Television Frames of the 2008 Liberal and New Democrat Accord

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ABSTRACT This article examines how the Liberal and New Democratic Accord was framed through and by national television news during the first week of December 2008. Using new institutionalism theory, this article argues that politicians must negotiate with journalists to present their framing of issues. While journalists may repeat and even balance competing frames, they also interpret politics strategically, and this is what dominates coverage. Based on a frame analysis, the study examines the national television coverage of the proposed coalition government. The analysis finds that TV news presented the preferred frames of the government and the coalition in similar proportion. However, the coverage spent significantly more time assessing performance and strategy and was highly critical of the strategy and performance of the key political players.

KEYWORDS Frame analysis; Coalition government; Television news; Canadian Politics

RÉSUMÉ Cette étude examine la façon par laquelle les informations nationales télévisées ont exposé les cadres d'analyse du gouvernement et des partenaires de la coalition durant la crise politique de 2008. La démarche entreprise utilise une méthodologie d'analyse-cadre, où la proportion de la couverture médiatisée accordée au gouvernement est comparée à celle donnée à la coalition. De plus, cette étude compare les cadres préférés des élites politiques avec les discussions télévisées de stratégies. Nous trouvons que malgré que l'analyse-cadre du gouvernement a reçu, marginalement, plus d'attention que celle de la coalition, l'emp Pathfinder principale de la télévision nationale était sur l'évaluation des aspects stratégiques de la crise. L'évaluation par tous les acteurs politiques était fort négative.

MOTS CLÉS Analyse des frAMES; Gouvernement de coalition; nouvelles à la télévision, la politique Canadienne

Introduction

On December 1, 2008, federal Liberal leader Stéphane Dion and federal New Democrat leader Jack Layton signed “An Accord on a Cooperative Government to Address the Present Economic Crisis” (Dion & Layton, 2008). This accord was designed to provide an alternative government when the scheduled December 5 vote of no confidence was to be held to defeat the newly elected minority Conservative government. Had the vote been held, the accord would have marked the first federal coalition government in Canada since the Union government from 1917 to 1920. Not only was the
accord a unique proposition in Canadian federal politics, but also the government’s response to prorogue Parliament to avoid a confidence vote was unprecedented in Canadian parliamentary history.

The signing of the accord was salient for the Canadian public, with news reports depicting Canadians talking about the event in the streets, online, and on radio talk shows. Mass media outlets labelled the event a “political crisis,” with television, newspapers, radio, and the Internet all running sensational headlines regarding the proposed coalition government. The public was energized, with some organizing rallies to support the coalition; others organized to rally in favour of the government. Each side presented arguments to the public to frame the issue to their advantage. In the simplest terms, the accord partners framed the issue as the government not adequately dealing with an economic crisis; the government framed the problem as the opposition parties attempting to grab power. This article examines the way in which English television news covered the competing frames of the coalition and the government, as well as how television news judged the strategy and performance of the parties and political leadership.

Because this event unfolded during one week in December and was given considerable attention by all media, it was an event that fit well into the media’s normative interpretation of balance as providing two sides to a story. News organizations, such as the CBC, claim that they “contribute to informed debate on issues that matter to Canadians by reflecting a diversity of opinion.” Indeed, CBC goes so far as to assert, “Our content on all platforms presents a wide range of subject matter and views” (CBC, 2011). In practice, however, the range tends to be narrow. Although it is rare for issues to have just two sides, this event, unfolding over a short period of time, with the coalition partners on one side and the government on the other, made it simple for the media to focus on these two perspectives. The question asked here is whether either of the two sides was able to become the primary definer of the event.

New institutionalism and frames
New institutional theory regards the mass media as an important political institution worthy of attention and study. Timothy Cook (2006) asserts that news making and policymaking are increasingly intertwined to the point of being indistinguishable. The reason journalists are powerful political actors is their unrivalled ability to channel or structure national politics (Sparrow, 1999). It is, therefore, vitally important for political actors to have journalists accept their interpretation—or framing—of issues, for acceptance of a particular position can have far-reaching implications for the success of a political party or policy.

News making involves negotiation among journalists and groups who seek news access (Lawrence, 2006). Part of this negotiation entails that political players frame their message in ways that best capture media attention and acceptance (Aday, 2006; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 2007). Political players use frames to encourage audiences to think about issues in a particular way (e.g., Gross & D’Ambrosio, 2004; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997). Framing contests are especially important during a political crisis (Boin, Hart, & McConnell, 2009). One reason
for their heightened importance is that during a crisis, the media are more attuned to the two sides of the conflict, almost to the exclusion of all other voices. Indeed, during a perceived crisis, political elites act as primary definers (Welch, Fenwick and Roberts, 1997). As Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts (1978) note:

The important point about the structured relationship between the media and the primary institutional definers is that it permits the institutional definers to establish the initial definition or primary interpretation of the topic in question. This interpretation then “commands the field” in all subsequent treatment and sets the terms of reference within which all further coverage or debated takes place. Arguments against a primary interpretation are forced to insert themselves into its definition of “what is at issue”—they must begin from this framework of interpretation as their starting point. (p. 58, italics original)

In a two-sided contest, such as the proposed coalition government, the simplest way to determine which frame dominated is by examining whether news coverage balanced the competing frames. This is done by measuring content bias (Entman, 2004). Frames are considered powerful if they are accepted and repeated by the media. American research has shown that in certain cases, governments have been successful in promoting their frame at the expense of their opponents and this has resulted in policy adoption. For example, a number of scholars have demonstrated how the George W. Bush presidency was effective in promoting its preferred frame of weapons of mass destruction to justify the invasion of Iraq (Bennett & Lawrence, 2007; Edy & Meirick, 2007; Johansen & Joslyn, 2008). Such one-sided framing contests do not happen with great frequency, and when they occur, they do not last for long periods. For the most part scholars have failed to find significant content bias of in a policy issue that favours one frame over its competition. This is especially true in studies that measure content bias in elections (Frizzell & Westell, 1985; Johnston, Blais, Brady, & Crête, 1992; Nevitte, Blais, Gidengil, & Nadeau, 2000; Soroka & Andrew, 2010).

The critical communications literature, however, provides evidence of one-sided analysis when it comes to “moral panics” (e.g., Cohen, 1980; Hall et al., 1978). In these cases, something or someone is identified as a threat to society. As Cohen (1980) states, “A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media” (p. 9). Cohen and others refer to these instances as “moral panic,” and those who are the subject of the moral panic are portrayed as “folk devils,” the “visible reminders of what we should not be” (p. 10). The crisis literature is dominated by the term “moral panic,” which is typically associated with crime and deviance. (For a review of the literature, see Hunt, 1997; for specific cases, see Edwards & Soetenhorst-de Savornin, 1994; Homan, 2003; Klug, 2005.) The primary definers for these cases are state officials in the form of law enforcement and/or politicians. The term has been applied to many issues, including “AIDS, child abuse, crowd violence at football matches, drug addiction, juvenile crime and surrogate mothers” (Hunt, 1997, p. 638). As compelling as this literature appears, it is somewhat removed from the present discussion as the potential viewpoints had two groups of
elites vying for the role of primary interpreter: the government and the coalition partners. It is somewhat of a stretch to apply the “folk devil” label to elites; however, Kate Jones (2008) did attempt such a stretch with some success in her study of Australian career politicians.

Keeping in mind the critical literature on sources and crisis, we now nonetheless turn to new institutional theory to inform this discussion by arguing that journalism is a political institution, and like other institutions, it has certain rules and routines that dictate how it operates. One rule is that journalists should act as neutral observers, attempting to balance the arguments on both sides of the debate (Cook, 2005). At the same time, however, the rules of journalism evolve over time, thus another role that has emerged with the advent of television news is that journalists are increasingly expected to act as interpreters of political behaviour (Cater, 1959). It is in their role of interpreter that journalists compete with political elites to present interpretations of political issues to the public. This role of interpreter has also provoked the largest condemnation of the media. Many have argued that television journalism has emphasized style over substance, with journalists examining the strategies behind policy, rather than the policies themselves (Fallow, 1997; McKibben, 1993; Patterson, 1994).

While content analyses of policy issues and elections often fail to show overt bias in favour of one or the other side in a political contest, these same studies note that journalists frame issues quite apart from how the political actors would like the issue or event to be discussed. One way journalists evaluate politics is through the strategic frame of assessing the strategies and motivations of political actors (Berganza, 2009; Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Cross, 2010; Hollander, 2006; Jamieson & Cappella, 1998; Lawrence, 2000; Sampert & Trimble, 2003; Schudson, 1995; Shah, Watts, Domke, & Fan, 2002).

Canadian election content analyses have also found that the media view politics from a strategic frame (Mendelsohn, 1993; Sampert & Trimble, 2003; Soroka & Andrew, 2010; Trimble & Sampert, 2004; Wagenberg, Soderlund, Romanow, & Briggs, 1988; Wilson, 1980-81). Even when Canadian researchers go beyond election studies, they tend to find that strategic frames dominate. In a study of newspaper coverage of the Gomery Commission, the strategic frame was presented in the English press more so than in the French press (Gingras, Sampert, & Gagnon-Pelletier, 2010). For Gingras and her associates, “the consequence of the strategic frame being emphasized over the issue frame makes us believe that ... readers were provided with an incomplete vision and implications of the findings of the [Gomery] Commission” (p. 291). This conclusion echoes the concern of Sparrow (1999), who asks, “If the press discusses only the ‘surface’ of political issues and only ‘samples’ reality, what effect does their superficiality and sampling have on democratic government” (p. 8)?

Apart from condemning the strategic frame, few researchers examine the broader implication of why this dominant frame is considered so salient. An exception is Regina Lawrence (2000), who argues that there are particular contexts in which strategic concerns are more important from a journalistic perspective than substantive issues. She points to situations when a policy is nearing its completion, when there is a high degree of conflict, and in instances with a clear outcome. In contrast, Callaghan and Schnell
argue that journalists exert power by interpreting and analyzing the behaviours and strategies of political actors. “The media have an interdependent yet competitive relationship with interest groups and elected officials in studying and interpreting political issues” (p. 184). New institutionalists such as Cook (2005) and Hallin (1992) see the behaviour of journalists as part of the broader market-based environment where the media competes with political players to define and mould political discourse. At the same time, some critical communication scholars argue that in order to maintain corporate market share, television emphasizes the strategic frame to retain audiences (Bennett, 1990; Parenti, 1993).

This study poses/addresses three primary research questions: First, did television news balance the competing frames, as theorized by new institutionalism? Second, what proportion of the coverage examined substantive claims of the political actors compared with the strategic frame presented by television news? Finally, what was the balance of assessments of the political players on television news? While content analysis can only ask what happened, the discussion section will move beyond what the coverage looked like to probe some possible reasons for the ways in which it unfolded. Before these matters are dealt with, a few words are needed to set the context for this unusual event in Canadian politics.

Background to the “crisis”

The Conservative Party of Canada won its second minority government on October 14, 2008. This win represented a 16-seat increase from its previous minority government in 2006. The increase in legislative seats for the Conservatives meant that none of the opposition parties held the balance of power. Defeating the government in a non-confidence measure would require unanimity among the three political parties of the Liberals, New Democrats, and Bloc Québécois. The previous Conservative government had the distinction of being the longest uninterrupted minority Parliament in Canadian history, lasting 937 days (Parliament of Canada, n.d.). That parliament could have lasted longer, as there was no confidence vote to defeat the government. Instead, Prime Minister Harper went against the spirit of the fixed-date election amendment when he asked the Governor General to dissolve Parliament a year before the scheduled October 19, 2009, election date.

It was in this context that, following the election, the Conservative government appeared to be governing as if it had a majority. During the fall of 2008 there was much concern about Canada's ability to weather the global financial crisis. Upon forming the minority government, Finance Minister James Flaherty presented an economic and fiscal statement, which “set out the government’s key short-term and long-term objectives as we prepare for the next federal budget” (Flaherty, 2008). The economic update had two objectives: to signal that the government would not engage in deficit financing to create stimulus funding; and to state that the government would attempt to reduce some spending so that it could provide essential services. Flaherty argued that the government was providing stimulus to deal with the financial uncertainty in the form of tax reductions, job-creation infrastructure, and investment in science and technology. Rather than announce new program spending in the form of a stimulus to the economy, Flaherty proposed that the government show restraint and respect
for taxpayer dollars. His most contentious proposal was to eliminate a $1.95 per-vote subsidy for political parties (Flaherty, 2008).

The reaction by the opposition parties was swift and unified. In addition to their denunciation of the overall direction of the fiscal restraint, they argued that the government was using the recession as a pretext to unfairly punish all the opposition parties, which relied more on the vote subsidy for their financial well-being than did the Conservatives. As one Bloc Québécois MP said, “Mr. Speaker, yesterday, this House witnessed a most disturbing attack on democracy. Most political analysts are roundly condemning the government’s frontal assault on the law governing political party financing. The Prime Minister’s approach is being described as nothing less than irresponsible” (Canada, 2008).

During the weekend after Flaherty’s speech, exchanges between the political parties became more heated: the opposition parties made it clear that they were going to join forces to defeat the government in a confidence vote over the economic statement. As a result, the government capitulated on a number of its proposals, also making a promise to table a stimulus budget by January 27, 2009 (Barton, 2008). Despite these concessions, the Liberal and NDP leaders signed the historic accord, agreeing that they would approach the Governor General after defeating the government in a confidence vote and form a new government. The accord stipulated that the coalition would be primarily between the Liberals and NDP, whereby each party would have cabinet ministers, while the Bloc Québécois agreed to support the coalition as long as it served the interests of Québec.

Methods
This study analyzes Canadian English television news reports from December 1 to 5, 2008. The coalition partners signed their historic agreement on December 1. The crisis lasted until December 4, when the Governor General prorogued Parliament. The analysis includes December 5 to incorporate television assessments of the week’s events. Television is chosen as it remains the main source for news and public affairs in Canada. Despite the increasing use of the Internet for news retrieval, especially among younger people (Zamaria & Fletcher, 2008), 91% of frequent news users cite television news as an important source of information, compared to 30% for the Internet and 70% for newspapers (Keown, 2007).

All English national network newscasts were selected: CBC’s The National, CTV News, and Global National. CTV News and Global National the latter two are traditional nightly national news programs; CBC’s The National is a hybrid program. The first half hour of the broadcast is a typical newscast, with news stories and headlines. The second half of the broadcast provides panel discussions and more in-depth feature reporting, making it more similar to public affairs programming. It should be noted that this study is about how the coalition was presented to English Canada. Polls conducted at the time showed the nation was divided between Québec and the rest of Canada. For example, a poll from December 3, 2008, conducted by the Strategic Counsel for The Globe and Mail, found that while 55% of Quebeckers supported the coalition replacing the Conservative government, outside Québec, 64% opposed the coalition (Strategic Counsel, 2008). Because of the disparity in support for the coalition between
English and French Canada, a separate study is needed to examine the coalition frames in French-language television news.

**Unit of analysis and materials**

The unit of analysis for the content analysis is the statement. Although the typical unit of measurement employed in these studies is the story (Choi, 2009; Matthes, 2009; Mendelsohn, 1993; Trimble & Sampert, 2004; Wagenberg et al., 1988; Wilson, 1980-81), I agree with Entman (2006) that the “story as a unit of analysis does not allow us to measure relative dominance and saturation more precisely” (p. 219). The statement as the unit of analysis increases coder reliability and provides a more valid measure of television coverage of the crisis.

All stories that covered the proposed coalition government were selected. Television transcripts were retrieved from the Virtual News Library and ProQuest by selecting all the stories broadcast during the week. Stories pertaining to the coalition were manually chosen by the author. While some scholars warn against conducting content analysis of television without also examining the video—lest researchers miss valuable nuances—in this case I was not looking at the visuals or nuances of facial expressions, but rather at what substantive and strategic frames and evaluations were presented. This methodological approach is consistent with the majority of content analyses, as 83% completely neglect visuals (Matthes, 2009). Therefore, reading the transcripts provides the necessary material to conduct the analysis. It is, however, acknowledged that some context may be lost by not also examining the visuals.

To obtain the measurement, each frame was treated as a unique nominal variable that was dichotomously coded as either the government or the coalition frame. The methodological assumption here is that the government and coalition were *de facto* the primary definers and that all other sources would have to first respond to their frames before providing an alternative perspective. This assumption is borne out by a reading of the transcripts before the codebook was developed. Because the statement is the unit of analysis, a sentence can have more than one frame. Each sentence was coded as to whether it included a particular frame. Then the coder identified whether the frame represented the government position or the coalition position. For example, on CBC’s December 3 *The National*, Jack Layton said, “Stephen Harper has broken his trust with the Canadian people, and because of that he’s lost the confidence of Parliament” (Boag, 2008). This sentence was coded as having two frames (statements) from the coalition perspective: the problem definition that he lost Parliament’s confidence; and the causal analysis that Harper broke the trust of Canadians. In contrast, Craig Oliver’s statement on CTV on the same day—reporting “The prime minister will ask the Governor General tomorrow for a cooling-off period”—was identified as a remedy endorsement frame from the government’s perspective (Oliver, 2008).

This coding technique was also applied to strategic frames and evaluations. Since each statement was coded, there was a differentiation between substantive and strategic frames. In the case of strategic frames, evaluations were categorized using these variables: which side was being discussed; and evaluation (unfavourable or favourable). For example, on the December 5 CTV News, Peter Donolo, the vice-president of the Strategic Counsel polling firm, assessed Stéphane Dion by saying, “Mr.
Dion, whose sales skills were already kind of rejected by Canadians, just weren’t up to what was going to be a terrific challenge” (Smith, 2008). This was coded as one negative statement regarding the performance of the Liberals from a strategic frame. Previous studies have shown that television news tends to focus on negative rather than positive assessments of political actors (Miljan & Cooper, 2003; Sheafer, 2007). The source of each statement was also coded. This identification helps capture the extent to which television news went beyond the primary definers.

Coder reliability
In all, 93 stories were collected and coded by three independent coders. The sample consists of 24 CBC’s The National, 21 CTV News, and 16 Global News stories, resulting in 467 CBC television, 308 CTV News, and 193 Global News coded statements. Coders were trained in how to determine frames and were given a detailed rule book. Fifteen percent of the stories were used to conduct intercoder reliability tests. Using Scott’s π using pairs, the overall reliability was .91, which is considered acceptable.

Findings
Framing by television
As can be seen in Table 1, two-thirds of television attention focused on strategic frames compared with substantive frames. The program most likely to provide strategic frames was CBC’s The National, with 70.4% of the overall coverage, while Global National was the least likely to present strategic frame, at 58% of coverage. The difference in the programs is reflective of the fact that each show has a different format. For CBC, as was mentioned above, the start of the program provides mostly news stories, while the second half of the hour often has in-depth reports and panel discussions. On CTV, while the program is mostly a news format, the anchor will often interview journalists at the end of their stories to provide greater context and insight. Global, in contrast, did not provide any panel discussions for its viewers. News anchor Kevin Newman would ask for a reporter’s analysis at the end of the story; however, these assessments were very brief. For example, on December 2, Kevin Newman asked Jacques Bourbeau, Global’s Ottawa Bureau Chief, “Boy, was there a lot of heat in this House today, but I mean, is there another side of this? Is there a danger in provoking the separatists? They were elected by a lot of Quebeckers. I mean, is the prime minister maybe stoking a national unity crisis to try to save his skin?” To which Bourbeau replied:

Well, Kevin, I do think it’s a risky strategy because talking about deals with separatists, first of all, the prime minister risks fuelling anger in English Canada, especially Western Canada. He also risks angering Quebeckers who may be wondering why it’s such a sin to elect Bloc Québécois MPs and have them take part in a coalition government, but it seems that as Stephen Harper is fighting for his political life, he is willing to risk unleashing those passions.

(Bourbeau, 2008)

Although the Global assessments were briefer than what was seen on CBC or CTV, they still provided the reporter an opportunity to provide analysis and commentary on the day’s events. The difference in coverage between the strategic frame and the
substantive frames of the actors involved in the crisis is not due to chance, as Chi-Square is statistically significant at the .01 level.\(^6\)

**Table 1: Frames by television network**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CBC</th>
<th></th>
<th>CTV</th>
<th></th>
<th>Global</th>
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<th>Total</th>
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<td>%</td>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantive frame</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>33.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic frame</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>67.2</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>648</td>
<td>66.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>467</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>968</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Note: \(\chi^2 = 10.22633, 2\) df \(p > .01\)*

**Framing through television**

Despite the relatively small attention paid to competing government and coalition frames, television news presented those frames in roughly equal proportion. On aggregate, the networks balanced the government and coalition frames. However, when the networks are examined individually, we find that Global and CBC were more likely to present the government’s preferred frame (59.3 and 55.1%, respectively) than the coalition partner’s frame (see Table 2). In contrast, CTV gave more attention to coalition claims, thus providing government frames at 46.5%. However, the differences between the networks are so small that we cannot rule out chance variation, as the Chi-Square statistic is not statistically significant.

**Table 2: Substantive frames by network**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CBC</th>
<th></th>
<th>CTV</th>
<th></th>
<th>Global</th>
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<td>%</td>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>53.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>46.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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*Note: \(\chi^2 = 3.186, 2\) df n.s.*

**Television assessments**

In addition to examining frames, the analysis also noted the evaluations of government and coalition actors. Overall, network news gave more unfavourable evaluations of the government and coalition than they provided favourable evaluations (see Tables 3a and 3b). For evaluations of the government, television news provided 78.8% unfavourable assessments, with only 21.2% favourable assessments. Global and CBC were the most critical, with 79.7% and 79.8% unfavourable for the government; CTV was
slightly less critical, at 76.9% unfavourable toward the government. The assessments of the opposition were slightly more unbalanced, with a combined 79.9% unfavourable to 20.1% favourable assessments. For the coalition, CBC (83.1%) and Global (83.9%) had the highest proportion of unfavourable comments, at 83%, followed by CTV, at 72.1%. While the networks appear to be proportionately more unfavourable toward the coalition than the government, this does not take into consideration the total number of evaluations on network news.

Table 3a: Government evaluations by network

<table>
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<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Favourable</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavourable</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>168</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
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Note: χ² = .365, 2 df n.s.

Table 3b: Coalition evaluations by network

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Favourable</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavourable</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>83.1</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>72.1</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>83.9</td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: χ² = 6.123, 2 df, p > .05

Figure 1 displays the results from Tables 3a and 3b graphically by plotting the amount of favourable and unfavourable attention by network for both the coalition and the government. CBC’s coverage appears to have a greater volume of unfavourable assessments toward the coalition than do the other two networks. Examining all the evaluative statements, we can see that while CBC had equal coverage of favourable commentary regarding the government and the coalition (9.2% each), The National spent more time evaluating critically the coalition than it did the government (45.3% coalition compared with 36.3% government). Many of the unfavourable assessments singled out Dion. In part, this had to do with real concerns regarding his ability to lead a coalition government when he had already announced his resignation as the Liberal leader after the autumn election. This was the point raised by Rex Murphy (2008) in his December 1 commentary on The National: “The latest bulletin has Stéphane Dion installed as prime minister, a man who after the 77 seats he brought home in the election, the Liberals couldn’t wait to boot out of their leadership.”
In contrast, CTV provided slightly more unfavourable assessments of the government than the coalition (37.9% government compared with 36.5% coalition). For Global, the proportion was reversed, with the coalition receiving 43% unfavourable assessments compared with the government’s 38.8%. Moreover, the government also received more favourable assessments on Global than did the coalition, at 9.9% compared with 8.3%.

Figure 1: Evaluations by network

Sources
To explain the coverage observed on these three networks the study also looked at the sources of the coded statements. As can be seen in Table 4, journalists made the highest proportion of statements. All three networks feature journalists more often than any other source. CBC had the least, with 62.5% of their sources, followed by Global with 63.9% and CTV with 67% of the sources. In terms of primary definers, we see that coalition representatives outnumbered the government. Overall, coalition representatives made 11.7% of the statements compared with the government at 8.5%. No doubt this had to do with the fact that there were two coalition partners, plus the Bloc Québécois. While the coalition partners may have had more airtime, it does not necessarily mean that they were able to present a clear and unified message. Over the course of the week, the various partners at times were just as critical of each other as they were of the government. Added to the primary definers were institutional sources such as pollsters (2.2%), pundits (1.6%), and academics (3.1%). The inclusion of such sources is consistent with the literature on primary definers, which indicates that institutional actors often provide legitimacy to the positions made by the primary definers. There was some inclusion of the public. In this case, CBC stood out by providing
the public with the most coverage, at 10.6% of the total source statements, followed by CTV with 8.7% and Global with 3.8%.

### Table 4: Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>CBC</th>
<th>CTV</th>
<th>Global</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>596</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>67.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pollster</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pundit</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>954</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** $\chi^2 = 78.433, 2 p >.000$

### Discussion and conclusion

This article answered three questions regarding Canadian English network television’s news coverage of the 2008 Liberal/NDP Accord. New institutionalism theory posits that in a two-sided contest, the news will balance competing frames. The analysis found that television news presented both the preferred frames of the government and the coalition, in roughly similar proportions. However, CBC and Global gave more attention to the government than the coalition, while CTV News gave more attention to the coalition’s frame. Although there were differences in the treatment the two sides received, the differences were relatively small, to the extent that no one side completely dominated the debate. There was diversity in the sponsor frames, with a balance of coverage between the two sides of the conflict. In addition, the study found that there was substantial similarity among broadcasters in the sense that each was careful to provide both sides of the dispute in relative proportion.

The second research question asked about the proportion of coverage that would be devoted to the substantive frames compared to strategy. New institutionalism theory argues that because of the increasing interpretive function of journalists (Cater, 1959), television news tends to focus on strategy over substance. The findings in this study are consistent with much of the research on Canadian news, in that the strategic or game frame was emphasized. However, because of the nature of the crisis, strategy was a key component of the unfolding events. The very nature of a coalition government was rife with uncertainty about how it would develop and what the Conservative government could do to avoid the inevitable. Television news used strategy and per-
formance of the leaders as the primary topic for their interpretative function. Leaving the debate of the merits of the proposed coalition or the prorogation of Parliament to the frame sponsors, they instead focused much more of their commentary on the following: how the parties performed; speculation on the next moves of the government or coalition partners; and, the potential problems of the coalition being led by Stéphane Dion. As we learned from Lawrence (2000), strategic concerns are particularly associated with a high degree of conflict. The proposed coalition was a unique and unprecedented political conflict that fit especially well into this journalistic frame.

It is beyond the scope of this article to compare directly public opinion with television coverage. However, media-sponsored public opinion polls indicating the public thought Dion should resign are consistent with television assessments of him. For example, an Ekos poll showed that 60% of Canadians thought Dion should resign. The same poll also found that of committed Liberal voters, 53% agreed that Dion should resign before the new year, with only 36% disagreeing with the statement. The same could not be said of Harper, as only 8% of Conservative voters polled thought the prime minister should resign (Graves & Adams, 2008b). Much of the criticism of Dion’s performance had to do with the television addresses made by Harper and Dion on December 3. In this context, discussion of strategy was highly salient for television news in assessing the ability for the coalition to sell its idea. In the prominent “At Issue” panel on The National, Peter Mansbridge (2008) started his line of questioning with the following observation: “Stéphane Dion didn’t look like the prime minister under a Christmas tree. He kind of looked like he was on YouTube. It was a very odd presentation, and I’m wondering how much of it took away from the case he was trying to make or whether he made that case.” Robert Fife (2008) in his CTV News story reported that the coalition partners were also concerned about the performance, saying, “Well, Mr. Dion’s coalition partners are also livid, the NDP saying this fiasco tonight undermined the credibility of the coalition. How can they show that they can govern the country if they can’t deliver a tape on time, and a tape that looked like it was filmed with a cellphone?” While this study did not examine French-language media, polls at the time showed that while Quebeckers may have been more likely to support the coalition than the rest of Canada, they nonetheless also gave Dion poor marks. An Angus Reid poll found 60% of Quebeckers disagreed with the statement, “I would be comfortable with Stéphane Dion becoming Canada’s Prime Minister” (Reid, 2008).

In addition to criticism of Dion, serious concerns were raised by pundits and journalists about the coalition when Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe indicated that he signed the accord because the deal was good for the separatist cause. This resulted not only in the government accusing the Liberals of being in league with “socialists and separatists” but also prompted a backlash against the coalition, especially in Western Canada. At the same time, this line of attack may have played well with Western Canadians; it was where the Conservative government was given a significant volume of criticism from pundits and the coalition partners. Journalists presented the case that the prime minister was being reckless in his strategy to maintain political power. For example, consider this passage from Genevieve Beauchemin’s story for CTV News
on December 4, 2008 within clips of Harper saying “Separatists” were interjected into
the story:

Genevieve Beauchemin (Reporter): Lloyd, the war of words in Ottawa has hit
hard in Quebec, landing straight in the middle of a provincial election cam-
paign. In La Belle Province, that’s the name of this diner, some say the Con-
servatives are serving up trouble for Canadian unity.

Unidentified woman: Making us feel like we’re nothing.

Beauchemin: Harper’s attacks on the coalition focused on its alliance with the
Bloc Québécois.

Stephen Harper (Canadian Prime Minister): Separatist party.

Harper: The separatists.

Harper: With the separatists.

Beauchemin: To some, that may end up fanning the flames of sovereignty, an
issue that had been on the back burner.

Antonia Maioni (McGill University): And now it seems that we’re back into a
very much a politics of division.

Beauchemin: Quebeckers have had little interest in the provincial election
campaign. But it seems Jean Charest’s Liberals were heading for a majority.
Now it may be a new game, predict some analysts.

Luc Lavoie (Former Brian Mulroney Advisor): The Québec bashing that came
out of this political collaboration led by the Conservative government in Ot-
tawa was not very helpful to the federalist cause in Québec. It was not very
helpful to the federalist party in Québec.

Beauchemin: Even Harper’s use of the word separatist, even though he uses
souverenist, or sovereignist in French, has many saying Harper is pushing the
buttons of division. Separatist is a loaded term, in the province.

While Beauchemin does provide an endorsement from one person on the street in an
interview for the Conservative strategy, the majority of the story focuses on the poten-
tial problems of Québec separatism. These findings underline the difficulty for political
elites to have the media accept their framing of events and issues. It is one thing to at-
tempt to demonize or create a “folk devil” of one’s opponents and quite another to
have the media accept such a characterization without comment or criticism. In con-
trast to the literature on moral panics, we find, in this instance at least, that television
news presented independent perspectives outside of government and the opposition
party to oppose the characterization of the coalition being in the hands of “separatists.”
Analyzing how this theme played out in the Québec media would be instructive to
help decipher public opinion at the time, but and also might give insight into the seeds
of the electoral tsunami that changed the face of Québec politics in the 2011 federal
election campaign, when the Bloc Québécois was reduced to four seats and the NDP
became the most successful federalist party in decades.
This article adds to our understanding of the role of television as an institution in Canadian political life. With the guidance of new institutional theory, we can see how English television news balanced, for the most part, the competing frames in a conflict but also how it assessed the parties and leaders. The fact that CBC provided both the most analysis and the largest volume of critical attention to the coalition is a rather interesting development. Conservative commentators have frequently complained of CBC’s so-called left-wing bias (Levant, 2011). Stephen Harper has been openly hostile to the Crown corporation and has had a tumultuous relationship with the CBC, often complaining of a bias against him and his party (Morrison, 2011). Yet, in this instance at least, CBC, while not overwhelmingly unfavourable to the Conservatives, was at least more critical of their opponents than of them. Whether this has to do with the events of the week, a change in editorial direction, or a misrepresentation of CBC’s coverage in the past is beyond the scope of this article to address.

Not only did television have a role to play in how the political parties presented their case to the Canadian public, but also television’s selection of strategic frames may have influenced the standards by which the parties were assessed by the public. The third research question was to what extent television news would balance the public’s assessments of the political players. It is on this question we see the importance of the interpretive function of English network TV news. The emphasis by television news on Dion’s leadership status, concern about the role of the Bloc Québécois, and the lack of Canadian precedents in coalition governments helped legitimize to English Canada Harper’s unprecedented solution to prorogue parliament. Nonetheless, television news media also focused much of their own assessments questioning the strategy and performance of the government in trying to maintain power. In the final analysis, English network television news did present dissenting views on both the actions of the government and those of the coalition.

Having addressed the question of how television news covered the events of the first week of December, we can speculate on why television news covered the crisis as it did. The literature on political crisis may help provide the answers. In the case of the proposed coalition, there were two primary definers who were opposed to each other: the Conservative government and the coalition partners. The relatively short period of time made it virtually impossible for any other interpretive frames by which to view the events. Over a very long period of time, the primary interpretative framework may be altered, however, it “is extremely difficult to alter fundamentally, once established” (Hall et al., 1978, p. 59). Therefore, it is not surprising that once the coalition had been stopped, albeit by prorogation and not popular opinion, Stephen Harper and the Conservatives used the potential of a new coalition in his 2011 campaign rhetoric. Moving away from the terms “socialists and separatists,” Harper instead used the mantra “reckless coalition” and “strong, stable, national, majority Conservative government” to underline his theme. Despite journalists’ cries that that the theme was repetitive, it was one that Harper continued to use up to and beyond the May 2, 2011, election campaign.9

Even though journalists did not accept the Conservative government’s characterizations of its opponents, the “reckless coalition” was a theme that the party continued
to use in the years following the crisis. This study should give us pause as to how much power journalists yield when it comes to their criticism of politicians and events. In addition to examining French-language television coverage of the events, further research is needed to see whether television news exhibits the same coverage of other crises as well as on policy issues. Additional studies are also needed to compare television with traditional media such as newspapers and radio. As the Internet becomes a more dominant form of news dissemination, how the public interacts with media interpretations will also be valuable in assessing the power of the media. While new institutionalism holds that journalists are powerful players in their coverage and assessment of political actors, those political actors wield independent strength that can overcome negative media attention.

Acknowledgments
I would like to thank W.C. Soderlund, Cameron Anderson, and anonymous reviewers for their comments on this article.

Notes
1. All of the major news media referred at some point to the events of the first week of December 2008 as a political crisis. For example, CBC News offered a webpage that provided a collection of stories on the event, labelling the page “Coalition Crisis” (http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/12/01/f-coalition.html). Headlines in daily newspapers across the country also emphasized the crisis label (see, for example, Beauchesne, 2008; Diebel, 2008; Greenaway, 2008; Guttormson, 2008; Linke, 2008; Marsden, 2008). In addition, the events prompted the University of Ottawa’s Faculty of Law to host a forum entitled “Crisis in Canada: Coalition Government and Beyond,” with a number of constitutional experts.

2. Much anecdotal information suggests that Canadians did use the Internet to mobilize support for rallies and to debate the issue. I do not wish to suggest that the Internet did not have a role to play in the events that occurred during the week of the crisis, only that separate study is needed to investigate that role.

3. The detailed coding rule book is available from the author by request.

4. The author would like to thank students Daniel Hobson, Daryl Ann Sdao, and Rhulangane Mungwete for their tireless work in coding the stories.

5. Individual coefficients calculated with Scott’s pi were as follows: sources = .97; problem definition = .87; causal = .88; remedy endorsement = .90; side being discussed = .95; assessments = .95; and spin = .90.

6. While the study employs a census sample in which no statistical measures are necessary, the Chi-Square statistic is used to measure whether the differences we see are real or could be attributed to chance variation.

7. The poll results are based on the following polls and questions: The Angus Reid results are based a random online survey of 1,102 Canadian adults administered between December 1 and 2, 2008, “As you may know, the Conservative minority government faces a confidence motion on December 8, which states: ‘This house has lost confidence in this government and is of the opinion that a viable alternative government can be formed within the present House of Commons.’ How would you like your own Member of Parliament to vote on this measure?” (Reid, 2008). The Ekos results are based on an interactive voice recognition random survey of 2,536 Canadians from December 2 to 3 that asked, “The Conservative government of Stephen Harper will likely be defeated when Parliament next has an opportunity to vote. The opposition parties want to replace the Conservatives with a coalition made up of Liberals and New Democrats led on an interim basis by Stéphane Dion. Based on this, which of the following is closest to your own view? Parliament taking a break for a month or so to see whether
the Conservatives can get the confidence of parliament when it comes back into session. The proposed coalition of Liberals and New Democrats replacing the Conservative government within the next few weeks. An election to be called within the news few weeks to break the impasse" (Graves & Adams, 2008a). The Strategic Counsel poll is based on a national telephone survey of 1,000 Canadians December 3, 2008, that asked, "Do you support or oppose the Liberal-NDP coalition replacing the Conservative Government?" (Strategic Counsel, 2008). Results are based on net support and net opposed responses.

8. On December 2, 2009, Gilles Duceppe was quoted in a story by Susan Bonner (2008) in which he said, “I think every gain we’re making here is good for Québec, and what’s good for Québec is good for a sovereign Québec.”

9. In a separate paper, I will be examining television news coverage of the 2011 election campaign. Transcripts reveal that Harper used the phrase “reckless coalition” throughout the campaign. On election night he repeated the theme, indicating that Canadians had voted for a “strong, stable, national, majority Conservative government.”

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