Cancelling Each Other Out? Interest Group Perceptions of the News Media

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Journalists sometimes claim that criticisms of the news from “both sides” of divisive political issues in effect absolve them from allegations of “bias”: they are simply “playing it down the middle.” This common-sensical defence finds some support in the literature. For instance, complaints of hostile news coverage from both labour and business abound (Aronoff, 1979; Dreier, 1982; Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, pp. 205-243; Hackett, 1983; Hoggan, 1994). Social psychologists have found that political partisans generally perceive news coverage as biased in favour of opposing interests; their research typically seeks to identify the psychological mechanisms underlying this “hostile media effect” (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985).

On the other hand, some research indicates that interest groups higher in the political and economic hierarchy tend to evaluate the media as being more favourable to their objectives than do groups in less-established, weaker positions (Donahue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1984; Rippy, 1981), perhaps with good reason. Many textual analyses of news suggest that the formal devices of balance—playing it down the middle by quoting “both sides,” for instance—can co-exist with hegemonic media frames which privilege established social interests over others (see, for example, Glasgow University Media Group, 1976).

Faced with these conflicting possibilities, the literature specifically concerning source-media relations is of limited help (for an overview, see Anderson, 1993). To be sure, there is much research indicating that information subsidies, power imbalances, and structural advantages create such substantial source bias in the news that bureaucratic institutions and political elites

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become the "primary definers" of mass-mediated public issues. Much of this research, however, has been characterized by an "excessive media-centrism" (Schlesinger, 1990, p. 61) which fails to examine source-media relations from the perspective of the sources themselves. Recognizing this vacuum, Ericson, Baranek, & Chan (1989) undertook a comprehensive investigation of source perceptions of Canadian news media. They found that many sources perceived the media as one of the most powerful agencies of social control, political pressure, and institutional power in society—a force they could not afford to ignore. Yet, by virtue of possessing key resources, the media were seen to often have the upper hand in framing events and selectively admitting voices into public discourse. Sources also perceived a good deal of bias and misrepresentation, resulting in feelings of source dependency and loss of control over public discourse. Sources were also aware, however, that the news amplified particular versions of reality that they themselves could sometimes help to construct; in evaluating media, sources were primarily concerned with whether or not news supported their own interests and reality-definitions.

Insightful as it is, however, even Ericson's research did not offer a comparative analysis of source perceptions. To advance our understanding of pressures and expectations placed upon the news media, we undertook a pilot study of perceptions of the news by two broad clusters of interest groups across Canada: on the one hand, relatively well-institutionalized groups representing conservative viewpoints or dominant social and economic interests; on the other hand, non-profit and non-governmental advocacy groups reflecting subordinate interests and/or progressive positions (such as the dispersal of power and wealth, or attention to broad human needs other than economic growth or private profit). We focused on perceived omissions in the news agenda, normative expectations, evaluations of and degree of satisfaction regarding media performance, and the extent to which respondents' perceptions employed interest-specific or more universalistic criteria (such as objectivity). Are criticisms from conservative/establishment and progressive/advocacy groups mutually contradictory, manifesting a general "hostile media effect"? Or do differences in power and orientation result in differential evaluations and understandings of the media?

**Methods**

In order to address these questions, we conducted a mail-out survey composed of five open-ended questions; responses were post-coded and aggregated. A reliability test of Questions 1, 3, 4, and 5 yielded 87.5% intercoder agreement.

Respondents were selected so as to achieve an approximate balance between the two relevant types of groups. The conservative/establishment category included government, business, industry, policy think-tanks, professional groups, and military/defence organizations. The progressive/advocacy
category included organizations representing gender, labour, social welfare, environmental, religious, and ethnic/race issues. The distinction between establishment and advocacy organizations thus conflated two dichotomies: first, conservative versus progressive political orientations; and second, institutionalized interests for which political advocacy and media relations constitute merely marginal costs, versus issue-oriented advocacy groups for which political communication work represents their primary costs. In the cases of those few groups for whom the first and second distinctions did not coincide (e.g., a women’s advocacy organization that represented extremely conservative views), the conservative/progressive distinction overrode the institutional/advocacy dichotomy.

Directories were used to identify as many such organizations as possible across Canada. From these, only organizations of national or major urban stature were selected. An effort was made to include organizations representing the broadest possible range of specific issues. Within these specific issues, an attempt was made to balance organizations representing contrasting viewpoints, such as business and labour or defence organizations and peace groups. Of the 300 organizations thus selected, 145 represented the establishment and 155 the advocacy categories.

The survey, along with a follow-up letter as needed, was sent to the media relations officer or the next most suitable person (e.g., the executive director) in each of the 300 organizations. A 29.7% response rate (89 responses) was ultimately obtained. The response rate of the establishment category (30 responses/20.7%) was lower than the response rate of the advocacy category (59 responses/38.1%).

Because the study was exploratory in nature and strictly speaking did not use a random sample of a larger universe, descriptive rather than inferential statistics were used to analyze the results.

Results

Question 1 asked: “In your view, what are the three most important issues or stories of significance to most Canadians, which the media are tending to ignore? Put differently, what are the most important blindspots in Canada’s news media in 1995?” The most frequently mentioned blindspots, as aggregated, are listed in Table 1. Multiple responses were permitted, so the percentages are not cumulative.

Responses to question 1 were also coded on a three-point scale to determine the degree to which they reflected the specific interests of each respondent. Specific interests were statements reflecting the immediate interests or concerns of the organization, for example, when an organization concerned with violence against women identified “realities of violence against women” as a blindspot. Indirect interests were more broadly generalized statements from
which the organization’s own interests could still be discerned, for example, when an organization concerned with disability issues identified “the abandonment of much of Canada’s social programming” as a blindspot. *Universal interests* were statements of very broad or vague generalities from which the organization’s own interests could not clearly be discerned, for example, when an organization concerned with medical issues identified “trends in Canadian and international society” as a blindspot. When a response included combinations of specific, indirect, and/or universal interests, its most specific component determined its categorization. Two further categories were initially anticipated—*idiosyncratic* and *counter-interests*—but their actual frequency was negligible. Therefore, all responses that did not fit into the three-point scale were simply coded as idiosyncratic/no response. As Figure 1 shows, a majority of respondents identified blindspots in a highly interest-specific manner. Fewer identified blindspots that only indirectly reflected the interests of their organization. Still fewer identified blindspots in a manner that reflected highly universalized interests.

### Table 1

**Perceived News Blindspots**  
(Percentage Response)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blindspot category</th>
<th>Total (n = 89)</th>
<th>Est. (n = 30)</th>
<th>Adv. (n = 59)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social implications of economic policies</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Positive” stories</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges to dominant or official powers</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International relations</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of religion in Canadian life</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic and race issues</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s issues</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental issues</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice/human rights issues</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health issues</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian nationalism</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education issues</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defence/security issues</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigative reporting in general (not enough)</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective reporting in general (not enough)</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decline of political institutions/processes</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical issues</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and technology issues</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 2 asked: “In your view, why do the media tend to ignore the above issues?” Respondents were able to provide multiple answers. When responses were grouped into broad categories, the category of *commercialism*—
comprising a range of producer, consumer, and advertiser pressures and constraints associated with commercialization, sales, and profit—was cited most frequently (Figure 2). News values—referring to the standards of newsworthiness that news organizations employ in selecting and constructing stories, for example, drama, sensation, conflict, and so forth—was cited with the next greatest frequency. News workers—referring to the individual qualities, collective routines, and established traditions of journalists and editors—was next, followed by hegemony—referring to subtle but oppressive influences perceived to be exerted by dominant interests on popular beliefs, values, and “common sense.” Bias—referring more generally to the opinions that are perceived to naturally distinguish various segments of the population in an assumed liberal-pluralist democracy—was least frequently cited.

Figure 1
Identifying Blindspots: Interest-specific vs. Universal Criteria by Organizational Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Establishment</th>
<th>Advocacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific Interests</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect Interests</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal Interests</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiosyncratic/No Response</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 3 asked: “In terms of both quantity and quality, how would you rate media coverage of the issues and perspectives of greatest concern to your own organization?” Responses were coded according to a five-point satisfaction scale comprising unqualified satisfaction, qualified satisfaction, neutral/mixed response, qualified dissatisfaction, and unqualified dissatisfaction. A majority of respondents expressed unqualified dissatisfaction with news coverage of the issues and perspectives of greatest concern to their own organizations (Figure 3). Qualified satisfaction was expressed with the next greatest frequency, followed by qualified dissatisfaction and neutral/mixed responses. Unqualified satisfaction was least frequently expressed. Overall, 67.3% of respondents (56.7% establishment/71.2% advocacy) expressed some level of
dissatisfaction; only 20.3% (30.0%/15.3% respectively) expressed satisfaction, whether qualified or not.

**Figure 2**
Aggregated Omission Factors by Organizational Type

![Bar chart showing aggregated omission factors by organizational type.](chart1)

**Figure 3**
Satisfaction with Group-relevant News Media Coverage by Organizational Type

![Bar chart showing satisfaction with group-relevant news media coverage.](chart2)

Question 4 asked: “Thinking more generally, what in your view *ought* to be the main purpose or function(s) of the news media in Canadian society?” Multiple responses were permitted. When responses were broadly categorized, the news media were most frequently called to serve as an objective
mirror to social events and issues (Figure 4). This category included references to objectivity, truth, accuracy, fairness, balance, elimination of bias, separation of facts from values, and the provision of information. Public sphere functions—including facilitating public dialogue, deliberation, and debate; representing diverse opinions and perspectives, including minorities and marginalized groups; providing background for decision-making processes; clarifying a public agenda and focusing on social priorities; and empowering the public—were prescribed with the next greatest frequency. An advocacy or positive moral function (i.e., promoting social justice and development, examining social and moral values, providing a global perspective, or providing “good” or inspiring news) was next, followed by an educational function (i.e., educating the public, raising public awareness, and encouraging critical thinking), and then an analytical function (i.e., providing objective analysis, context, and background; examining trends and processes; and providing informed interpretation). The traditional investigative watchdog functions of the media were least frequently prescribed.

Figure 4
Prescribed Function by Organizational Type

Responses to Question 4 were also coded according to the same interest-specific response scale employed in Question 1. Results were the opposite (Figure 5). Very few respondents expressed highly interest-specific views. A modest portion identified news media functions that indirectly reflected the interests of their organization. And a large majority identified functions that reflected very broad, universalized principles.

Question 5 asked: "How well, in your view, are the media actually performing this purpose or function [those identified in responses to question 4]?” Responses were again coded according to a five-point satisfaction scale, as in question 3. A majority of respondents expressed unqualified dissatisfac-
tion (Figure 6). Mixed or neutral responses were expressed with the next greatest frequency, followed by qualified dissatisfaction and qualified satisfaction. Unqualified satisfaction was least frequently expressed. Combining these results, 61.8% of respondents (53.4% establishment/66.1% advocacy) expressed at least some degree of dissatisfaction; only 18.0% (23.3%/15.3% respectively) partly or wholly approved of the media performance.

Figure 5
Prescribed Functions: Interest-specific vs. Universal Criteria by Organizational Type

Figure 6
Satisfaction with Overall Media Performance by Organizational Type
Discussion

The results of this survey are clearly provisional; before they can be generalized, a larger sample and the refinement and addition of variables would be needed. Still, we find the results intriguing and suggestive of further research.

Superficially, the findings reinforce the "mutual cancellation" interpretation of interest group perceptions. A strong majority in both camps profess support for journalism's own legitimizing ideals of objectivity, but a similarly large majority is also somewhat or very dissatisfied with actual media performance. Such dissatisfaction, it could be argued, is inherent in the role tensions between sources and journalists who seek to report all interest groups in an independent (and often adversarial) manner.

This interpretation is supported by the interest-specific manner in which respondents identified news blindspots. Thus establishment organizations were somewhat more likely to identify such issues as defence and security, while advocacy groups disproportionately mentioned challenges to dominant or official powers; the role of religion; Canadian nationalism; and ethnic, women's, and ethical issues.

Moreover, disapproval of media treatment of each group's particular issues was slightly higher than disapproval of media performance in general. This difference, though weak, is consistent with the notion that investment and/or expertise in an issue increases the perception of flaws in reportage by generalists writing for a broad audience.

Our findings, however, suggest two crucial limitations to the "mutual cancellation" interpretation. First, the two types of groups share some similar criticisms of the news which are not contradictory. Both groups were critical of the media for insufficiently covering positive stories and the social implications of economic policies, though to be sure the content of these two perceived blindspots was likely to differ between the two groups. More important, both types of groups perceived commercial pressures, audience-attracting news values, and the specific qualities of newworkers as causes of media blindspots. Leaving aside the validity of these criticisms, the key point here is the intergroup similarity and the indication that dissatisfaction with media performance cannot be reduced to perceptions of hostile "bias."

Moreover, a significant minority in both camps prescribed a positive "public forum" function as a normative ideal for journalism. As embodied in the recent public journalism movement, this aspiration implicitly challenges traditional understandings of detachment and objectivity in the media. Such a challenge cannot be dismissed with the "mutual cancellation" defence.

This defence is also contradicted by a second aspect of the findings: subtle but potentially crucial differences between the two camps' perceptions of the media. For instance, in identifying blindspots in the news, establishment organizations were somewhat more interest-specific and less likely to invoke
universal concerns, in comparison with advocacy groups. Establishment groups were also more likely to identify left-wing biases as a cause of blindspots, while advocacy groups were more likely to identify such hegemonic filters as advertising, corporate linkages, or newworkers' conservative common-sense assumptions. These criticisms are not necessarily contradictory. It is quite possible, for instance, that journalists' liberal and secular sensibilities influence coverage of moral and social issues, while conservativizing filters mainly affect economic reportage.

There are further asymmetrical differences between the two camps. Most crucially, within a broad pattern of discontent with media performance, advocacy groups were measurably more dissatisfied. Why might that be the case? One reason may be that to some extent, advocacy groups evaluate the media through the prism of expectations more at odds with journalism's own regime of objectivity. Disproportionately, advocacy groups called on the media to adopt a pro-active role as advocates of social reforms and challengers of the status quo. By contrast, establishment groups were more likely to call for neutral and objective information provision, a more passive, market-driven role which arguably perpetuates (or at least avoids fundamentally challenging) dominant values, beliefs, and power relations (Hackett & Zhao, 1996). By invoking the criteria of objectivity, the media do not necessarily occupy a neutral "third" ground, but rather adopt the same criteria that establishment groups disproportionately favour, presumably in their own interests.

A second reason for the lower level of discontent by establishment groups may be their higher level of routine access to the media. Speculatively, in this respect, these groups' substantially lower rate of response to our survey, notwithstanding their generally greater staff resources, may well indicate a desire not to rock the boat. By contrast with their establishment counterparts, some of the advocacy respondents specifically identified reliance on elite sources as a reason for news blindspots and for their own alienation from media. Some of them also called on the media to give "a voice to the marginalized segments of our society" and thus to facilitate more inclusive public discourse.

But if indeed establishment groups enjoy better media access and express less discontent in our survey, why have the most vocal criticisms of media in recent years originated not from the left, but from conservative institutes, politicians, and corporations? This question begs for further research, but we speculate that higher expectations of favourable coverage (or lower tolerance of hostile coverage), greater resources and self-confidence, a deliberate political strategy to pressure the media, and paradoxically, the very media access which establishment groups enjoy, all play a part in giving disproportionate political weight to their media "beefs" (see Dreier, 1982).

In conclusion, this pilot study casts doubt on the dismissal of interest group media criticisms as simply self-serving and off-setting mirror opposites. To do
so would be to ignore the similarities, as well as non-contradictory differences, in their critiques. It would also ignore the possibility that when groups do make contradictory attacks on the media (reflecting the importance of media representations as a site of struggle in a climate of political polarization), one side may well have a more valid case than the other(s). We need more critical evaluation of interest group attacks on the media in light of actual media coverage, groups’ expectations and relations with the media, and the impact of financial and social inequalities on the relative political efficacy of their critiques.

Notes
1. This study was supported in part by the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada (Grant 410-94-0472, awarded to R. Hackett, J. Winter, & R. Grunew). The authors also wish to acknowledge the research assistance of Katherine Manson and Cheryl Linstead.
2. An additional purpose of the survey, not discussed here, was to generate hypotheses (associated with Project Censored Canada’s broader research agenda) about significant blindspots in the national news agenda.
3. In relation to expectations of the news media, an example of specific interest was an organization concerned with race issues stating “the media has a social responsibility to be involved in attempting to eradicate all forms of racism.” An example of indirect interest was an environmental organization stating the media “ought to be defining and discussing what is really important to individuals and to society, rather than reporting/supporting the agenda of large vested interests.” An example of universal interest was an organization concerned with poverty stating the media ought to “provide people with sufficient information so that they can make informed decisions.”

References


