Are we expecting too much from print media? An analysis of newspaper coverage of the 2002 Canadian healthcare reform debate

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Abstract

News media effects on their audiences are complex. Four commonly cited effects are: informing audiences; agenda-setting; framing; and persuading. The release in autumn 2002 of two reports on options for reforming Canada’s healthcare system attracted widespread media attention. We explored the potential for each of the four media effects by examining Canadian newspaper representation of this healthcare policy debate.

Clippings were gathered from regional and national newspapers. Two data collection methodologies were employed: the first involved two staggered “constructed weeks” designed to capture thematic news framing styles; the second collected “intensive” or episodic coverage immediately following the report releases. Health reform articles with a financing and/or delivery focus were included. Using a codebook, articles were coded to track article characteristics, tone, healthcare sector and reform themes, and key actors.

A greater quantity of episodic (n = 341 clippings) versus thematic coverage (n = 77) was documented. Coverage type did not vary significantly by newspaper, reporting source (e.g., staff reporter versus staff editorialist) or article type (e.g., news versus letter). Thematic articles were significantly shorter in length compared to episodic clippings. Episodic coverage tended to have a positive tone, while thematic coverage ranged in tone. Most coverage was general in scope. Sector-specific coverage favoured physician and hospital care—the two providers accorded privileged financing arrangements under Canada’s universal, provincially administered health-insurance plans. Coverage of healthcare financing arrangements favoured broad discussions of publicly financed healthcare, federal–provincial governmental relations, and the Canada Health Act that governs provincial plans. Governmental actors and the political institutions that they represent were the dominant actors. Professional associations were also visible, but played a less dominant role.

Given its non-specific scope, it is unclear how informative this coverage was. The large quantity and short duration of the episodic coverage, and the preponderance of governmental actors, suggests these newspapers acted as conduits for the policy agenda. Differences in framing styles were observed by coverage type, newspaper, reporting source, article length and type of article. Finally, the dominance of governmental actors provided these actors with numerous opportunities to persuade the public.

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Introduction

Mass media are the nexus between public and policy agendas. As major information sources about policy initiatives, mass media can shape public opinion and expectations about policies that, in turn, influence policy development processes. Despite these integral links, attention has only recently been paid to studying their interactions (Soroka, 2002). Three bodies of literature are relevant to the study of media roles in policy processes: political communications scholarship and its study of mass media effects on issue salience and public opinion (Cohen, 1963; Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1983; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; McGuire, 1986; McCombs & Shaw, 1972); political science research that has documented the roles played by media in shaping how issues come to the attention of policy makers (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Cobb & Elder, 1972; Kingdon, 1995); and a smaller literature that has focused on how media agendas, themselves, are constructed (Gonzenbach, 1996).

While the diverse effects of news media have been documented in theoretical literature (Iyengar, 1997, Chap. 26), few studies have simultaneously explored the potential for multiple media effects in the health policy context. The purpose of this study was to explore the potential for a range of commonly cited media effects to shape public opinion, through an empirical study of newspaper coverage of recent Canadian healthcare reform debates. These debates have centred on how governments should respond to growing concerns among Canadians that their healthcare system is failing to deliver timely access to high-quality care, and to pressures for increased private financing and for-profit delivery to sustain the healthcare system (Abelson et al., 2004; Kirby & LeBreton, 2002; Romanow, 2002).

A framework for news media effects

Four media effects have received considerable attention by political science and communications scholars (Iyengar, 1997).

(1) News media as informers

News media are major sources of information about public policy issues. Policy-engaged citizens draw on these sources with the assumption that they “will become more informed about the issues and events of the day” than had they not consumed such media (Iyengar, 1997, p. 212). The accuracy of this assumption, however, is contingent upon the quality of news media presentations, and the manner in which media consumers decode their associated messages (Hall, 1980). While it is impossible to control how consumers receive media messages, media producers have some control over presentation quality.

A major threat to news quality is the growing trend towards tabloidization (Iyengar, 1997). Newspaper editors and reporters increasingly confront the tension between delivering balanced, accurate reporting of daily events and pressure to generate sellable products (Seale, 2003). Another threat to news media quality is the self-admitted limitations of specialist journalists in reporting on science or health issues, particularly when statistics are involved (Voss, 2002). Although they have had some training in the fields they report on, “specialist journalists are journalists first and specialists second, and their instinct is to go for drama” (Day, 1997, p. 65).

The medical community is particularly sensitive to news quality threats, given the public’s heavy reliance on news media for information regarding new advances in drugs, therapies, and medical technologies (Benelli, 2003; Day, 1997; Schwartz & Woloshin, 2004). These sensitivities appear well-founded given emerging evidence that news coverage of medical treatments often overemphasizes positive data, while ignoring risks associated with treatments and potential conflicts of interest with industry-supported research (Cassels et al., 2003; Moynihan et al., 2000; Woloshin & Schwartz, 2002).

(2) News media as agenda-setters

One of the most commonly cited influences exerted by news media is agenda-setting: media’s ability to raise the salience of novel or existing issues, and the corresponding level of importance the public assigns to these issues (Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Otten, 1992). Empirical studies have demonstrated that the level of importance assigned to an issue—the public agenda—is proportional to the amount of attention paid by the media (the media agenda), suggesting a dose–response relationship (Funkhouser, 1973; Glynn, Herbst, O’Keefe, & Shapiro, 1999, Chap. 11; Shoemaker, 1989).

The public does not assign consistently high levels of importance to an issue. Rather, agenda-setting processes are dynamic. For example, Downs (1972, p. 38) describes an issue-attention cycle: an issue is suddenly presented in the media over a short period of time, the public correspondingly pays attention,
sometimes demanding government action, until the issue “fades from the center of public opinion”. Similarly, there is a maximum level of importance the public assigns to issues. A minimum threshold of coverage must be reached to push an issue onto the public agenda, and a maximum threshold of coverage can be reached after which increased coverage will not lead to higher levels of public concern (Neuman, 1990).

Not all issues presented in the media have the same impact on public agenda-setting. Soroka (2002) identifies four issue attributes that mediate the intensity of agenda-setting effects. An issue likely has stronger agenda-setting effects if it: is unobtrusive (i.e., affects a minority of the population); has generated intense coverage over a short period of time; is concrete rather than abstract; and is dramatic (Soroka, 2002). Governmental issues, such as national debt, national unity, and taxation, are considered to be unobtrusive as they “do not directly and observably affect the majority of individuals” (p. 21). These issues are identified as important by policy makers who formulate the policy agenda, which then informs the media agenda, and in turn the public agenda. “[T]he media act primarily as a conduit for government-led issue cues” (p. 22). In this study, Canadian healthcare reform is a concrete, governmental (and unobtrusive) issue, where public reliance on media for information is high (Soroka, 2002).

(3) News media as framers

While informing and agenda-setting effects are mediated by quality and quantity of news coverage, framing is mediated by how issues are presented in the news; “framing is the subtle selection of certain aspects of an issue by the media to make them more important and thus to emphasize a particular cause of some phenomenon” (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 64). Iyengar (1997) differentiates between two types of news framing. Episodic news framing “depicts issues in terms of specific instances”, typically generating large amounts of coverage over short timeframes, while thematic news framing, resembling continual coverage of an issue, “depicts political issues more broadly and abstractly by placing them in some appropriate context” (p. 214). Episodic framing often “shields public officials and institutions from responsibility”, and thereby perpetuates the status quo (p. 214).

Understanding the distinction between episodic and thematic reporting styles is important because these framing styles lead to different attributions of responsibility by their audiences. Episodic framing promotes individualistic attributions of responsibility that support the establishment (i.e., governing political parties and the powerful interest groups that support those parties), while thematic framing promotes societal attributions of responsibility that challenge the status quo (Iyengar, 1991). While Iyengar’s (1991) empirical work on framing effects has concentrated on television news reports, it is reasonable to expect newspaper coverage to exhibit similar framing effects, with perhaps a greater proportion of thematic framing given their practices of publishing more in-depth analyses (e.g., editorials, op-ed pieces, columns).

(4) News media as persuaders

The fourth effect is the ability of news media to persuade the public regarding the issues they present (Iyengar, 1997). Persuasion encompasses three factors: (1) the message (i.e., what is represented in media), (2) the source (i.e., which actors are represented in media); and (3) the audience (i.e., the persuadability of media consumers) (Iyengar, 1997). Explorations of persuasion effects in news media tend to be analyses of “who says what to whom” (p. 215).

Representation of policy actors in news media is necessary for the public to become informed about policy issues. Media can, however, be passive and complacent actors in policy processes, acting “merely as a conveyor belt for interest groups seeking government action” (Otten, 1992, p. 111). The power wielded by elites in society has fuelled charges that the press is just an arm of these elites and their interests (Seale, 2003). Elite influence over media content has been demonstrated in empirical analyses of the US health insurance industry’s ad campaigns launched in opposition to the Clinton administration’s healthcare reform proposals (Brodie, 2001; Goldsteen, Goldsteen, Swan, & Clemena, 2001). Beyond simply representing interest groups, news media can also facilitate arguments between elites (Arvai & Mascarenhas, 2001). While some scholars argue that media are destined for mediator roles (Jacobs, 2001), others have expressed concern that news media are no longer interested in engaging the general public in policy debates (Schudson, 2002).

Study context and purpose

Governance arrangements for Canada’s healthcare system include a dominant role (in financing
and delivery) for provincial governments, and partial financier and standards enforcer roles for the federal government. Hospital and physician care are 100% publicly financed for all citizens (i.e., there is no cost-sharing) whereas prescription drugs, home care and high-tech care are financed through a mix of public and private mechanisms. Health system delivery arrangements are primarily private, not-for-profit with single-tiered access; however, the current debate over the healthcare system’s sustainability has been marked by some calls for for-profit delivery. As in many other countries, the issue of healthcare reform has been at the top of the Canadian political agenda for over a decade. Shifts in healthcare delivery patterns, government spending cuts and highly publicized disputes between federal and provincial governments have fuelled public concerns that Canada’s healthcare system requires fundamental change (Abelson et al., 2004).

A series of national and provincial health reform commissions have been established to respond to these concerns. In the autumn of 2002, two major Canadian healthcare reform reports were released: the Final Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology (“Kirby report”, released October 25th) (Kirby & LeBreton, 2002), and the Report of the Commission on the Future of Healthcare in Canada (“Romanow report”, released November 28th) (Romanow, 2002). In the months leading up to the release of these reports, substantial media attention was devoted to healthcare reform, and financing issues in particular, which dominated the work of these national commissions.

Our exploratory analysis examines, through content analysis of newspaper coverage during the periods leading up to and following the release of these reports, Canadian newspapers’ representation of this major healthcare reform issue and associated debates. Iyengar’s (1997) framework of potential media effects guides our examination. All four potential effects were explored; however, framing effects were a primary focus.

**Methods**

**Approaches to media studies**

According to Seale (2003), there are three main approaches to media studies. Media production studies “aim to deepen understanding of the commercial environment of media organizations” (p. 515). Representation studies “involve analysis of media messages themselves” (p. 515). Reception studies focus on audiences, and the manner in which they take up media messages. As a representation study, our analysis only facilitated inferences of potential or intended effects of the newspaper coverage; actual effects of this coverage on public opinion would require a combination of representation and reception studies.

Newspaper media were the exclusive focus of this study for two reasons. First, consumers of print media have a reasonable level of control over their news consumption—they can attend to news reports in different orders, at different times—unlike the television viewer who is “time-bound and is forced to follow a series of reports presented in rapid succession” (Soroka, 2002, p. 33). Beyond affording readers more control over their news consumption, the press has also been described as a more accurate source of news information as compared to television media (Glynn et al., 1999).

**Newspaper selection**

Nine newspapers were selected to represent both regional and national news coverage (Table 1). All nine newspapers are broadsheets and politically independent; while each newspaper has its political leanings, none of them are explicitly affiliated with a political party in Canada. For each data collection day, the newspapers were purchased, reviewed, and relevant articles were retrieved and coded. To ensure reliability and to provide journalistic insight, a team of journalism researchers (supervised by HP) collected, coded, and managed the data.

**Data collection methods**

Two different methods were used to retrieve newspaper clippings. The first was a “constructed week” approach, designed to mimic the typical 6-day per week newspaper publishing routine for many Canadian newspapers (Riffe, Aust, & Lacy, 1993). This approach involved retrieving clippings once a week over a 6-week period (Table 2). This staggered data collection approach was chosen (over a consecutive days approach) to obtain a broad sweep of newspaper coverage over the specified time periods. Data were collected for two constructed weeks. The first constructed week (September 30–November 9, 2002 (week 1)) was timed to yield coverage well in advance of the
release of the Romanow report, scheduled for the end of November 2002. The precise timing of the Kirby report release was not widely publicized yet it also fell within the first constructed week. The second constructed week (February 3–March 15, 2003 (week 2)) was chosen as a follow-up period that would be adequately distanced from any immediate press coverage related to the release of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of newspaper</th>
<th>Region served</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Circulation (Weekly total as of 03/31/2003)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Ownership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver Sun</td>
<td>British Columbia &amp; Yukon</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>1,170,963</td>
<td>Mon–Sat</td>
<td>CanWest Publications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmonton Journal</td>
<td>Prairies</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>943,320</td>
<td>Mon–Sun</td>
<td>CanWest Publications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winnipeg Free Press</td>
<td>Prairies</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>881,320</td>
<td>Mon–Sun</td>
<td>Free Press Canadian Newspapers Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto Star</td>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>3,293,031</td>
<td>Mon–Sun</td>
<td>Torstar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montreal Gazette</td>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>1,023,188</td>
<td>Mon–Sun</td>
<td>CanWest Publications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Presse</td>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>1,426,067</td>
<td>Mon–Sun</td>
<td>Power Corporation of Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halifax Chronicle-Herald</td>
<td>Atlantic</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>621,537</td>
<td>Mon–Sun</td>
<td>Halifax Herald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Globe &amp; Mail</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>1,965,991</td>
<td>Mon–Sat</td>
<td>Bell Globemedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Post</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>1,502,649</td>
<td>Mon–Sat</td>
<td>CanWest Publications</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Quantity of coverage by methodology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data collection method</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number of clippings per data collection day</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First thematic week</td>
<td>09/30/2002</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/08/2002</td>
<td>10/16/2002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/24/2002</td>
<td>11/01/2002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11/09/2002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second thematic week</td>
<td>02/03/2003</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02/11/2003</td>
<td>02/19/2003</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02/27/2003</td>
<td>03/07/2003</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>03/15/2003</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episodic (Post-Kirby Report)</td>
<td>10/25/2002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/26/2002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episodic (Post-Romanow Report)</td>
<td>11/28/2002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/29/2002</td>
<td>11/30/2002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/02/2002</td>
<td>12/03/2002</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
national reports. The constructed week approach facilitated in-depth examination of thematic news framing (Iyengar, 1997).

Designed to augment the thematic coverage and facilitate in-depth examination of episodic news framing (Iyengar, 1997), the second method involved retrieving “special events” coverage clips immediately following release of the two healthcare reform policy documents (Table 2): 2 days following release of the Kirby report (October 25–26, 2002); and 5 days following the Romanow report release (November 28–December 3, 2002). (Although the Kirby report was released during the first thematic week, data were collected on different dates, as shown in Table 2.)

There were several reasons for allotting different timeframes for gathering episodic coverage. First, the anticipation of these reports varied, as substantially more media coverage was devoted to the “Romanow report” in the months preceding its release (CBC, 2004). The difference in anticipation regarding these reports was partly attributable to differences in budget; the Romanow commission cost taxpayers $15 million for 18 months of work, whereas the Kirby report was subsidized by the Standing Senate committee’s existing budget. Further, the federal government commissioned the “Romanow report,” thereby generating public intrigue and expectations, whereas the Standing Senate committee holds a permanent position in the federal government.

Article selection

Selected articles were coded according to their coverage of one or more of the following themes representative of core elements of Canadian healthcare reform discourse:

1. Federal–provincial government roles and relationships in healthcare;
2. Healthcare funding issues related to reform (e.g., the healthcare system is inadequately/adequately funded);
3. Future of the publicly funded healthcare system, including clippings related to the Romanow and Kirby commissions, or other discussions of public healthcare system management;
4. Public versus private financing or delivery of healthcare (general discussion);
5. Specific discussion of healthcare financing arrangements (e.g., users fees, two tier healthcare, medical savings accounts, etc.); and
6. References to the Canada Health Act or healthcare standards.

Coding of newspaper articles

Media content analyses are often conducted using qualitative analytic techniques. In this study, however, a large quantity of coverage was anticipated during the data collection periods of analytic interest. Thus, a quantitative codebook, consisting primarily of categorical variables, was developed to categorize and analyse clippings. The codebook was developed using an inductive approach; four members of the research team (PC, JA, HP and MS) reviewed a sample of trial clippings, and each developed a set of codes. These codes were compared, revised and applied to another set of trial clippings. Consistency of coding was compared across team members and feedback on the codebook’s effectiveness informed final revisions. Two independent coders performed all article coding, and areas of divergence were resolved by consensus after discussion with HP. The codebook was designed to capture key characteristics of a large body of newspaper articles to be analysed statistically, and included the following variables of analytic interest: article characteristics; tone of coverage; healthcare sector theme; healthcare reform theme; and key actors.

Coding for article characteristics

Each article was coded for several basic characteristics, including newspaper source, date, and length. Reporting source—staff reporter, editor, columnist, bureau, Canadian Press (a national wire service), or letter to the editor—was also identified. Similarly, clipping type was defined as news, editorial, column, or letter. While newspaper section was recorded for each clipping, this variable was excluded from analysis as the majority was found in front sections (70% and 67% for thematic and episodic coverage, respectively).

Coding for tone

Article tone was determined by the overall impression of the future of Canada’s public healthcare system, as conveyed by the article’s author (and not necessarily the actors represented in the article) (Table 3). Articles that presented a positive outlook on the future of the healthcare system were coded as conveying a positive tone, and articles with a negative outlook were coded as
conveying a negative tone. Articles that did not convey clearly positive or negative impressions were coded as neutral, which was often the case with articles that reiterated one of the report’s recommendations or cited a research study. Tone coding was based on a gestalt of phrases and ideas, and not simply a statement from the article. In addition, articles that covered similar issues did not necessarily convey the same tone; for example, one article focusing on privatization may have conveyed a positive tone, while another privatization article may have conveyed a negative tone.

For example, below are excerpts from clippings coded with positive, negative, and neutral tones, respectively:

All Canadians share a common goal of renewing health care. The upcoming first ministers’ meeting is an opportunity to begin a new partnership between the provinces, territories and federal government to meet that goal—in a way that works for the benefit for British Columbia, and all Canadians (Campbell, 2003).

Canada’s health-care system—a patchwork of 13 jurisdictions—faces tough problems that might not be resolved for more than a decade (Derfel, 2003).

Canada should follow Sweden and embrace privatized medicine to avert the need for massive spending increases, according to the Fraser Institute, which released two papers on the topic yesterday. The papers, produced by the pro-market think tank, claim Swedish-style reforms would improve access, increase patient choices and reduce waiting times in Canada by allowing more competition (Heyman, 2003).

Coding for healthcare sector theme
Healthcare sector themes were assigned based on the sector featured in the article, such as physician & hospital care, home & community care, primary care,

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### Table 3
Tone of coverage by article characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Sub-variable</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of coverage</td>
<td>Thematic</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Episodic</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper source</td>
<td>Vancouver Sun</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Edmonton Journal</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Winnipeg Free Press</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Globe and Mail</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Toronto Star</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Montreal Gazette</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>La Presse</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Halifax Chronicle-Herald</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National Post</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting source</td>
<td>Staff Reporter</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>0.044</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff Editorialist</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff Columnist</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bureau</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>26.5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Canadian Press</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>23.5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Letter to the Editor</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of item</td>
<td>News</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>0.043</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>32.5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Column</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>27.5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Letter</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>34.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Article length</td>
<td>1–250</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>251–500</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>501–1000</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1001–2000</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000+</td>
<td>57.2</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
high-tech care (which included prescription drugs), etc. If multiple sectors were mentioned, the most prominent sector in the article would be coded. Clippings that made no reference to a particular sector were coded as general healthcare.

Coding for healthcare reform theme

The healthcare reform theme code was designed to identify financing-related healthcare reform themes. This code was broken down so that articles would be assigned a broad and specific theme if applicable (Table 4).

Coding for key actors

In almost all newspaper articles, actors are discussed, quoted, or referred to in some way. We coded each clipping for up to four different actors represented in the article. The most prominent actor in the article was coded as the primary actor, followed by secondary, tertiary, and quaternary level actors if applicable.

Conceptual approach to the analysis

Iyengar’s media effects model was used to guide the analysis (Table 5). Quantity and content of the newspaper coverage (i.e., healthcare sector and reform theme) were used to explore the potential for informing and agenda-setting effects. The potential for framing effects were examined by comparing thematic and episodic coverage, and specifically how article characteristics (i.e., newspaper and reporting source, type and length of news item) and article tone (i.e., tone by newspaper and by reporting source) varied by the type of coverage.

Statistical analysis

Based on newspaper and article selection criteria, relevant articles were identified, clipped from newspapers, and coded. Coded clippings were entered into an SPSS database, version 11.5, for management and analysis. Basic statistical tests included frequency distributions and cross-tabulations. Tests for significant differences between episodic and thematic coverage employed the Pearson \( \chi^2 \) test, using the 95% confidence level.
Results

Quantity of coverage

Quantity of coverage was used to explore informer and agenda-setter effects. Almost equal numbers of clippings were retrieved in the first ($n = 39$) and second ($n = 38$) weeks of thematic coverage, although daily distribution of coverage over each week varied (Table 2). Despite using nine different newspaper sources per data collection day, only an average of 6.5 clippings/day were retrieved from the first week and 6.3 clippings/day from the second—less than one clipping per day per newspaper. Conversely, 341 clippings were generated from only 7 days of episodic coverage: 2 days post-Kirby report and 5 days post-Romanow report (Table 2). Coverage of the Kirby report constituted 9% ($n = 38$) of the total coverage in contrast to Romanow report coverage, which made up 73% of the total coverage ($n = 303$). Almost half of all episodic coverage (143/341, 40%) was generated the day after the Romanow report release (Friday, November 29, 2002).

Article characteristics

Four article characteristic variables (newspaper source, reporting source, article type, and length) were used to explore framing effects. Of these four, only article length generated statistically significant differences on the basis of coverage type ($p < 0.001$); 57% of episodic coverage articles were over 2000 words, while 59% of thematic coverage clippings ranged from 251 to 1000 words. Differences in newspaper source ($p = 0.067$), reporting source ($p = 0.263$), and item type ($p = 0.923$) between episodic and thematic coverage were not significant.

Tone of coverage

Framing effects were also explored using the tone variable (Table 3). Clippings were coded as either conveying a positive, negative, or neutral impression of the future of Canada’s healthcare system. Tone comparisons by coverage type (i.e., thematic versus episodic) revealed significant differences ($p = 0.005$). Over half of the episodic coverage was positive in tone; less than one-fifth was neutral; and over one-quarter was negative. In contrast, thematic coverage generated an almost even distribution across tones.

Analysis of tone distribution by article characteristics allowed for a more in-depth exploration of framing (Table 3). Toronto Star (68%) and Halifax Chronicle-Herald (67%) produced the highest proportion of positively toned articles, Globe and Mail and Winnipeg Free Press had the most neutral reporting (both 30%), and Montreal Gazette was the most negative (54%). Staff reporters produced the highest percentage of positively toned articles (59%), staff columnists were the most neutral (32%), and staff editorialists were the most negative (39%). News items were the most positive in tone (57%), columns were the most neutral in tone (33%), and letters to the editors were the most negative in tone (35%). Finally, the majority of positively toned articles were over 2000 words (57%), while many neutral and negatively toned clippings were between 251 and 500 words (both 44%).

Healthcare sector theme coverage

The potential for informer, agenda-setter, and persuader effects were all explored using the healthcare sector theme code. The majority of coverage (72%) focused on the healthcare system as a whole (i.e., general healthcare) rather than a specific sector (e.g., hospital care, home care, etc.). Of the sector-specific coverage, 10% were physician and hospital care stories, followed by high-tech care (7%), home and community care (5%), primary care (2%), and other (4%).

Healthcare reform theme coverage

The healthcare reform theme variable was also used to explore informer, agenda-setter, and persuader effects (Table 4). Where applicable, clippings were assigned broad ($n = 356$) and specific healthcare reform theme codes ($n = 259$). For the broad healthcare reform theme, most articles focused on general discussions of the public healthcare system (62%). Similar content concentration was observed with the specific healthcare reform theme; over three-quarters of the clippings discussed either federal/provincial relations (45%) or the Canada Health Act (31%). Less than one-quarter of specific healthcare reform coverage discussed the public/private debate or financing options (24%).

Key actors

The final variable of interest, key actors, was used to explore the persuader effect (Fig. 1). Roy
Romanow (and the commission he chaired) was the most prominent actor in the coverage, representing the primary actor in 59% of the clippings (which is not surprising given clippings were sampled on the basis of article themes that related to the commission). After primary actor, there was a dramatic drop in Romanow Commission representation, and steady increases in representation of political institutions. Governmental actors and the political institutions they represent (e.g., political parties, prime minister, health ministers, senate) were the most common secondary, tertiary, and quaternary actors represented in 53%, 62%, and 66% of the clippings, respectively. The highest degree of representation for professional associations was at the tertiary level, represented in just over 11% of clippings at this level.

Discussion

Could the coverage have informed the public?

One of the most common, and contentious, assumptions about news media effects concerns their ability to inform the public. One of the variables used to explore the potential informer effect was quantity of coverage. When comparisons were made between the thematic and episodic reporting styles, striking differences were observed; thematic coverage (12 days) generated only a quarter of the clippings generated by episodic coverage (7 days). During such an intense period of debate about the future of Canada’s healthcare system, health policy analysts might have expected more thematic coverage. Unlike episodic coverage of the highly anticipated Romanow report, however, thematic coverage was continually competing for newspaper space. Thus, our findings suggest that the episodic coverage had greater potential to inform the public of this debate, assuming quantity is a determinant of becoming informed.

Potential informing effects were also explored using content-specific variables. Our findings demonstrate that the content of this debate coverage was often general in scope, offering minimal concrete details of the policy issues being debated. So, while a large quantity of coverage was generated from the episodic reporting style, the extent to which this information actually informed readers of policy issues germane to this debate is less clear. These findings are supportive of Seale’s (2003) contention that news media expect the public to be actively engaged in their news consumption.

Could the coverage have set the public agenda?

Our findings are suggestive of a potential agenda-setting effect, as a large quantity of episodic coverage was generated from only 7 days. Conversely, thematic coverage demonstrated limited potential for agenda-setting, as minimal coverage was generated over 12 days total. Our findings lend support to the argument that media act as conduits for the policy agenda rather than as agenda-setters themselves. However, our findings also suggest that news media act as filters for nuanced discussions of
policy agendas, given the preponderance of clippings focusing on general rather than specific healthcare content themes. The focus on general discussions of this reform debate may reflect lay, and even reporters’ (Voss, 2002), understandings of the issues, and the need to accommodate those understandings.

**How was the message framed?**

Our data collection methodology facilitated an in-depth exploration of potential framing effects. First, article lengths were significantly shorter in thematic versus episodic coverage. Couple the difference in article length with amount of coverage, and it is evident that the episodic reporting style presented more opportunities for thorough presentation of issues relevant to this debate.

Differences observed in tone between thematic and episodic coverage provide support for Iyengar’s (1991) theory that thematic coverage is more critical in perspective; episodic coverage clippings were more positive in tone compared to thematic coverage, which had a fairly equal distribution of articles with positive, negative, and neutral tones. While positive tone from the episodic coverage may reflect the content of the policy reports, these findings also suggest that the articles’ authors adopted less critical perspectives on the future of the healthcare system. The seemingly more critical perspective present in our thematic coverage is consistent with print media analyses of the managed care sector in the United States, where negative impressions of the industry are routinely conveyed (Bernard & Shulkin, 1998).

Potential framing effects were also examined through analysis of tone distribution by article characteristics. Newspaper and reporting sources, type of article, and length of article all generated significant differences in tone. These findings suggest that the source and manner in which newspaper articles are presented can dramatically influence the impressions conveyed of the future of a country’s healthcare system.

Our findings provide only partial support for Iyengar’s (1991) theory of framing effects: episodic coverage is typically “pro-establishment” because it generates individualistic, rather than societal, attributions of responsibility. The episodic coverage in this study framed issues more positively, suggesting it was less critical of the status quo. However, because the publicly funded healthcare system represented the establishment in this study, it is possible that thematic coverage would have generated more individualistic, rather than societal, attributions of responsibility, such as support for user fees or two-tier healthcare. Our findings suggest that Iyengar’s theory of framing effects may not apply universally to all public policy issues, but instead may apply more specifically to issues such as crime and unemployment as he has demonstrated (Iyengar, 1991).

**Could the coverage have persuaded the public?**

The persuasion effect is mediated through message, source, and audience factors (Iyengar, 1997). This study explored the message and source dimensions through content and key actor variables, respectively. Based on the content variables analysed, the coverage did demonstrate potential for public persuasion. Of the sector-specific coverage that was observed, there was substantial clustering around physician and hospital care themes (the two providers privileged by provincial health-insurance plans), and a corresponding lack of coverage of less traditional healthcare sectors, such as home care. The clustering of themes around more traditional healthcare sectors suggests that newspaper coverage of this debate was influenced by dominant institutional arrangements in Canada’s public healthcare system. The predominance of the Romanow Commission and political institutions as key actors lend further support to this argument, and to the view that media act as facilitators for powerful interests (Glynn et al., 1999; Goldsteen et al., 2001, 1999; Otten, 1992; Seale, 2003).

Typical conceptualizations of “interest groups” that influence public policy development processes extend beyond governmental actors, to include private businesses, advocacy groups, and professional associations (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003; Stone, 2002). In turn, a common view is that these interest groups use media as their vehicle of influence (Brodie, 2001; Otten, 1992). Our findings confirm professional associations’ presence as key actors next to political institutions; however, their minimal representation suggests their roles may be mediated largely outside of media spotlights. Alternatively, professional associations may have taken more time to absorb the information presented in the two reports, enabling them to respond with a more crafted message for the public (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000).
Limitations and directions for future research

As a representation study, our ability to assess actual coverage effects on public opinion and agenda-setting is limited. A more complete analysis would have additionally employed a reception study, where changes to public awareness of, and opinions towards, healthcare reform could be examined. It is worth noting, however, that studies that have explored these media effects have typically focused their efforts on one type of effect, such as agenda-setting or framing. Future studies in this area should involve a multi-phased approach, employing representational analyses that explore multiple effects, and reception analyses to assess public opinion concerning healthcare reform.

While there is tremendous value in quantifying newspaper coverage of healthcare policy issues, qualitative media content analysis would have allowed us to contextualize our inferences of potential coverage effects. For example, qualitative analysis would have illuminated instances where different tones were generated from similar content areas. Given the paucity of media content analyses of health policy issues, however, the thematic versus episodic analytic approach undertaken here contributes important insight into the framing effects of print media. Moreover, our comprehensive codebook captured multiple aspects of newspaper coverage, allowing for the exploration of a broader range of media effects than typically found in similar studies (Arvai & Mascarenhas, 2001; Bernard & Shulkin, 1998; Brodie, Brady, & Altman, 1998; Davidson, Hunt, & Kitzinger, 2003).

The timing of our data collection may have presented a weakness. The first week of thematic coverage may have been conducted too near the Romanow report release to find diversity in content reporting; had this week been constructed over the summer months, we may have generated more articles with specific content and reform foci. With an 18-month mandate to conduct its work, substantial in-depth coverage of the Romanow Commission could have already taken place. Similarly, had our episodic coverage lasted a few days longer, we may have observed representation of more diverse sets of actors, such as professional associations. It is unclear, however, whether more diverse representation would have had an impact; many readers may have become desensitized to the debate after being overwhelmed with coverage in preceding days.

According to Iyengar (1991), framing plays an important role in shaping public opinion towards issues presented in the news. He contends that episodic news is typically pro-establishment, while thematic coverage is more critical of the status quo. These different framing styles likely reflect the varied information sources consulted in developing stories; episodic coverage is more reliant on government and other elite information sources, while thematic coverage likely draws on a wider base of information to present issues. Thus, another important avenue of future research is in-depth exploration of the relative influence of these sources on how stories are presented to readers.

Conclusions

Using Iyengar’s model to guide our exploration, we considered four potential media effects in newspaper coverage of Canada’s 2002 healthcare reform debate. Based on differences in quantity, our findings suggest that the episodic coverage provided more opportunities to inform the public and to act as conduits for policy agendas than the thematic coverage. The generalist content, however, questions just how informative the coverage was, given only vague details of policy agendas were provided. The specific coverage that was present tended to reflect dominant institutional arrangements in Canada’s healthcare system, in terms of both financing and delivery, offering little opportunity for the public to become informed of alternative approaches to reform the healthcare system. Furthermore, the preponderance of governmental actors (including Romanow and his commission) in this coverage supports Soroka’s (2002) argument that media act merely as conduits for policy agendas. The lack of content-specific coverage is particularly noteworthy considering the previously demonstrated positive correlation between government responsiveness to public opinion and issue salience among the public (Burstein, 2003).

While framing effects were observed in the coverage, their implications are difficult to interpret using Iyengar’s (1991) theory of framing. There was a greater quantity of episodic coverage that was also more positive, and arguably less critical, in tone lending partial support to Iyengar’s theory. Our findings, however, challenge the applicability of Iyengar’s responsibility attribution argument (i.e., that episodic coverage shields governments from
responsibility), particularly when the issues being presented deal with public institutions.

This study represents a new contribution to the under-researched area of print media representation of health policy issues (Seale, 2003). As long as healthcare spending continues to account for such a large proportion of government expenditures (OECD, 2003), healthcare reform issues will remain at the top of policy agendas and continue to garner news media attention. Our findings contribute to a growing understanding of how news media affect public agenda-setting processes, while reinforcing and challenging some commonly held assumptions about these roles.

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