinion polls over the three years shows a steady decline in support for the military mission (Angus Reid Global Monitor 2009: 1). Arguably, as the “cascading activation” model accounts for, the public may have initially accepted the military and government’s sponsored frames – but increasingly rejected them as journalists increasingly contested elite frames that that did not mesh with reality. Determining the exact origin and cause of public opinion is well beyond the scope of this study, though. Still, the literature suggests media influences the public by “calling attention to some matters while ignoring others” (Iyengar and Kinder 1987: 63). As Entman (1993: 56) stresses “if the text frame emphasizes in a variety of mutually reinforcing ways that the glass is half full, the evidence of social science suggests

that relatively few in the audience will conclude it is half empty.” Brian Stewart argues it is not the returning dead soldiers that have turned many Canadians against Afghan military mission, but the “lack of progress.

By...[20]08 there was clear evidence that not only was there not a lot of progress on the ground, but if there was progress it was the Taliban that were making it. In fact many of the areas that we had seen as areas where we had progress we were in fact now having to defend a new. And we got into fiascos like the jailbreak, for instance.... those things all began to breed in the Canadian public a sense that geez, you know we have been told now year after year that we are making real substantial progress well how come [the insurgents] are almost inside Kandahar? And how come we are back having to take the same roads and the same orchids that we had to take before? (Interview with Brian Stewart, June 4, 2009.)

Research concurs with Stewart’s thinking, suggesting that the public has a high tolerance for casualties if people “believe the war was the right decision” and that progress is being made (Feaver *et al.* 2009: A13).

Conversely, Sally Armstrong argues progress is being made in Afghanistan, blaming the Harper government’s inability to articulate a clear purpose for the mission for eroding public support. Moreover, she stresses many positive elements, including improving health and welfare for women and children in Afghanistan, are often overshadowed and ignored by journalists because of the feckless communication strategy of the Harper government and the media’s propensity to gravitate towards negative stories.

"The protestors own the conversation. The media are mostly reporting on the failures. They are very rarely reporting on the successes. And there... are loads of successes. I mean, six million kids back in school and the reform of family law is going on and they will get... the [electricity] grid working again I'm sure by the end of this year. There are changes in Afghanistan. (Interview with Sally Armstrong, May 28, 2009.)

Zaller (1992: 311) offers that people “are blown about by whatever current of information manages to develop with greatest intensity.” Simply put, sometimes the loudest frames have the largest effect (Druckman and Chong 2007a: 113). As well, Zaller’s (1992) thinking does account for people rejecting schema that is incongruous with their past experience or reality. For many Canadians, the media representations of their military forces in Afghanistan have been, arguably, incongruous with the traditional view of the Canadian military. Research suggests many Canadians view their soldiers as merely “peacekeepers” and not warriors like Americans or British forces (Wagner 2007:45). “Canadians... have largely come to see their military,” writes Simpson, “as a civil force in two meanings of the word: Soldiers help the civil powers, as in mopping up during floods, and they act civilly while abroad as blue-helmeted [United Nations] peacekeepers” (Simpson 2006: A15).

“Mythologized” and “altruistic”, peacekeeping is wrapped up in the very ideals – and even identity – of many Canadians (Wagner 2007: 54). Keeping the peace is inherently viewed as “good” whilst other military endeavors are seen as “bad” (Wagner 2007: 54). While considered scholarship suggest this so-called “peacekeeping myth” has little historical validity (Maloney 2007), it, nevertheless, persists in the minds of many, informing, perhaps, their misunderstandings, contends Robert Bergen:

If that's the set of baggage, their intellectual background that they bring to the debate on Afghanistan, it is mistaken and it is wrong, but it is an unfortunate reality and it may well be resulting in the Harper government's inability to frame this conflict in a way that says we are doing something positive over there... (Interview with Robert Bergen, July 23, 2009.)

8. Conclusion

By combining both quantitative and qualitative research, this research assessed both how military and political elites tried to frame Canada’s military mission in Afghanistan and how journalists challenged those media messages. This research posed two sub groups of questions: (1) How has the Canadian news indexed and framed Canada’s military mission in Afghanistan – and how – if at all – did reporters resist those sponsored frames; and (2) Why – if at all – did journalists contest the government’s frame – and what role did that play in public opinion?

This study’s major findings include:

- The news media largely indexed its coverage of Canada’s military mission in Afghanistan to elite debate;
- Given Canada’s on-going minority parliament, mediated political discourse gave more prominence to opposition politicians or other critics of Canada’s combat efforts in Kandahar;
- The news media’s coverage of Afghanistan has been consistently negative, focusing on death, injuries, corruption, human rights abuses, the deteriorating security in Afghanistan and domestic political squabbles over deadlines;
- Attempts by government and military leaders to frame combat operations in moral tones largely failed because the mission did not produce results in line with their media messages or rhetoric;
- This “failed framing” may be attributable to the Harper government’s acrimonious relationship with the news media;

- Canadian journalists felt a strong professional obligation to challenge military and government sponsored frames;
- Attempts to link Canada's military with the Bush "war on terror" frame largely failed because that frame was largely discredited by 2006;
- Canadian conceptions of its military as peacekeepers (the so-called "peacekeeping myth") may be incongruous with the elite (government and military) sponsored frame(s) of combat efforts in Afghanistan; and
- Public opinion may – or may not – have been shaped by this contested dynamic over media framing.

This work raises more questions than answers, both methodologically and theoretically. Further research may be able to better define the factors shaping public opinion. Ideally, focus groups or surveys with the public before, during and after the mission may have been able to better appreciate how Canadians reacted to the mediated discourse about Afghanistan. No doubt, some of the questioning should focus on public attitudes towards peacekeeping and how that influenced attitudes towards current combat operations in southern Afghanistan.

As already noted, framing represents an important power dynamic in the media/political nexus. It is thus crucial to fully understand "the complex ways power informs frames sponsorship" and its effect on audiences (Carragee and Roefs 2004: 228). To that end, framing research may wish to focus on long-term exposure to media frames and the magnitude of effect (Druckman and Chong 2007a). As well, ethnography, akin to Tuchman's work in the 1960s and 1970s, that investigates how frames are adopted by journalists and news rooms would surely add to our understanding of the journalist role in frame sponsorship and adoption – and its potential ramifications for mediated democracy (Carragee and Roefs 2004: 228).

There are also theoretical implications stemming from this work. Indexing theory suggests elites have considerable power to frame stories given journalists' propensity to privilege "credible" sources. But, as this study's findings make clear, even though Canadian journalists largely indexed their coverage to elite debate, they often resisted the military and government leadership's sponsored frame. Indexing theory does hold that elite discord is a prerequisite to influential frames being challenged. Yet, what level of disagreement is necessary to prompt challenges to powerful frames? As well, can public opinion become a

substitute for elite discord? That is, if elites are largely unified and public opinion is in opposition to the elite consensus, what affect does that have on journalists resisting or accepting elite sponsored frames?

Persistently attacked (Curran 2006; Blumler and Gurevitch 1996; Donahue, *et al.* 1995) for not living up to its normative conception as a “watchdog”, this study, however, suggests that the Canadian news media did act in the Burckian conception of a “fourth estate” checking and challenging the assertions of government and military elites. Despite the Canadian news media’s propensity to index its coverage to mostly government or military leaders, much of the coverage did challenge the military and government’s sponsored frame(s) in contrast to so much of the U.S. media in the aftermath of 9/11. The power of the Bush frame silenced democratic debate and allowed the U.S. administration to launch an invasion of Iraq on false pretences (Kern *et al.* 2003; Denton 2002; Nacos 2002 Norris *et al.* 2003). *The Globe and Mail*, as singled out in this discussion, in fact, received Canada’s highest journalism award for meritorious public service for its reporting on the treatment of Afghan detainees in 2008. The newspaper’s coverage asked tough questions during a time of war, forcing the government to re-think its policy on prisoners (Michener Awards Foundation 2008). As Hacket puts so well, the news media “is not a level playing field, but sometimes it is possible, even playing uphill, to score points, to win a match, and perhaps occasionally even to refine the rules of the game” (Hacket 1991 in (McCullagh 2002: 64).

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