(Mis)Representing the 2008 Prorogation:
Agendas, Frames, and Debates in Canada’s
Mediocracy

Johannes Wheeldon
Norwich University
Alex McBrien
University of Calgary

ABSTRACT In this article, we explore the role of the Canadian media during the 2008 parliamentary crisis. While the crisis was resolved when the Governor General granted a request for prorogation that allowed the Prime Minister to avoid a vote of no-confidence, debate persists about the wisdom of such action. We argue this event represents an important case study in understanding how the Canadian media communicates essential principles of parliamentary democracy. Five years later, and based on recent research, we compare survey results on the 2008 prorogation between 10 leading Canadian journalists and commentators, and 30 constitutional scholars and former advisers to the Crown.

KEYWORDS Prorogation; Media; Survey; Constitutional scholars

Introduction

Media play a variety of roles in a democracy. From investigating and informing, to validating or contesting political messages, media shapes public discourse concerning politics, democracy, and governance (Chaffee & Frank, 1996; Livingstone, Couldry, & Markham, 2007). This is by no means a recent observation. Walter Lippman (1922) noted that people make sense of the world presented to them by the

Johannes Wheeldon, Assistant Professor, School of Justice Studies and Sociology, Norwich University. Email: jwheeldo@norwich.edu. Alex McBrien, Graduate student, Department of Communication and Culture, University of Calgary. Email: mcbriena@gmail.com.
news media because of the tendency for the media to help order and organize the reality in which people live. The news media influence what issues are relevant to society, and hence shape the way a message’s audience perceive their reality. This influence is based on the way presented images influence how individuals construct their respective reality of the world. As Lippmann argues, “the world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind” (Lippmann, 1922, p. 32).

While few doubt the media’s role in shaping news, it is the myriad ways in which media, the public, and policymakers interact that is central to a nuanced understanding of Canada’s political system. On this view, less attention should be paid to how the media influence the public and policymakers per se, and more should be paid to both the connections between the public and elected officials, as well as to the role the media plays in mediating these interactions. For instance, Hugo Cyr (2013) has observed that on election nights, media in Canada compete against one another to be the first to declare which party will form the next government. In the rush to make these announcements, the media often substitute a complex set of constitutional rules, principles, and practices for the simplistic view that the political party that has won the largest number of seats has won the election, and hence the right to form the next government (Cyr, 2013).

Elections are an important, but not exclusive, example of the importance of how media frames constitutional issues in Canada, and the consequences that result. The 2008 prorogation represents an important case study in understanding how the Canadian media communicates essential principles of parliamentary democracy. In this article, we build on past work that suggests that the 2008 prorogation offered a problematic picture of what Canadians know about their democracy (Wheeldon, 2011), as well as more recent research that highlights the problematic role that the media played in communicating what was at stake during the run up to the 2008 prorogation (McBrien, 2012; Miljan, 2011; Wheeldon, 2013).

Building on Soroka’s (2002) agenda-setting framework for issue analysis, we compare the views of 30 Canadian constitutional scholars and advisers to the Crown, with the views of 10 national journalists and commentators to test the hypothesis that journalists and commentators (media) had a fundamentally different view of the constitutional questions at stake in 2008 than leading constitutional scholars and advisors to the Crown (experts). The article is organized to discuss the role of the media in a democracy, and to synthesize past research, highlighting the problematic role played by the Canadian media during the parliamentary crisis during November and December 2008. Our findings suggest that five years after the 2008 prorogation, respondents are better informed on the issues that were at stake in 2008 and more cognizant of the consequences of failing to “fact check” statements of constitutional significance made by the prime minister. We conclude that, should similar crises emerge, a deliberate effort to identify agendas, frames, and arguments for and against specific propositions might allow the media to present various legitimate debates that exist, rather than prematurely accepting dominant frames.

**Agenda-setting framework: Models, frames, and key concepts**

If more scholarly attention is needed to understand the media’s role in shaping political and civic engagement in Canada (O’Neill, 2009), a useful first step might be to examine
case studies in which multiple agendas intersect (Soroka, 2002). Furthermore, it may be especially valuable to explore events in which the media’s role has been critiqued (Wheeldon, 2013). The agenda-setting function of the media was formally conceptualized in McCombs and Shaw’s 1972 study of the media coverage during the 1968 U.S. presidential election. Agenda setting refers to how the media organizes, constructs, and presents political news. Agenda setting is best defined as referring to

the idea that there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that mass media place on certain issues (relative placement or amount of coverage), and the importance attributed to these issues by mass audiences. (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11)

It has become the most common theoretical foundation research on mass media research for more than 30 years (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006).1

Understanding agenda setting requires assessing relational frameworks among media, the public, and policymakers, all of whom have specific agendas that both shape and are shaped by the nature of the news story (Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg, 1995; Rogers, Dearing & Bregman, 1993; Walgrave, 2008). One means to characterize the agenda-setting process is based on three sources or models of agenda setting: bottom-up, top-down, and mediacracy (Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg, 1995). Each of these models addresses a distinct origin for agendas appearing within the news. This includes the transfer and establishment of issue salience on public issues, as well as the process of political communication involving both how problems and the range of satisfactory solutions are identified (Birkland, 1997; Dery, 2000). In Canada, Soroka (2002) has presented the agenda-setting framework as one that involves the interaction between the public agenda, the policy agenda, and the media agenda.

The public agenda can be seen alongside the bottom-up model of agenda setting. In this model, it is the public’s concerns that are prioritized and that are posited to influence the political agenda. Thus, the media acts as a conduit of information of public concerns to the political elite, and public preferences drive policy developments (Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg, 1995). In such instances, the media serves principally as an information provider rather than an opinion shaper. The policy agenda might be seen alongside the top-down model of agenda setting. Both suggest that political elites influence the media’s agenda (Mastaganis & Payne, 2005), which then in turn may influence the public’s agenda or perception of an issue (Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg, 1995). On the other hand, the media may play a role based on the ways in which they simply reflect, or more rarely, challenge the frames presented by political elites. This forms the basis of the third agenda-setting model, mediacracy (Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg, 1995), or, according to Soroka (2002), the media agenda. It suggests a more involved role for media in which they “create pseudo events by which they shape cognitions about the real world” (Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg, 1995, p. 100). Positioned between the top-down and bottom-up models, this approach views the media as the central agenda-setting institution within society.

In addition to these agenda-setting approaches, there are three other concepts that may interact to shape the presentation of news and its influence on viewers. One is “obtrusiveness,” understood as the amount of personal experience with an issue.
For example, Chernov (2010) found that those who did not have personal experience with an issue showed significant attitude change based on how the story was presented, further validating findings that have been reproduced in dozens of other studies (Aday, 2006; Hastie & Park, 1986; Iyengar, 1991; McCombs, 2004).

Another relevant concept is “priming,” which refers to the ways in which the presentation of news can impact the “standards that people use to make political evaluations” (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 63). Priming can occur when news content suggests to news audiences that they ought to use specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of leaders and governments. While some consider priming to be an extension of agenda setting, it is perhaps best seen along side it. Agenda setting may make some issues more salient in people’s mind than others, while priming suggests the standards people ought to take into account when making judgments about political candidates or issues (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

The final concept is “framing.” Distinct from how issues are selected by the media and/or how these issues are primed for public consumption, framing focuses explicitly on how events are characterized. Scheufele & Tewksbury (2007) suggest the sociological foundations of framing can be based on the idea that individuals understand the world in reference to their own life experiences (Goffman, 1974). In a series of experiments, researchers demonstrated how different presentations of essentially identical decision-making scenarios influence people’s choices and their evaluation of the various options (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; 1984). These concepts are essential to any evaluation of the media’s role in 2008 of communicating key principles of parliamentary democracy.

**Media (mis)representations in 2008: Agendas, coverage, and critiques**

On Friday, November 28, 2008, standing before a press conference in the foyer of the House of Commons, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that he was rescheduling an Opposition Day scheduled for Monday, December 1st. It had been previously announced by opposition parties that the opposition day in question was to be used to move a motion of non-confidence in the Harper government. This would have almost certainly seen the fall of the Conservative Government, as all three opposition parties had signalled their intention to defeat the government. On December 1st, the Liberal Party of Canada and the New Democratic Party (NDP) signed an accord, pledging to work together until June 30th, 2011, while the Bloc Québecois agreed to support the proposed coalition government until June 30th, 2010 (Russell & Sossin, 2009). On December 4th, the Prime Minister surprised many when he advised the Governor General to prorogue parliament while a vote of confidence was pending (Miller, 2009). Between December 1st and December 4th, Harper pursued a number of communication strategies that confused constitutional conventions and stoked nationalist animus and regional tensions within Canada (Wheeldon, 2011).

In the first few years since the 2008 prorogation, there was little reflection on the media’s role during the crisis. Few commented on the significance of the protests outside Rideau Hall that had been orchestrated by the Prime Minister’s Office. Further, no one noted the potential personal conflict of interest that the “separatist takeover” narrative implied for the Governor General. Instead of recognizing the importance of the two competing views in 2008 about the nature of Canada’s parliamentary system
of government, the media has at times appeared self-congratulatory, arguing that since the coalition fell apart, their coverage focusing on Dion's perceived weaknesses was justified (Wheeldon, 2011). The problem is that media decisions about what to cover ignored the fact that Canadians were ill prepared to challenge the attempts to sow confusion about the way democracy operates. At times, the media appeared to be caught up in what Don Newman called “the fantastic Tory spin machine” (Klein, 2009).

In retrospect there were at least three frames based on the agenda-setting framework presented above, which the media might have focused upon. The top-down, or policy agenda, might have resulted in media coverage on prorogation, based on the frames presented in the House of Commons about the role of responsible government in a Westminster parliamentary system (McBrien, 2012). This might have pitted traditional notions of responsible government, which simply require that those who exercise ultimate political power always obtain and hold the support of the House to use that power (Smith, 2009), with newer untested notions of majoritarianism, in which Canadians directly elect a Prime Minister who exerts executive authority with few impediments (Flanagan, 2009).

For example, Harper insisted that the government would “use all legal means to resist this undemocratic seizure of power” (Mercer, 2008). This appeared to suggest another departure from past parliamentary practice. Dismissing his own party’s failure to capture a majority in the 2008 election, he asserted that the coalition would overturn his minority government’s right to govern. Through Conservative radio and TV ads, Harper contended, “a leader whose party captured just 25% of the vote in the October 14 election doesn’t have a legitimate mandate to govern” (Chase, Curry & Campbell, 2008).

A central issue within this frame is how to understand the role of elections. Under traditional notions of responsible government, elections are but one means to ensure political accountability. Canadians elect a local Member of Parliament (MP) to represent them in Ottawa, and the Executive is selected from this group of M.P.’s. During the crisis in 2008, the majoritarian view of democracy was presented by the Conservatives, in which the recent election was the one and only mechanism by which a government could gain a mandate (Simpson, 2009).

Another frame might be based on the bottom-up, public model centred on the role of political and linguistic minorities. In Canada, there are strong feelings about the political role of the Bloc Québécois, who have explicitly focused on the regional, political, and cultural rights of French-speaking Quebeckers. Beyond the constitutional question of the legitimacy of coalitions, once the Prime Minister embraced a narrative that appeared to de-legitimize the Bloc Québécois (BQ) as a political minority, he was appealing to many Canadians who resent the Parti Québécois and by extension the Bloc for the tactics used before and after the 1995 Referendum (Levy, 2009). For example, statements made in the House of Commons by Stephen Harper referred to the accord between the Liberals and NDP as undemocratic backroom dealing, and claimed that the inclusion of the BQ amounted to “a betrayal of the voters of this country, a betrayal of the best interests of our economy, and a betrayal of the best interests of our country” (Topp, 2009).
This theme continued as the Prime Minister erroneously alleged that three clearly visible maple leaf flags at the coalition's signing ceremony did not exist, and railed against the “unpatriotic” coalition. Harper stated: “such an illegitimate government would be a catastrophe for our democracy, our unity and our economy” and that the NDP and Liberals have entered into an “unholy alliance” with the Bloc Québécois, “a party that is here in Ottawa for no other reason than to destroy the country we all love.” (Whittington, Campion-Smith & MacCharles, 2008). Other conservatives, like John Baird, Jean-Pierre Blackburn, and Jim Prentice, equated support for the coalition with a “separatist coup d’état” and threatened that “Conservatives would go over the head of Parliament and of the Governor General” (Akin, de Souza, Mayeda & O’Neill, 2008).

These statements appeared to some as a cynical effort to mislead the public about coalition-building, given that Harper had himself proposed cooperative efforts with the Bloc Québécois (BQ) while in opposition (O’Malley, 2008). The simplistic suggestion that every BQ voter is a separatist intent on destroying Canada is silly. Many simply seek more control for Québec over its own internal affairs and a stronger role for Québec inside Canada. By portraying the BQ, and Quebeckers in general, as being a threat to national unity in Canada (Maioni, 2008), Harper played on old nationalistic divisions. Canadians might have been well served by media efforts to ask the government to explain why it is that Quebeckers who voted for the BQ now have less political and civic rights to participate in government than everyone else.

Two recent projects have offered important contributions to understanding the media’s role in 2008 (Miljan, 2011; McBrien, 2012). The first is a Master’s thesis (McBrien, 2012) that explored the agendas and frames used by newspapers in their coverage of the 2008 prorogation. Based on a content analysis of articles that appeared between November 27th, 2008, and December 7th, 2008, in the Toronto Star, National Post, and Le Devoir, key themes, messages, and terms were identified, categorized and compared. McBrien (2012) hypothesized that, as a policy-driven issue, prorogation would emerge through the top-down model of agenda setting and lead to frames presented in the House of Commons about the role of responsible government in the Westminster system. He further suggested competing views would be more likely to appear based on the perceived ideological orientation of the newspaper. Instead, he found newspapers placed more salience on frames and agendas concerning terms like “socialists,” and “separatists” (McBrien, 2012).

The second involved an institutional analysis of how the Liberal-NDP accord was framed through national television news during the first week of December 2008 (Miljan, 2011). Miljan argues that the media left the debate of the merits of the proposed coalition, or the prorogation of parliament, to the frame sponsors. Instead, television media focused their commentary on how the parties performed, the next strategic move by the government or coalition partners, and the potential problems the coalition would face if led by Stéphane Dion (p. 571). The emphasis by television news on Dion’s leadership status, concern about the role of the BQ, and the lack of Canadian examples of federal coalition governments, helped to legitimize Harper’s unprecedented request to prorogue parliament (p. 573).
Together these findings suggest that the media selected which frames to focus on, defining how the government and opposition parties ought to be judged, and ranked which issues mattered in 2008. Understanding how television and print journalism covered the parliamentary crisis is also important, given that few Canadians had any recent personal experience with confidence votes leading to government changing hands, with coalition governments formed after an election, or with prorogation either on its own or in 2008 as a contested practice. Television news primed the viewing public by focusing on the strategy and performance of the government and the opposition during this period (Miljan, 2011), while leading newspapers framed the issues at stake as ones related to political leadership and regional divisions (McBrien, 2012).

The role of the media in 2008 was widely criticized in a recent project involving Canadian constitutional scholars and former advisers to Lieutenant Governors and Governors General (Wheeldon, 2013). Although not specifically asked within the survey, numerous respondents pointed to the lack of understanding among Canadians about our parliamentary system and the media’s “farcical” role. In sum:

very few if any of the journalists understood Canada’s Parliamentary system or the role/prerogatives of the Crown in the system. Most bought into the Harper government’s tactics and strategy without any critical thinking.

(p. 20)

Five years later, it may be reasonable to assess to what extent the Canadian media is better placed to confront the constitutional questions that emerged in 2008 and that remain relevant to understanding possible reforms to Crown prerogative, parliamentary accountability, and the role of the Governor General.2

Methods: Question, sample, data collection and analysis

Research focus
One explanation for the suggestion that journalists and commentators in 2008 focused on terms like “socialist” and “separatist” and covered strategy, tactics, and regional differences instead of engaging the broader questions of constitutional significance is that they simply did not understand basic political and civic concepts that animate Canada’s parliamentary system. While retrospective analysis is impossible, one can explore current views of journalists and commentators by comparing their answers to a survey on the constitutional issues at play in 2008 with the answers provided by subject matter experts, such as constitutional scholars and former advisors to the Canadian Crown. In this article, we tested the hypothesis that journalists and commentators (media) have a fundamentally different view of the constitutional questions at stake from that of leading constitutional scholars and advisors to the Crown (experts).

Sample
Between October and November 2012, the views of 14 national journalists and commentators were solicited from a variety of national publications. Journalists were contacted by email and invited to complete an online survey using the online survey software Qualtrics. All were promised anonymity and confidentiality.3 This convenience sample was developed based on the following criteria:
1. Journalists and commentators who wrote on the 2008 prorogation during or after the events of December 2008;
2. Journalists and commentators who are currently employed by Canadian newspapers and news outlets;
3. Journalists and commentators who have expressed conflicting views on the 2008 prorogation.

Of the 14 solicited journalists and commentators, 10 started and completed the survey representing a response rate of just over 70%.

**Data collection**

Data collection was completed using an online survey that included specific questions and a choice of answers on the 2008 prorogation. The options provided were based on propositions published in peer-reviewed books and articles since 2008 and were reviewed by three scholars who have published distinct and contradictory positions on the 2008 prorogation. In this article, we focus on comparing responses to 1) the existence and nature of the Governor General's discretion to prorogue; and 2) the impact of prorogation on principles of responsible government. In every question, participants were given an opportunity to add their own responses.

**Analysis**

The research utilized the analytic tool *Analysis of Competing Hypotheses* (ACH), which is an example of a Structured Analytic Technique used to identify mental mind-sets, manage uncertainty, and improve judgment (Heuer, 1999). These strategies were developed in part through careful analysis of past decision-making processes drawn from domestic and foreign policy scenarios (Neustadt & May, 1986). Specifically, ACH is useful when there is a large amount of data to absorb and evaluate, and when analysts themselves have a view on the topic or issue. The approach focuses on presenting the theories that have been advanced and the evidence for these views and disentangling the assumptions upon which these theories are based (Heuer & Pherson, 2010).

In this study, we used ACH to compare the two most popular positions taken by journalists and commentators, and constitutional scholars and former advisers to the Crown. Additional questions exploring the underlying logic of each position were likewise quantified and compared. Consistent with ACH, the focus involved testing support for specific hypotheses surrounding the 2008 prorogation to ascertain which explanations appear the weakest and which explanations remain contentious and/or require more attention. In addition, when participants shared additional comments, views, or reflections, these were combined and integrated into the analysis.

**Findings: Comparing survey results**

In sum, there is little support for the hypothesis that the media surveyed through this project had a significantly different view of the constitutional questions at stake. While differences between the groups emerged, five years later, the essential debate based on the top two responses is the same for both groups. This debate might be framed as between, on the one hand, those who hold that the Governor General has broad discretion to rely upon his or her personal discretion in assessing governing coalitions, and, on the other hand, those who argue that the Governor General's discretion to re-
fuse the Prime Minister is limited to determining the views of the House, Canada’s only democratic institution at the federal level. The findings are presented based on the following themes: 1) the existence and nature of the Governor General’s discretion; and 2) the impact of the 2008 prorogation on responsible government. Of specific interest are the similarities and differences between journalists and commentators (media) and constitutional scholars and former advisers to the Crown (experts).

1) the existence and nature of the Governor General’s discretion in 2008

In response to the question, “Did the Governor General have the discretion in 2008 to refuse the Prime Minister?”, a large majority of respondents agreed that she had. While a higher percentage of experts (86%) than media respondents (80%) argued the Governor General had discretion, the difference is small. Table 1 reports a comparison of the replies.

Table 1: Expert and media views of Governor General’s discretion in 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Experts (n=29)</th>
<th>Media (n=10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked about the logic behind their view, media respondents who stated that the Governor General had discretion to refuse the Prime Minister were split evenly between those who thought that the Governor General always retained the right to refuse and those who thought that the discretion was limited to ensuring the House met on the vote of no confidence. Experts suggested by a 2-1 margin that this discretion was tied to determining who held confidence in the House of Commons, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Expert and media views on nature of Governor General’s discretion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Experts (n=19)</th>
<th>Media (n=8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Until House Met</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always Retains</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2) views on the impact of prorogation on responsible government

When asked which statement best reflected their view on the impact of the 2008 prorogation on principles of responsible government, a majority of scholars stated it had harmed principles of responsible government. Based on the ACH analysis, the top two responses are presented in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Expert and media views on the impact of 2008 prorogation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experts (n=18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upheld</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media (n=7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upheld</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked which statement best reflected the views of participants on the Governor General's decision to follow the advice of the Prime Minister in 2008, a majority replied that the Governor General's decision was problematic given that prorogation temporarily undermined the role of House to determine who governs Canada. The second most common answer was that the Governor General should rely upon personal discretion to assess “appropriateness” of alternative governing coalitions. Table 4 reports the top 2 answers for both groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4: Expert and media views on the Governor General’s decision of 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experts (n=16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undermined House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate given coalition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media (n=6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undermined House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate given coalition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to selecting specific propositions in answering the survey, some participants offered additional reflections. For example, some journalists and commentators surveyed were critical of the media’s role in 2008. Some argued broadly that:

The entire affair was compromised by … a lack of understanding of the conventions of parliamentary government in Canada by the public and parliamentarians and journalists.

Others suggested that the “media failed in its role by not sufficiently fact-checking the Prime Minister’s argument that ‘the party that wins the most seats forms the gov-
There is little support for the hypothesis that journalists and commentators view the constitutional issues in 2008 differently today than do constitutional scholars and advisers to the Crown. There is evidence, however, that journalists and commentators are aware that they (like most Canadians) did not know enough about the issues at stake in 2008 to properly convey the significance of the debates, the assertions, and the consequences of accepting one constitutional view over another.

Discussion: Mediacracy and media’s role in political crises

The term “mediacracy” was popularized in a 1975 book by Kevin Phillips entitled: *Mediacracy: American Parties and Politics in the Communications Age* in which he posited the likely effects that new communication technologies would have on American politics. The central tenet of mediacracy is that the media agenda sets both the public agenda and the political agenda. While Kleininnijenhuis and Rietberg (1995) found little support for it in their seminal study of the presentation of economic issues in the Netherlands in the 1980s, it has remained a fixture of Media and Communication Studies. Many hold that within established democracies, the media is an “inevitable third element,” mediating between the political system and citizens (Ansolabehere, Behr & Iyengar, 1993; Bennett & Entman, 2000; Graber, 2001).

One view of mediacracy implies that a media system is a self-reliant social subsystem in which independent actors serve as the “fourth estate,” a term first used by Edmund Burke in a debate about the need to open the U.K. House of Commons to the press in 1787 (Schultz, 1998). In general, media are viewed as playing a central role in the development, framing, and presentation of political “news.” Many still hold the view that media are independent actors within a democracy, holding government and other powerful elites to account. A more sceptical view presents mediacracy as the result of a fusion between political and media elites. Colin Seymour-Ure (1974) argued that “parallelism” existed between parties and newspapers, based on ownership of the mass media, the editorial choices of the news organizations, and the party affiliation of the readership. More recent conceptions explore how common views, assumptions, and dominant positions form part of what has been called media-political parallelism (Bodrunova, 2010).

Perhaps because the notion of mediacracy remains contested, there has been little research on how much the media knows or understands about contentious issues, and how this shapes whether top-down or bottom-up frames are more likely to be adopted. In the public agenda, or bottom-up model, the media may simply reframe issues identified by the public in terms likely to be “newsworthy.” Likewise, in top-down or policy agenda models, the media plays a more or less neutral conduit for stories generated by political elites by reporting what one official stated. The mediacracy model assigns media an essential and even dominant role in societal agenda setting as they affect both the public agenda and the policy agenda. If correct, more research is needed to understand and assess how well informed the media is when contentious issues emerge so that they may fully and fairly discharge their duty (Miljan, 2011).

This study suggests that debates remain on both the role of the Governor General and the 2008 prorogation, and while one view is more popular for both media and ex-
perts, the two most common views are the same for both groups. While it is not possible to retrospectively assess knowledge in 2008, questions remain about how to organize media practice when political crises emerge. To help explain the “dialectics” of media practice, Bauder (2010) applies Bourdieu’s (1998) concept of *habitus* to journalists. Known as the practices, dispositions, styles and tastes that are shared among the members of a social or professional community, *habitus* offers a means to understand the informal practices within newsrooms. Bauder (2010) shows how editors, reporters, and media staff adopt common rules of news publishing, standards of journalistic integrity, norms of establishing legitimacy, and practices to select information. As active agents, media select and interpret news events relying at least in part on journalistic “gut feelings” to select newsworthy information (Schultz, 2007).

### Table 5: Identifying agendas, arguments, and frames during the 2008 crisis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACT</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Substance</th>
<th>Fears</th>
<th>Rights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CPC won a plurality of seats in last election and has a mandate to govern</td>
<td>A majority of voters chose other parties who will work together</td>
<td>Dion does not “look” like a Prime Minister should</td>
<td>Looks are irrelevant; Dion is PM if he holds confidence</td>
<td>BQ has threatened the break up of Canada for regional advantage</td>
<td>BQ voters have equal citizenship rights, even if many dislike BQ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VALUE</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Substance</th>
<th>Fears</th>
<th>Rights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plurality rules; elections are the only way to change a government</td>
<td>Majority in House rules; elections not only way to change a government</td>
<td>Leaders should be strong, top-down, effective speakers</td>
<td>Leaders should focus on leading a strong team</td>
<td>BQ as part of coalition threatens Canada, and affirms their past policies</td>
<td>BQ as part of coalition affirms their rights and role in Canada</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLICY</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Substance</th>
<th>Fears</th>
<th>Rights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prorogation to avoid confidence votes is acceptable</td>
<td>Prorogation to avoid confidence votes is not acceptable</td>
<td>Coalition including ‘socialists/ separatists’ will stoke regional tensions</td>
<td>Coalition represents means to bring disparate views together</td>
<td>BQ should never be part of a governing coalition</td>
<td>BQ can participate in coalition subject to specific terms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The problem is how informal practices may complicate competing views of journalistic roles and responsibilities. On the one hand journalists have an obligation to write accurately and objectively about real occurrences in the world (Schudson, 2002). On the other, the media typically follows particular practices to select, interpret, and
present these facts (Tuchman, 1978). As Miljan (2011) notes, an important factor in the media coverage in 2008 was the short period in which the events unfolded. In these circumstances initial hyperbolic frames can overwhelm other more nuanced interpretations (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, Roberts, 1978). Miljan’s findings are especially important in understanding the power that journalists have in political and constitutional crises to frame events, issues, and other questions that may emerge in times of political uncertainty.

One approach to manage this inherent complexity is based on the view that contradiction and not consensus is the central element of journalistic discovery (Merrill, 1989). This may require that when political crises occur, journalists not only seek to understand the frames presented by key stakeholders, but also actively seek out contradictions and oppositional viewpoints. The conscious identification of agendas, frames, and arguments that may pertain to a story is essential. This should then be followed by internal discussion about the potential consequences of accepting one agenda, frame, or argument over another. One practice based on debate and dialogue pedagogy (Wheeldon, Chavez & Cooke, 2013) is to take deliberate steps to outline each side of an argument using a step-by-step approach. Based on existing literature on media and prorogation (McBrien, 2012; Miljan, 2011; Wheeldon, 2011), one approach is presented in Table 5.

Limitations
All research is by its very nature limited, and this project is no different. The sample of national journalists and commentators is too small to infer anything like generalizable meaning from their responses. Even combined with findings that show little variance between experts and media based on the Analysis of Competing Hypotheses (ACH) strategy, care should be taken in attempting to extrapolate more broadly. Likewise, while the justification provided for ACH may appear sound, the use of this analysis strategy ought to be tested and refined. It may be that by reducing complex ideas to the 2 most common positions on a topic or issue tends to oversimplify concepts that require an understanding of their inherent complexity.

Another important limitation is that while this article focused on the Governor General’s role in 2008 and the outcome of prorogation, beyond the purview of this analysis is the need to compare similarities and differences among these groups about the best way to address the confusion around constitutionality in Canada. While some journalists and commentators acknowledge the failure of the media to challenge statements made by the Prime Minister about the nature of parliamentary democracy, others held that:

My view is the system worked as it should; requires no modification; mere possibility that GG will refuse to prorogue is a check on PM power; PM also took political risk and gamble… Should opposition parties count on GG to do make the tough political choice (i.e., vote out a government) that they eventually declined to do?

This respondent appears to suggest that no new steps are needed to address Canada’s constitutional confusion, while betraying his or her own confusion by suggesting the Governor General “votes out” a government.
The view that “the system worked as it should have” is one that also exists among Canadian constitutional scholars (Valpy, 2009; Cameron, 2009). In this regard, arguments have been made to suggest that it has long been, and still is, parliamentary practice for the Prime Minister to ask the Governor General to prorogue parliament as he or she sees fit. Most often, this has occurred once a government has accomplished all of its goals and completed its agenda during a parliamentary session. The exception in 2008 was that the Prime Minister used prorogation as a means to avoid a vote of confidence that he knew he would lose. Ethics and morality aside, the fact that Stephen Harper was able to avoid a vote of non-confidence by receiving permission to prorogue parliament can be seen as exploiting a constitutional loophole, as opposed to an unambiguously unconstitutional act. That this position is still debated adds to the constitutional confusion that presents itself within the field of Canadian political studies. It also leaves room for further discussion as to how to remedy these differences in constitutional interpretations.

Another limitation is the call for a more deliberate brainstorming process to identify agendas, frames, arguments, and counterevidence. While our approach offers a structured means to ensure various ways of seeing a story are considered before dominant frames are presented as fact, it assumes both that this does not occur within Canadian newsrooms and that such a call could be reconciled in an era in which expectations about the immediacy of information often undermine other more rigorous processes. New norms dictate that journalists are expected to accept an increasing amount of responsibilities, while competing in the never-ending and near constant 24-hour news cycle, on both traditional and social media. As a result, the quantity and quality of time that journalists spend researching stories can be complicated by an ever-increasing workload, as well as by the rush to be the first to report on a story. The suggestion that Canadian newsrooms should make an increased effort to incorporate a more deliberate brainstorming process to identify agendas, frames, arguments, and counterevidence, may in fact fly in the face of the established journalistic realities in today’s news industry. These include layoffs of reporters and editors that have eliminated many specialist reporter positions, and replaced them with general assignment reporters who are assigned to cover a different issue every day.

A final acknowledgement that ought to be presented in the interests of transparency is that in previous work, the authors of this article, (McBrien, 2012; Wheeldon, 2011) have each taken contradictory positions on some of the questions explored in more depth through this research. While their views on the 2008 prorogation remain at odds, both remain interested in the role of media in times of constitutional controversy, and several strategies were employed to address the possibility that personal views may, or could be seen to contaminate the research. Firstly, a deliberate strategy underlying this research is that those who hold views different than those of the researchers were included in the survey. Secondly, the research prorogation project relied upon Analysis of Competing Hypotheses (ACH) to guide the analysis. This approach relied upon a survey design in which the questions asked of participants were based on the best possible case for various published positions. ACH is an analytic tool that has some important benefits when there is a large amount of data to absorb and eval-
uate, and (as in this case) when the researchers may have a personal view on the topic or issue. Indeed it is this strength that provides the media a means to identify which debates ought to be reported upon, and which might be ignored.

Conclusion

Previous research suggests that the media selected which stories to tell during the prorogation crisis of 2008 and focused on simplistic accounts of derogatory terms, regional tensions, and political strategy to the exclusion of more substantive questions about parliamentary democracy, accountability, and political representation (McBrien, 2012; Miljan, 2011; Wheeldon, 2011). Thus, it may be reasonable to assume that the media was simply ignorant of the broader issues at stake. While that may have been the case in 2008, this article suggests that those in media who participated in this research hold views that are more or less consistent with Canadian constitutional scholars and advisers to the Crown. Based on the ACH, the debate about the 2008 prorogation that exists amongst constitutional scholars also exists among the selected journalists and commentators. In short, the question is not whether the Governor General could have intervened in 2008, but rather, about how to understand the Crown’s role when a government seeks to avoid a vote of non-confidence in the House of Commons.

The findings in this article suggest that while debate in Canada about the 2008 prorogation remains, the two most common views about the role of Governor General and the impact of the 2008 prorogation are the same among leading Canadian journalists and commentators, as well as constitutional scholars and former advisers to the Crown. While not everyone may agree that media’s role in a democracy is one of informing, educating, and engaging, few would dispute that media shapes public discourse concerning politics, democracy, and governance. This role may require a more deliberate approach to ensure that when political crises arise, early frames that favour one group over another are not adopted before other views are considered.

Notes

1. Beyond the scope of this article, but of some interest, is the idea that the agenda-setting function of the media, as traditionally defined, is out-dated. Given the role of the Internet in challenging the media as sole gatekeeper of information, and a much more deliberate effort by governments to circumvent and constrain the media in Canada and elsewhere, this framework might usefully be revisited and updated. For an example, see Gladstone (2012).

2. This study emerged from a larger study entitled “Assessing Views on the 2008 Prorogation,” IRB Number 12688, which was certified exempt on August 9, 2012, by the Washington State University’s Office of Research Assurances based on 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2). It is not possible to identify which of those approached completed the survey and no individual response can be attributed to any respondent.

3. Journalists and commentators approached were well known national figures. Each had covered the 2008 prorogation for publications and outlets such as the CBC, Maclean’s, National Post, Ottawa Citizen, and Toronto Star. While all were invited to waive anonymity, only David Akin explicitly agreed to do so.

4. Constitutional experts were selected based on specific criteria including 1) tenured or tenure track scholars who have published or engaged in significant public engagement on the 2008 prorogation; 2) advisers to the Crown including private secretaries to Provincial Lt. Governors, and those asked to consult with the Governor General in 2008. Of the 34 initially contacted, 25 completed the survey (see Wheeldon, 2013).
References


Hastie, Reid, & Park, Bernadette. (1986). The relationship between memory and judgment depends on whether the task is memory-based or on-line. Psychological Review, 93(3), 258–268.


