Commentary

“Recess Is Over, Students”: The Suburban’s Framing of Educational Issues and the 2012 Printemps Érable

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ABSTRACT In this article, I explore how Montréal-area community newspaper The Suburban represented the 2012 Printemps érable and, more specifically, the educational issues at the core of this uprising, which was sparked by a historic student strike. A qualitative framing analysis was conducted on the visual and textual content of the newspaper’s front pages from February 13 to August 1, 2012. Results suggest that the paper framed the Printemps érable as an illegitimate series of individual protest actions worthy of derision. Students were represented as lazy, self-centred, directionless consumers, and authoritarian government action as desirable in forcing them to submit to the realities of a neoliberal economy and corresponding education system.

KEYWORDS Community media; Education; Frame analysis; Social movement; Newspapers

Introduction Many of us involved in the 2012 Québec student strike and ensuing Printemps érable were disappointed in mainstream media representations of our popular revolt. We felt that the messages being disseminated, which so many unquestioningly accepted, did not accurately reflect the reality we were experiencing together in the streets, nor the
issues, educational and otherwise, we were collectively trying to address. This continued long after students returned to class, as an article titled “Students cost city $11.6 million (or 19,000 student increases) in police overtime” (Sévigny, 2013) was published a full year after the protests. However, this article was printed not in the editorial pages of one of the oft-maligned corporate-owned newspapers, but on the front page of an idiosyncratic local publication called The Suburban. Is this the kind of coverage it had been providing during the entire spring and summer of the previous year? Could The Suburban not, as an independent newspaper, offer an alternative to this disturbing hegemonic narrative?

The Suburban occupies a fairly unique position in the Québec media scene. Founded in 1963 in Montréal’s English-speaking west-end suburb of Côte-Saint-Luc, the paper is now owned by the Sochaczewski family, with the outspoken Beryl Wajsman serving as editor-in-chief. It is published in a tabloid format every Wednesday, with three editions: its principal “City” edition—which was used for this study—as well as “West Island” and “East End” editions. Delivered to homes and made available free of charge, The Suburban’s website (n.d.) bills it as “Quebec’s largest English weekly newspaper” and claims it has a print circulation of 145,000 copies—although recent issues have declared that its three editions “have reached a total circulation of 140,000 copies.” Its website also boasts, in addition to its numerous other accolades, that it is “a repeat winner of the QCNA’s best overall newspaper in Québec and the first Canadian winner of the SNA’s Best community service award [sic],” although it should be noted that neither of these organizations include publications in French. The Suburban thus appears to represent a singular voice for a relatively wealthy Anglophone minority in Montréal, being both highly regarded among community newspapers and widely read. It is also noteworthy of course for the consistency and clarity of its editorial stance, which will be discussed below.

In this article, I present the results of a qualitative analysis of the framing of the Printemps érable and, more specifically, of educational issues in The Suburban. The research includes both visual and textual content from the front page of the paper during the period from the beginning of the student strikes up until the announcement of the provincial election that would ultimately oust the ruling party from power. The results suggest that this particular publication, in a way possibly similar to that of the mainstream media, worked to delegitimize the uprising, to conflate the categories of student and protester, and to imply that both present a problem to which the solution is decisive government action. The Suburban framed students as lazy, self-interested, and directionless consumers, and education, whether they like it or not, as little more than another market commodity to be bought and sold.

This research is particularly relevant considering the current groundswell of discontent against the current provincial Liberal government’s austerity measures in Québec, and the widespread organizing and coalition-building now taking place among the province’s students, public-sector workers, community organizers, and others.

While the literature goes to some lengths to address mainstream media representations of protest movements, including the one that produced the Printemps érable, it would appear that there is little in the literature about their coverage by independent
or community media. Furthermore, coverage of protest movements in the mainstream media seems to focus largely on more superficial attributes of individual events, rather than underlying thematic issues (Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Ashley & Olson, 1998; Smith, McCarthy, McPhail & Augustyn, 2001). This leads us to the following two research questions:

RQ 1: How did The Suburban frame the Printemps érable?

RQ 2: Within the context of the Printemps érable, how did The Suburban frame educational issues specifically?

Methodology
The research conducted for this article consists of qualitative—or what Altheide (1987) refers to as ethnographic, in contrast to quantitative—content and frame analysis. This methodology involves an inductive approach and “reflexive [rather than serial] movement between concept development, sampling, data collection, data coding, data analysis, and interpretation. The aim is to be systematic and analytic, but not rigid” (Altheide, 1987, p. 68).

Beginning with concept development, framing is described in Entman’s seminal 1993 text on the topic as “often defined casually, with much left to an assumed tacit understanding of reader and researcher” (p. 52). Nonetheless, he does provide some direction by hinting that it “essentially involves selection and salience” (Entman, 1993, p. 52, italics in original) and typically defines problems, diagnoses causes, makes moral judgments, and suggests remedies. He adds that “[a]nalysis of frames illuminates the precise way in which influence over a human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location—such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel—to that consciousness” (Entman, 1993, p. 51-52).

According to Matthes’ (2009) survey of the field, Entman’s is the predominant conception of framing used in the literature, and it is this conception that primarily guided my research, although there are of course others. For instance, Gitlin (1979) defines framing as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (p. 12, Italics in original). Iyengar and Simon (1993), for their part, differentiate between episodic and thematic framing, which represent public issues as either specific events or in a more general context with background information and interpretive analysis.

This study was limited specifically to front-page representations of the Printemps érable or striking students in issues of The Suburban published between the start of the first strike on February 7 and the calling of the Québec provincial election on August 1, 2012, inclusively. This provided a sample size of nine content units for analysis from eight different issues, including three photographs with captions. Thus, unlike most studies of framing, this research heeds the advice of Matthes (2009) and includes visual as well as textual content. Textual units of analysis were relatively brief, however: aside from the captions for the aforementioned images, there were three teaser headlines for editorials, two mentions in pieces focused on other topics, and one short excerpt of an opinion piece included inside the issue. It should be noted that during this period, the
front page made no reference to traditional, “objective” news articles focused primarily on providing coverage—whether thematic or episodic—of the uprising.

Results and discussion

The Suburban’s framing of the Printemps érable

An inductive data coding process revealed that the principal frame employed by The Suburban to represent the Printemps érable on its front page was that of an illegitimate program without a credible basis for its actions. This framing corresponds with that which is typically employed with comparable social movements, according to the literature. For example, the headline for the February 22 editorial “Recess Is Over Students [sic]” draws comparisons between their strike and an idle period of rest and child-like play. Along with the March 28 heading “Easier to Demonstrate than to Work for $300,” it implies that students were striking not because they had some legitimate grievance but because they were lazy, did not want to work, and were concerned only with their immediate and individual self-indulgence. The March 28 heading also suggests that $300—or $325, the actual amount of the annual tuition increase, as discussed earlier in this article—is not a sum of money large enough to justify such action, ignoring the fact that this represents a much larger amount to some than to others.

Further contributing to the frame of the Printemps érable as unjustified is the May 16 opinion piece “A Quebec Spring? Think Again!” (Deguire, 2012)—identified as a “Feature”—which directly challenges the legitimacy of the name given to the uprising and, by extension, the uprising itself. Meanwhile, a June 13 heading over a photo of a small group making straight-arm salutes explicitly asks, “Legitimate Protest?” In that same issue, the headline “Memo to Montreal’s Mad Marchers: Nazi Salutes? You Lose!” suggests that the use of the gesture by some of the protesters as a critique of the police delegitimizes the entire movement. Finally, “The Provincial election [sic],” a “Viewpoint” published the same day as the election call on August 1, argued that the movement had nothing to offer in terms of “polity and policy” except for “demonization, marginalization and social disruption.”

A related frame employed by The Suburban was that the Printemps érable was directionless and ineffectual. The photograph titled “Easier to Demonstrate than to Work for $300” (March 28), for instance, does not depict marchers in motion but a group of people, some of them masked, milling about in all directions as they would before or after a demonstration—or as elementary school students would at recess—giving the impression that the demonstrations themselves were disorganized and pointless. This same impression would not have been conveyed had the image chosen depicted tens or hundreds of thousands of people in purposeful, coordinated action. Similarly, the photo “Student Demonstrations” (April 25) depicts a single person, assumed to be a student, standing before a stationary line of riot police and defiantly showing them the middle finger. The visual message is clear: the level-headed forces of law and order are everywhere and have the situation under control, while the rebellious gesture of this single hysterical individual, set up to represent an entire movement, is provocative but ultimately harmless and futile.
To complement its framing of the *Printemps érable* as both illegitimate and ineffec-
tual, *The Suburban* frequently made use of the kind of snide ridicule mentioned by
Massumi (2012), whether speaking about or directly to participants in the revolt, in
what must be considered attempts at humour. “Recess Is Over Students [sic]” (February
22) is an obvious example—assuming, of course, that there was meant to be a comma
after the word “over.” Protesters are mockingly criticized as lazy, disobedient children
who must be ordered back to class. Their intelligence is derisively questioned and they
are insolently ordered to “Think Again!” (May 16) (Deguire, 2012) and to take history
lessons (for instance, “Legitimate Protest?”, June 13). Furthermore, they are given pejo-
rative, alliterative nicknames like “Montreal’s Mad Marchers” (June 13).

Considering that *The Suburban* sought to question both the legitimacy and effi-
cacy of the *Printemps érable*, it is unsurprising that the uprising tended to be framed
more often as a series of individual events, or episodically, than as part of a larger move-
ment (Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Smith et al., 2001). Only twice were actions associated
with the revolt acknowledged as anything other than individual demonstrations,
protests, or marches: on one occasion it was referred to as a boycott (April 25) and on
the other, in scare-quotes, as “strikes” (May 16).

*The Suburban* also regularly collocated and even conflated the terms “student” and
“protester,” which served to frame any and all protesters as students and, inversely, all stu-
dents as protesters. Limiting the revolt to only students, and all students, denied it the
more widespread support it actually received from other segments of society, as well as
ignoring differences of opinion among students. All of the protesters depicted in the pho-
tographs are ostensibly students, although there is no way for the audience to be sure.
The one titled “Student Demonstrations” (April 25), and which the caption links to the
“11-week student boycott of classes” (p. 1), was actually taken outside Montréal’s Palais
des Congrès at a protest against the government’s extractivist Plan Nord project in north-
ern Québec, which was not directly related to “planned increased university tuition fees”
(p. 1) and drew opposition from a wide range of actors. After Bill 78 was passed into law,
*The Suburban* proclaimed its support and announced that “Charter Rights Don’t Just
Belong to the Students” (May 23), ignoring the fact that, by that point, countless non-stu-
dents were also exercising their widely-recognized democratic rights to expression and
peaceful assembly by joining them in the street. As late as July 11, after months of sponta-
neous *casserole* protests that included people from all walks of life in neighbourhoods all
over the city, the paper obstinately continued to refer to the events as “student protests”
(Woodhouse, 2012)—perhaps corroborating Lamoureux’s (2012) observation that the cri-
sis never actually developed into anything more than a student conflict.

The students were often framed collectively as the primary actor in the *Printemps
érable*, particularly in the first few months of their conflict with the government.
Despite *The Suburban*’s disapproving and even disparaging tone, those involved in the
uprising might consider this a success for a couple of reasons: first, because it depicts
the students as active subjects rather than passive objects; and second, because it fo-
cuses on the group-subject and counteracts the modern tendency, as seen in coverage
by some other media outlets, to individualize students or to play up the cult of per-
sonality of an appointed leader (Manning, 2012).
The students were thus portrayed, toward the beginning of the strike, as the active group-subject responsible for the events taking place, and the cause of these events was framed as either $300 or “planned increased university tuition fees” (*The Suburban*, April 25). However, *The Suburban* did not attribute the tuition increase to choices made by the government or to any of the broader issues expressed, for instance, in the CLASSE manifesto (2012). Furthermore, as their conflict with the government dragged on, the students were no longer framed as actors but as objects to be acted on—that is, they were no longer portrayed as responding however irrationally to a problem, but instead as themselves being the problem.

As the months progressed and an election call seemed imminent, it was the government that came to be framed as the primary actor, and was called to act upon the students. *The Suburban* began to adopt the government’s discourse, notably the term “boycott,” and even borrowed from federal Liberal leader Justin Trudeau the argument that “the first party to invoke Hitler or the Nazis in a debate automatically loses” (Memo to Montreal’s Mad Marchers, June 13, p. 16). The government’s actions—and, more generally, government itself—were depicted as the obvious remedy to the conflict, reaffirming the legitimacy of the electoral political system versus that of the masked and occasionally violent student protesters. *The Suburban* cheered the government’s “risky but responsible” use of Bill 78 to curtail Charter rights and “quell the student protests” (Woodhouse, 2012, p. 1). In addition, the paper drew a parallel between the impending election and a referendum, attempting to further enhance the perceived legitimacy of the system by connecting it to a more direct democratic form. It also supported the party that had ruled Québec for the past nine years by stressing the importance of continuity and experience, and described the election as follows: “It will be a choice between supporting those who seek to protect liberal political discourse and encourage civilized debate against those whose weapons of polity and policy are demonization, marginalization and social disruption” (The Provincial Election, August 1, p. 1).

To summarize, in response to the first research question, *The Suburban* framed the *Printemps érable* episodically, as a comically foolish, illegitimate, and ill-conceived series of protests involving all students, but only students—depicting them as an anonymous, homogeneous, and unified mass worthy of derision and contempt. Moreover, it initially sought to portray student action as a negative response to seemingly natural “liberal” market forces—namely an increase in tuition—but later flipped to portraying heavy-handed government action, and government more generally, as a positive response to the problem of student action.

The Suburban’s framing of education and educational issues

Turning to *The Suburban*’s representation of educational issues more specifically, the key frame that emerged from the data contrasted students with workers. This frame appears, for instance, in the March 28 header “Easier to Demonstrate than to Work for $300.” This presumes that students do not already work, and further that neither scholarship nor participation in a social movement constitute work, limiting the definition of work to remunerated employment—against, for instance, the efforts of feminists who have long fought for recognition of the unpaid labour of women. In the same way, adopting the term “boycott” while sticking “strike” in scare-quotes denies that
students are workers. Instead, students are framed as consumers who individually purchase educational services from institutions operating in the marketplace. Additionally, as previously mentioned, the tuition increase was framed as not being caused by the government but by the “[neo]liberal economy that respects free and fair markets” held so dear by the paper’s editorial staff (The Provincial Election, August 1, p. 1).

As discussed above, The Suburban also framed the students as being lazy, self-interested, and needing instruction. It is in students’ nature, according to the paper, to do nothing but run around and have fun all day. They seek to do whatever is easiest, implies The Suburban. They need to be ordered back to class. All of this justifies a strong, authoritarian approach—whether from their professors, their bosses, or elected officials—in ensuring their compliance with the neoliberal capitalist economy advocated by the paper.

In sum, addressing the second research question concerning The Suburban’s representation of educational issues, I argue that the paper frames education as just another consumer product to be bought and sold in a neoliberal capitalist economy—an economy into which students, who do not know better, must be coerced for their own good.

Conclusions

One concern that may be levelled against this research is that it only analyzed the front-page content of The Suburban, and that this content may not accurately represent that which is published within the newspaper. Space on the front page is limited and it may receive more reductionist, sensationalist, and provocative content in order to entice audiences to pick up and read the paper. This is certainly a matter for further study, but having looked through many issues of The Suburban, I suspect that much of the content on the inside pages—and particularly in the editorial section—is just as reductionist, sensationalist, and provocative as that on the cover, if not more so. For example, the February 22 editorial “Recess Is Over Students [sic]” on page 14 includes both a photograph of a crying infant and an editorial cartoon of a university student being fed from a bottle—a perfect illustration of what McGary (2014) describes as the infantilization of those who question “new debt politics.” The May 23 opinion piece “Charter Rights Don’t Just Belong to Students” further has editor-in-chief Beryl Wajsman calling students “[s]elf-indulgent, self-absorbed capricious thugs” on page 17. In addition, on June 6, in one particularly ill-advised attempt at humour, reporter P.A. Sévigny links the Printemps érable to the murder of Concordia student Jun Lin in the form of a standard news piece on page 10.

Another potential limitation of this study is that The Suburban is such a singular publication and may not be representative of community newspapers, in part because Montréal’s Anglophone west-end suburbs are certainly not representative of all communities. This particular publication may very well be little more than a mouthpiece for a charismatic bourgeois gentleman and his over-privileged clique—as has been argued elsewhere, “an echo chamber for an insulated group of angryphone burghers on Montreal’s west side” (Turcotte-Summers, 2013, n.p.). Additionally, the fact that it is a widely distributed, free weekly newspaper does not necessarily mean that it is widely read. Nevertheless, it is possible that The Suburban, in shedding archaic commitments to appearing “objective” and “impartial” that can hinder mainstream journalism, man-
ages to tap into a desire for raw and honest reporting that represents how a significant demographic genuinely feels about the issues, in the manner of Fox and the now-defunct Sun News—the latter of which editor-in-chief Wajsman worked with on a number of occasions.

In any case, this study appears to reaffirm Hall’s notion of an ideological-state apparatus, as cited in McGay (2014). The media frames the destructive neoliberal capitalist agenda, of which tuition hikes are but a small part, as natural and unavoidable, and thus shields the government from blame. The government, in turn, serves as an invaluable source to the media and defends neoliberal capitalist interests from attacks like those of the Printemps érable. The media and the state, or at least The Suburban and the Liberal Party of Québec, here operate in near-perfect symbiosis. It appears to make little difference that this particular publication is not actually corporate-owned—it is funded by advertising and run by individuals who whole-heartedly buy into the hegemonic narrative.

Conspicuously absent from the relationship described above and from The Suburban’s coverage of the Printemps érable is the police. They were represented only once in the front-page content analyzed for this study, depicted calmly forming a line in front of the Palais des Congrès during the Plan Nord protests in the April 25 photograph “Student Demonstrations.” In contrast, mainstream media coverage of the revolt appeared to include regular clashes between police and protesters, which some would argue detracts from the issues that protesters were attempting to bring to the public’s attention. The Suburban’s exclusion of the police is another topic that merits further study, although for the time being I would posit that those at the paper mostly take the police for granted as part of the machinery of the paternalistic state, much as one might take the servants for granted as part of a wealthy household. However, the paper adopted a much more critical view of the largely working-class, francophone Service de police de la ville de Montréal in its June 25, 2014, editorial “Unacceptable and Irresponsible,” condemning police along with firefighters protesting the neoliberal agenda’s effects on their own pensions.

Other community media are likely to provide radically different representations of reality than The Suburban. An obvious example is Concordia University Television—CUTV, which has also been referred to as Community University Television—and its footage from many of the actions of the Printemps érable streamed live online, along with critical commentary from its participant-reporters as well as others in attendance. But a term like “community media” opens the door to as many possibilities as do the terms “community”—for instance, some communities being significantly more privileged than others—and “media.”

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Notes
1. There are a number of English translations in use for Printemps érable, including Maple Spring and Québec Spring; however, these fail to capture the original’s pun on the Arab Spring (or Printemps arabe), and thus the creativity and youthfulness associated with such a pun and with the uprising.
2. The QCNA is the Québec Community Newspapers Association, while the SNA is the Suburban Newspapers of America, apparently now rebranded the Local Media Association.

3. The CLASSE manifesto “Nous sommes avenir” (translated as “Share Our Future”), released later in the conflict in July 2012, ambitiously connected the ongoing student strike and the issue of tuition fees with a host of much wider concerns regarding representative democracy, the loss of our shared resources, sexism, racism, colonialism, and more.

4. The word liberal, with a lowercase L, is conveniently scattered liberally throughout The Suburban’s not-so-subtle endorsement of the (neo)Liberal Party of Québec.

References


