

**Mass-Mediated Canadian Politics:  
CBC News in Comparative Perspective**

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Questions about news media bias are recurring themes of mainstream debate and academic inquiry. Allegations of unfair treatment are normally based on perceptions of inequality – an unfair playing field. News is dismissed as biased if people think that a political group or candidate is systemically advantaged (or disadvantaged) by coverage. When allegations of this nature surface, the perpetrator is usually one of three usual suspects: the media (writ large), a newsroom, or a medium (e.g. Adkins Covert and Wasburn 2007; D'Alessio and Allen 2000; Groeling and Kernell 1998; Niven 2002; Shoemaker and Cohen 2006). Headlines and stories are marshaled for evidence; yet the integrity of headlines as proxies for their stories is rarely considered as an avenue for testing and conceptualizing claims of media bias.

It is common knowledge that headlines are supposed to reflect, at least to some degree in the space they have, the content that follows. Yet this myth has thus far received only sparse attention in social science (Althaus, Edy and Phalen 2001; Andrew 2007). It is a surprising oversight, partly because news headlines are clearly not just summaries. They also signal the importance of, and attempt to sell the news story that follows. The interplay of these imperatives is what makes a test of the relationship between headline news and story news particularly intriguing. The importance of headlines not just for news processing and political engagement, but for all aspects of daily life in hyper-mediated society is what makes their analysis essential. Social scientists have yet to seriously consider the potential biases of headlines.

This paper examines the connection between headlines and stories provided by Canadian news media during the 2006 federal election campaign. It considers, specifically, a theoretical proposition that market pressure widens the gap between politics as presented in headlines compared with how politics is presented in the stories. Market exposure is the causal mechanism for the headlines-stories relationship examined throughout this paper. The variance between

headlines and stories is expected to increase in profit-driven newsrooms, where headlines presumably focus more on selling than summarizing. Headlines from newsrooms less exposed to open markets should provide better summaries, and thus prove more accurate proxies for stories.

This expectation is tested by comparing Canada's public broadcaster's television, radio, and online election coverage in headlines and stories with that of other major news organizations in Canada. Doing so provides the first large-scale empirical test for the following questions: Do competitive media markets foster 'yellow journalism' – news headlines that are flashy and attention gripping, but hold little connection with the stories they profess to sum up? Or does competition encourage newsrooms to strengthen the convergence between headlines and stories?

### **Media Bias Revisited**

Media bias is commonly understood as politically slanted news. News organizations typically face this allegation when their coverage – sources, frames, placement, and tone, for instance – is perceived to favour one political group or another. In the Canadian context, news media are sometimes accused of privileging left- or right-wing interests. Yet the major obstacle for any charge of media bias is normative: defining what correct coverage of a political party or politician ought to be. Claims that a newsroom is right- or left-wing slanted depend wholly on what constitutes neutral coverage in the first place. Otherwise, as former *National Post* editor Ken Whyte put it, a media organization may be labeled "right-wing when they're not as left-wing as somebody else" (Interviewed April 24, 2008).

This is a normative question with no simple resolution. The best empirical studies of media content can offer is a sense for an average: be it local, regional, national, or global (D'Alessio and Allen 2000; Shoemaker and Cohen 2006; Soroka 2002). A news media average on any

dimension is not a true north of objectivity. It does, however, speak to concerns about whether a newsroom's coverage is significantly different from what passes as normal. Though it cannot say whether a newsroom is pro-Liberal or Conservative, it can say where a newsroom fits in relation to what else is available.

A largely uncharted concern with this approach is unit of analysis consistency. Any average measure of media content based on headlines may be systematically different from average measures using stories. And almost all research designed to isolate media averages has relied on one or the other: headlines or stories (e.g. Adkins Covert and Wasburn 2007; Niven 2002; Peake 2007). Hence, if headlines report news differently than stories, an average measure of media coverage using them may not be directly comparable with those using stories.

A related concern is that the variance between headlines and stories may not be consistent across news media outlets. Consider the case of Conservative party coverage during the 2006 campaign. If it were true that headline bias endorsement cues, then news organizations who reported positively about the Conservative campaign in their stories would be found to frame their coverage with even more positive headlines about the Conservatives. And newsrooms, less sanguine about the Conservative performance in stories, would appear even less positive about them though the lens of headlines.

The question of how headlines play up or play down information in their stories has received little attention in political science. There has been some work done comparing headlines and stories (Althaus et al. 2001; Andrew 2007). Yet no research, to my knowledge, has aimed to test whether headlines play up or play down information in consistent ways *across newsrooms*. If headline biases are consistent, then it would be safe to say that people who get news mainly from headlines are exposed to the same degrees of headline biases. But if all newsrooms are not equal

with respect to how headlines represent their stories, then where people get their news from becomes important in a way political scientists have not yet considered.

### **Newsroom Effects**

The expectation is that newsrooms do affect the headlines-stories relationship. Headlines are required in varying degrees to sell, sum up, and signal hierarchy or importance of their stories. It cannot be assumed that all copy editors or producers responsible for headlines tend to strike an identical balance between these imperatives. One factor that may account for variance between headlines and stories is market exposure. A heightened responsibility to sell news could be expected to lead editors and producers to place greater value on headlines that are flashy and attention-grabbing. More emphasis on selling the news could mean the headlines in general become less reflective of what the stories actually report.

More formally, the hypothesis is the extent to which newsrooms are market-driven should increase differences in the supply of essential political information in headlines compared to stories. If politics is indeed presented differently in headlines relative to stories, then gaps should be most evident in news supplied by more market-exposed newsrooms. Fully market-exposed newsrooms are not insulated in any way from open market logic. This means that profit maximization is a necessary objective for long-term survival.

Long-term survival is contingent on news that is profitable. As a commodity, news is most profitable when it provides the highest payoff in terms of audience in the most cost effective way (McManus 1994). Research has shown that competitive marketplaces encourage news organizations to seek ways to make their coverage of current affairs stand out (Mullainathan and Shleifer 2005). Headlines are an obvious mechanism to turn to in this regard. They represent a newsroom's most prominent and personalized stamp on the news (Bell 1991;

Dijk 1985). This suggests that if there are gaps between headlines and stories they should be widest for newsrooms most exposed and affected by market logic.

Conversely, the absence of (or a reduced exposure to) market logic should reduce the pressure on headline producers and writers to sell people on reading, watching, or listening to more. As a consequence, it is expected that newsrooms less exposed to market influence will tend to supply headlines that are better summaries of news stories. This is not to suggest that absent (or reduced) competitive pressure necessarily means that journalists will treat headlines exclusively as summaries, or that a profitable headline is necessarily an inaccurate summary of the news story that follows. Summarizing and selling are not incompatible in theory or in practice, especially when the news story itself includes information people would view as sensational and eye-grabbing in the first place.

The expectation is that pressure to sell and advertise a newspaper or newscast increases the probability that headlines are out of balance with their stories, relative to newsrooms where journalists are less tied to high ratings or street-sales. If the number of events and details about politics that can be written about (and reported on) is limited, then the headlines are logical devices for competing newsrooms to put their unique mark on news. This logic seems especially germane when reliance on national and global wire agencies for story content is the norm. Accepting homogenized news content for stories likely means more attention is paid to making the headlines stand out. Moreover, the uncertain financial conditions that currently face all major Canadian media organizations could mean fewer resources are available to produce original story content. Thus the importance of differentiating news through headlines grows.

### *Headlines-Stories Variance*

Evaluative messages, whether directed toward a party or politician, are one set of media-supplied cues be unbalanced in headlines compared with stories. For instance, stories that come across as balanced for party X could have headlines that are relatively unbalanced toward that same party – i.e. predominately positive or negative about them, rather than neutral or balanced. In other words, the tone of story coverage might cancel out in the aggregate but the headlines come off as slanted one or the other.

Or, consider party Y that receives consistent but predominately neutral coverage in stories. But party Y makes headlines only for unusual or news-grabbing circumstances. The result is that relatively fewer headlines are produced or published about them, and these headlines are likely to have an evaluative tone. It would take a few salient negative (or positive) headlines about party Y to misrepresent what is overwhelmingly neutral story coverage. Both party Y's share and balance of coverage would be misrepresented in headlines.

These are just two illustrations of what an endorsement cue gap might look like in practice. And there is reason to believe that such gaps do exist in media coverage (Andrew 2007, 2008b) . It may be partly because journalists are simply assuming the responsibility of the public's watchdog. From the perspective that news media has a surveillance role over public affairs – the "fourth estate" – it makes sense that that headlines amplify to what is going well, and what is going wrong.

Yet endorsement gaps of this nature must also be viewed simply as the consequence of the headlines doing one of their jobs well. They sell the stories that follow them. Headlines need to say things to attract people to do that. When they are doing it properly, it makes sense that

headlines amplify what is clearly good or bad news for a party or politician. People are attracted to deviant and extraordinary information (Shoemaker and Cohen 2006). The headline 'Nothing Happened Today' will never be written. That is why headlines are biased against reporting neutral coverage of politics.

Is there reason to expect that market exposure has an impact on endorsement cue gaps? It would make sense if it did. Competitive pressure should, in theory, heighten the role headlines play as attraction mechanisms. As shown previously, gaps in terms of tone between headlines can exist. And the difference between headlines and stories in this regard is not just restricted to election campaign coverage. The headlines-stories literature has shown that headlines can sensationalize what stories report on a range of subjects (e.g. de Semir 1996; Dijk 1988). It seems logical that this headlines stories gap would be widest for newsrooms where last night's ratings or yesterday's street sales are most critical.

A headlines-stories gap can also exist for relational coverage of candidates and parties, as well as for viability versus ideology coverage. It is clear, from the previous work, that headlines are biased toward messages about candidates relative to parties (Andrew 2007). Market-exposed newsrooms are perhaps most susceptible to this form of personalization bias of headlines. It would make sense if journalists think that personal politics is more broadly appealing than party politics, and there is reason to suspect that they do.

The much vaunted pattern of horserace-style journalism is another area where market exposure could affect gaps between headlines and stories. It would make sense for market-exposed newsroom bias "the race" in headlines if horserace reporting is thought of as more mass appealing than reports on policy and issues. It would also make sense if reporting news on the horserace between parties or candidates is more cost efficient than producing news about a

policy proposal or campaign platform. Newsrooms in which resources severely constrain investigative journalism may exhibit wider headlines-stories gaps simply because they have more reports focused on the race to begin with. In short, it would make sense if market-exposure drives variance between how headlines and stories report politics across newsrooms. A case can be made where evaluative, personal, and strategy-oriented headline biases are all accentuated by market logic.

### *What do Journalists Think?*

All of these expectations are dependent on what journalists think. Do they agree that personalization, the horserace, and evaluation are profitable (and saleable) messages about politics in the first place – at least more saleable than neutral reports about public policy debates and party politics? Interview data with Canadian journalists for this project suggest this is a tenable assumption. Globe and Mail columnist John Ibbitson, for instance, suggested as much while challenging the idea that issues-based election coverage is better for democracy than horserace journalism.

I personally reject that. Voters vote on personalities. It's important that there be issues-based stories, at a certain point in the campaign we need to lay out where they are on healthcare, where they are on education...[However] I believe that voters at a certain point base their vote on their own intuitive sense of the extent to which the voter thinks the political leader represents their values. Does he get me? That's what an election race is about. That's what an election race should be about. It shouldn't be about who wrote that healthcare or education plan...We have the best example of voters, voting on personality in the U.S. It was Barak Obama's personality that voters were deciding on, and well they should (Interviewed Nov. 18, 2008).

In a similar way, Ken Whyte and Michael Goldbloom suggested that news stories and headlines which personalize Canadian politics (rather than abstract to a party level) are indeed typical responses journalists have to mass consumer preferences. Whyte, for instance, framed his comments on the subject from his perspective about an average *National Post* consumer. He argued at one point that typical readers

want to know that it's worth investing time in this [campaign]. It's just simple personal human nature that we all share. Personalities are easier to connect with than issues, you know flesh and blood personalities, and real events rather than abstractions. And politics has always been, at its healthiest, about a joining and being passionate about something, and a feeling of belonging and a feeling of community. That's a healthy part of the democratic process. So the fact that newspapers concentrate on these things to the extent that it draws people in, makes them a part of the process, I think is a very positive thing. You can get too critical of the media for not running 2000 word dissertations on the issues everyday (Interviewed April 24, 2008).

Former *Toronto Star* editor Goldbloom focused on a day-to-day Canadian newsroom ethos to make the point. When asked specifically about those responsible for writing and producing headlines he offered the following remarks

Is there more [emphasis] attached to focusing on an individual. I think so. Editors writing headlines are looking for a higher emotional component... You can be critical of people who are only interested in celebrity journalism, but I think it's human nature that people are more interested in people. The people [copy editors] are trying to find the emotional core of a story, and pick the element which has the most impact. It makes sense that they focus more on the individual (Interviewed May 22, 2008).

The interviews, in general, were broadly illustrative of a shared understanding that Canadian politics is likely to be most appealing for mass audience when it reports in certain ways.

Headlines that focus on a person rather than parties, on horserace and strategy rather than policy, and which gravitate to good bad and news, are thought most effective for engaging and connecting citizens with public affairs. This suggest that if gaps exist between headlines and stories they are likely most profound in newsroom where mass appeal is paramount. Headlines-stories variance should be widest when selling news drives newsroom decision making.

### **Market Exposure and Canadian News Media**

The extent to which profit drives newsmaking is the basis for testing these expectations. In theory, the impact of market conditions on newsrooms can be absolute. Resources can either be totally determined by market performance, or wholly unconnected to it. In practice, the importance of profit for newsrooms tends to be less clear-cut. Private newsrooms can be insulated from competition through regional monopolies, just as public newsrooms often

complement their funding with ad revenue. In the forthcoming analysis, therefore, headlines and stories offered in *more* market-exposed newsrooms are compared with headlines and stories supplied by *less* market-exposed newsrooms. It is assumed that pressure to generate audiences should be strongest in profit-driven newsrooms and weakest in newsrooms less concerned with profit. But is not assumed that any of the newsrooms in this study at one extreme or the other.

Interest in the way profit affects journalism and media systems is nothing new, of course (for instance, Hallin and Mancini 2004; McManus 1994; Siebert, Peterson and Schramm 1956). Typically, the influence of market pressure is assessed by comparing publicly-funded newsrooms with private-funded newsrooms. In European media systems, where public broadcasters have leading roles in news dissemination, a distinction is sometimes offered between *market-oriented* and *public interest-oriented* newsrooms, where market-oriented refers to predominately private funding and public interest is equated with public financing (Esser 2008). This analysis draws on that distinction and terminology to explore the Canadian media landscape.

All newsrooms in the study that received direct state funding classified as public-interest oriented, whereas profit-based newsrooms are classified as market-oriented. CBC is Canada's only public broadcaster. Funding for all CBC newsrooms is (partly) based on an annual parliamentary grant issue by the Canadian government. Therefore, the analysis focuses on how CBC television, radio, and internet news coverage of the 2006 campaign compare with all other leading sources of election news.

Note that this approach does not preclude the possibility that some market-oriented newsrooms in the sample are more market-exposed than others. Interview data suggested, for instance, that the Toronto (and to a lesser extent Montreal) metropolitan media markets are viewed by journalists as exceptional with respect to market intensity. Ken Whyte noted the

Greater Toronto Area market specifically when asked about competition in Canadian news media.

I think the biggest factor in my experience is the competitiveness of the marketplace. In a market like Toronto where you've got four daily newspaper and a few give-away newspapers, and just a lot more media generally, it's more important for a newspaper to have a distinctive voice, and either get the story first or get it best, preferably both. Those sorts of sensitivities are heightened in a competitive market and they don't seem to play as much in a monopoly situation.

John Ibbitson echoed this perspective.

I think the concentration of competitive media in Toronto may sharpen the headline writing process. If you're the only newspaper in town, generally speaking, management may think less about what it's doing when its putting its paper together, knowing it has to compete with all sorts of things but not with another paper. In Toronto your news choices, your headline choices, your art choices up front will compete with the National Post, Toronto Star, Toronto Sun, and how many of those freebies are there out there, 6 or 7 in the market now?

So, yes, above the fold in the newsstand, is something that [Toronto] editors will worry about acutely. The Calgary Herald certainly cares what's above the fold in the newsstand because it wants people to buy the Calgary Herald. But the Toronto Star wants people to buy the Toronto Star and not the Globe and Mail, the National Post, the Toronto Sun, or any of those freebies. So it [the Toronto metro market] is one of the most, if not the most, intensely competitive media markets on the continent.

These responses suggest that Toronto-based journalists face more competitive pressure than journalists situated in Halifax or Whitehorse. Toronto may be a hyper-competitive Canadian media market. And the newsrooms that compete mostly in these markets may be hyper-exposed to market conditions. Nonetheless, it is not fully accurate to suggest that newsrooms based outside of major metropolitan centers operate in less competitive conditions. Simply consider the increasing importance of news aggregators such as Google News for providing current affairs information. Exposure to Canadian politics stories and headlines is less pre-determined by a person's geographic location than it ever has been. A story or headline published by [thechronicleherald.ca](http://thechronicleherald.ca) is not restricted to people who live and work in the Halifax area. The point is that even newsrooms with ostensible regional monopolies are less insulated from competitive pressure in a modern media environment.

## *CBC News*

Three points about CBC news are necessary before the analysis. First, the CBC is not wholly dependent on state financing. Advertising is a tangible and highly visible component of CBC news production. All television programming, including the flagship nightly newscast *The National* is broadcast with commercial breaks. For this reason, CBC may be more appropriately characterized as a 'hybrid' system of public broadcasting (Raboy 1996). It is not fully insulated from market logic.

Second, the radio model used by the hybrid broadcaster suggests that some variation may exist between newsrooms within the CBC. CBC radio is commercial-free; CBC television is not. Third, note that Canada's broadcasting regulator (CRTC) mandates that *all* broadcasters are required to cover Canadian elections in fair and equitable ways. They are responsible to "ensure that the public has adequate knowledge of the issues surrounding an election and the position of the parties and candidates."<sup>1</sup> And all Canadian broadcasters have no choice but to provide at least some election coverage regardless of how low ratings for it might be. This reinforces the earlier point that no newsroom in the study is fully exposed or insulated from markets.

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that CBC stands apart from other major Canadian news organizations. It has an explicit public interest mandate. CBC programming is supposed to "contribute to shared national consciousness and identity," to "reflect the multicultural and multiracial nature of Canada," and to "strive to be of equivalent quality in English and French."<sup>2</sup> Whether CBC journalism meets these standards is a point for debate, of course. But it does have a clearly articulated public service mandate which distinguishes it for other leading media outlet.

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/INFO\\_SHT/b309.htm](http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/INFO_SHT/b309.htm) for more information on the CRTC election coverage guidelines for Canadian broadcasters.

<sup>2</sup> The CBC mandate and a link to the full Broadcast Act is available online at <http://www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/about/mandate.shtml>.

In terms of its coverage of politics specifically, a case can also be made that CBC stands apart from other major newsrooms. The sheer volume of its federal and provincial election coverage is one important difference. In the 2006 campaign, for instance, *The National* aired 35 percent more election stories than CTV, and the stories were twice as long on the CBC television compared with CTV. CBC radio news programs averaged 12 election stories daily, and the cbc.ca posted 2.5 times more stories than globandmail.ca. There is, in short, little doubt when surveying all of the major news coverage of the 2006 campaign that CBC reported more about it than any other newsroom.

CBC news publisher, John Cruickshank, agreed with the proposition that CBC news is unique among Canadian media. In a 2008 interview he explained that

The CBC sees itself to a certain extent as the news organization of record for Canadian national politics. We actually have a legislative obligation to cover some political activities including the opening of Parliament, for example. It's a part of the [overall] responsibility (Interviewed April 24, 2008).

Whether or not the ethos for CBC journalists is in fact different from their counterparts is also an open question. The forthcoming analysis will provide a unique empirical basis for at least one dimension of this debate. It is the first to compare the relationship between CBC news and other major news outlets in Canada in terms of how well headlines represent the stories.

## **Methodology**

This paper relies principally on a large dataset of headlines and stories collected from television, newspapers, radio, and the internet news sources during the 2006 election campaign period in Canada. A series of in-depth interviews with news editors and journalists is the other main component of this research design. Note this paper is part of a broader project on the media headlines and stories, in which both aggregate-level (headlines and stories) and individual-level

(a headline and its story) relationships are examined. The hypothesis presented here is one of five areas explored in that larger project.

The setting for the study is the 2006 Canadian federal election campaign. The content analysis includes newspaper, radio, television, and internet news coverage during the official campaign period between November 29, 2005 and election day on January 23, 2006. For newspapers, material has been gathered from seven major English and French language dailies: *Calgary Herald*, *Globe and Mail*, *La Presse*, *Le Devoir*, *National Post*, *Toronto Star*, and *Vancouver Sun*.<sup>3</sup> The sample includes all published articles (N=3,766) about the election in these newspapers: 2,441 news stories and 1,325 editorial and opinion items. Internet coverage includes all lead articles published on five major news websites in Canada: *canada.com*, *cbc.ca*, *globeandmail.ca*, *halifaxchronicleherald.ca*, and *torontostar.ca* during the campaign. This sample includes 1229 articles in total.

Television content includes nightly election coverage (N=608) from the two largest Canadian network news programs: *CBC - The National*, and *CTV News*.<sup>4</sup> Radio content includes all election items (N=406) broadcast on the three largest nationally syndicated news programs of Canada's public radio station (CBC Radio One): *World Report*, *The World at Six*, and *The World This Weekend*. Considered together, these media outlets (and programs) account for much of the mass-mediated information that Canadians receive about everyday politics (Gidengil et al. 2004). Media research during the 2006 campaign itself also confirms the dominance of these outlets as

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<sup>3</sup> For the newspaper and internet study, a team of undergraduate and graduate student coders were introduced to the project during formal training sessions that included a series of practice coding exercises and a guide for the online data entry system. Stories were randomly selected for double-coding throughout the campaign to check intercoder reliability – the consistency with which different coders come up with identical codes.<sup>3</sup> Coding for television and radio data, though not formally assessed for reliability, was completed immediately following the newspaper election project. (More detailed methodological information is available at the McGill Media Observatory website (<http://media-observatory.mcgill.ca>).

<sup>4</sup> All television and radio coding was completed by the author, following a coding strategy developed for the 2004 and 2006 newspaper study (Andrew 2007, 2008a; Andrew, Maioni and Soroka 2006; Soroka and Andrew n.d.).

suppliers of election information in Canada (Waddell and Dornan 2006). In short, this design has captured a significant chunk of the headlines and stories conveyed to the public by mass media before this election.

## **Results**

Did market exposure matter for the integrity of headlines as news shortcuts for the 2006 campaign? To answer this question, CBC results are juxtaposed with all other Canadian newsrooms for the presence of leader, party, viability, ideology, and endorsement cues. The analysis proceeds by asking two questions. First, do headlines bias information similarly across more and less market-exposed newsrooms? Second, if there is newsroom variation, does the CBC consistently reduce the differences between headline and stories compared to more market-exposed newsrooms? The answers will, at the end, provide a sense for whether the potential biases encountered by headline skimmers are in any way mediated by following CBC's coverage of this campaign.

We begin with a sense for where CBC stands in relation to each of the 12 different newsrooms in the sample. Figure 6.1 presents a breakdown of media emphasis. This is the degree to which headlines and stories primed party cues compared with leader cues. The extreme points of the bars for each newsroom represent the percent gap between party and leader attention in headlines (H) and stories (S). In other words, this figure provides a sense for whether headlines were filled by more, less, or about the same mix of cues about the main parties and leaders as their stories.

[Figure 6.1 about here]

First of all, note that headlines for all newsrooms (with one exception) biased leader coverage. The headlines were more likely than stories to report about leaders than parties in all

cases except the *Calgary Herald*. CBC was no different in this respect. Headlines are more leader-centric than the stories they represent. (This is evident in the full sample results at the top of Figure 6.1.)

The gap between headlines and stories was widest for the two French-language dailies, CTV television, and all online election coverage. There was nearly a 50 percentage point gap between *La Presse* headlines and their stories, and more than a 40 percentage point gap between headlines and stories on CTV. The *Globe and Mail's* online headline content was also significantly more leader focused (37 percentage points) than the stories published on their website.

The headline-story gap tended to be smaller for the English-language print daily newspapers. There are only marginal differences between the *Vancouver Sun* (.3 points) and *Globe and Mail's* (2.7 points) print edition in terms of leader versus party emphasis. Hence, in terms of leader versus party cues it mattered little whether voters skimmed or followed this campaign closely if they were only exposed to these two papers.<sup>5</sup> On the whole though, Canadian newsrooms tended to frame their election coverage in headlines more in terms of leader than their stories would have suggested.

Notice how CBC news is not an outlier, contrary to expectations. Their headlines tended to prime leaders more than stories, just as almost every other Canadian newsroom did. This would suggest that at least on the dimension of leader and party cues, market exposure did not matter. There is little obvious difference in terms of gap size between headlines and stories for CBC

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<sup>5</sup> The most distinctive take on this election, with respect to leaders and parties, was offered by the *Calgary Herald*, where headlines were more party-centered (11 percent) than stories. In fact, both headlines and stories for the Herald were considerably more likely to focus on a party than any other newsroom in Canada. *Calgary Herald* headline skimmers, in particular, were significantly more likely than skimmers encountering any other media to be primed with cues about the Conservatives or the Liberals rather than Harper or Martin.

relative to most other newsrooms in Canada. CBC does not have the widest gap, but it does not have the smallest either.

The caveat is that not all CBC newsrooms were equivalent in this respect. As shown in Figure 6.2, *The National* and *cbc.ca* are the two drivers of headlines-stories variance. *The National*, for instance, was virtually identical to the other television network (CTV) in terms of leader emphasis in the headlines. CBC radio listeners, by contrast, received balanced exposure to leaders and parties, independent of whether they followed the news closely or mainly through headlines. There is, then, a layer of evidence showing that CBC's headlines-stories gap was not consistent across mediums. It is striking that the gap is almost non-existent for the commercial-free news branch of the CBC.

[Figure 6.2 about here]

### *Leaders and Parties*

The above results cannot speak to whether CBC headlines were different with respect to coverage of each party compared to their leader. This is a critical distinction because a gap between party cues and leader cues overall is substantively less interesting than, say, a gap between Liberal cues and Paul Martin cues. What has been reported so far only tells us that headlines focused more on leaders in general than parties in general, relative to the stories.

One-to-one party versus leader analysis is a necessary next step because leaders are often more (or less) popular than their party. The short-term appeal of leaders is indeed regarded as an important factor in Canadian elections (Clarke et al. 1996; LeDuc 1984). And, of course, the long-term factor of partisan attachment is an enduring theme of electoral outcomes in Canada (Blais et al. 2002; Gidengil et al. 2006). Examining how headlines treated each of the four main parties and leaders can point to potential advantages (or disadvantages) at the ballot box. It also

offers an additional test for the thesis that market exposure affected the headlines-stories relationship.

Figure 6.3 shows party-leader results for CBC compared with more market-exposed news. The first question is did CBC headlines bias leader cues in the same way as other newsrooms? The answer is yes. Canadian news media headlines tended to focus more on each leader than the balance of coverage in stories would have suggested. This is illustrated in Figure 6.3 in which headline (H) consistently appears on the left (leader-oriented) side of the story (S) in both the CBC and the market-oriented newsrooms. All four leaders made headlines at least as often as their parties did, and in some cases more often. But that was not representative of story coverage. In each case, stories tended to report more about each party than they did about each of their leaders.

[Figure 6.3 about here]

A typical CBC story was 32 percent more likely to mention a party than its leader. A typical story from market-oriented newsrooms was nearly 55 percent more likely to report about a party than its leader. One would expect these relationships to hold in headlines if headlines are perfect proxies for the story in this respect. They were not. A typical CBC headlines was 30 percent more likely to reference a leader than a party. And there was no difference, on average, for party-leader emphasis for market-oriented news headlines. Scanners were more likely to encounter leader coverage, regardless of what party we consider or where the headline was made.

That leads into the second consideration about the gap width for CBC headlines and stories relative market-oriented newsrooms? Were CBC headlines any less biased toward leader coverage than elsewhere? The answer is no. In fact, the CBC headlines-stories gap is wider than

other news media for the two main parties contesting this election. Notice how the bars for CBC news are larger for coverage of the Liberals and Conservatives. The Liberal-Martin gap is 45 points for CBC compared with 36 points elsewhere. Similarly, The Harper-Conservative gap for headlines and stories is 48 percent versus 27 percent elsewhere. CBC headlines were less (not more) representative of how their stories reported the campaign for these parties compared with more market-exposed newsrooms.<sup>6</sup>

Note how the gaps in general between headlines and stories are widest for the NDP and BQ – third parties in this campaign – in both the CBC and more market-oriented newsrooms. Campaign headlines for those parties were not just less leader-focused than stories; they were mainly about the leaders. For the NDP, the CBC gap was 76 points compared was 93 points in market-oriented newsrooms. The gap is smaller for CBC, as expected. Yet the 76 point gap is still larger than it was for both the Liberals and Conservatives. Headlines focused mainly on Layton in all newsrooms, considerably more so than the stories would predict. CBC headlines were somewhat more representative of their stories in this regard, but the gap was still wider than it was for the main parties.

The leader bias in headlines was no less intense for CBC's coverage of the Bloc Québécois, relative to market-oriented newsrooms. It was more intense, in fact. The CBC gap was 74 points compared with about 60 points elsewhere. Overall then, CBC coverage for three of the four main parties was no different from elsewhere in terms of leader emphasis. The gap between headlines and stories was not reduced as expected. In fact it grew for three of the four cases. In

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<sup>6</sup> Recall that headlines are biased toward leaders most strongly in television news. CBC television does represent a greater proportion of overall CBC coverage (15 percent) than CTV television (1 percent) represents in the market-oriented news sample. Yet there is little difference between these television networks with respect to leader emphasis in headlines. The gap between stories and headlines is robust for both networks and the size of these gaps are virtually identical across parties. This suggests that results presented this way are still valid, notwithstanding the unequal weight television has in the two samples.

short, there is no evidence for the claim that leader bias in headlines is reduced in less market-exposed setting. If anything, results suggest the opposite.

### *Polls and Issues*

There is also little evidence for the hypothesis that less market-exposed newsrooms reduce differences between headlines and stories in terms of viability and ideology signals. In fact, there little evidence that headlines and stories differ much generally in terms of how the horserace and issues are reflected through them. That was indeed one of the conclusions reached in the previous research. For now, briefly consider the way CBC headline-story coverage compared to all other newsrooms with respect to polls and issues.

The first point to reiterate is that variance between headlines and stories coverage is the focal point, not the difference in news orientations or topics. It was true that CBC covered the horserace and issues of this election somewhat differently. Yet their headlines were neither better nor worse proxies for what the stories were reporting compared with other news sources. It did not matter where voters skimmed information. The headlines reflected what stories were saying on the polls and race, independent of where it came from.

To demonstrate this, think first about the overall coverage of ideology and viability in headlines compared with stories. Figure 6.4 illustrates this relationship by showing the percentage of horserace-oriented coverage relative to issue-oriented coverage for CBC newsrooms and more market-oriented newsrooms. Again, the first question to ask is did CBC headlines bias information similar to elsewhere? The short answer is no. There was little variance between headlines and stories at all in this respect. Both CBC headlines and market-oriented headlines closely mirrored how their stories were covering the race versus issues.

[Figure 6.4 about here]

Note that CBC ran more stories with an issues frame than market-oriented newsrooms. The difference is about 20 percent. Yet CBC headlines are almost an exact mirror of their stories in this respect. The gap between issues and horserace coverage is +8.1 percent in CBC stories compared to +7.7 in CBC headline. They are essentially identical. In market-oriented newsrooms, the difference is +.5 percent in stories, and +2.1 percent in headlines.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the variance between headlines and stories is .4 percent at CBC and 1.7 percent elsewhere. The follow-up question of whether CBC reduces the gap is, then, muted by the lack of variance to begin with.

The consistency of headlines as proxies in this way held throughout the course of the election period. Figure 6.5 illustrates this by graphing coverage of viability cues in headlines and stories by campaign week. Note again the close relationship between headlines and stories for almost all weeks of the campaign. There was obviously more variance in CBC's attention to the horserace, relative to the other major news outlets. But in most weeks the headlines and stories from all sources offered voters nearly the same mix of reporting about polls and strategy.

[Figure 6.5 about here]

In terms of specific issues, CBC headlines and stories related in much the same as headlines and stories from elsewhere. Figure 6.6 shows the percentage of total issue coverage taken up by the four most salient campaign topics in headlines and stories.<sup>8</sup> The first question is did CBC headlines play up (or play down) the same issues as market-oriented newsrooms? In three of four cases they did. All headlines amplified the corruption issue, and played down the economy

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<sup>7</sup> Separate analyses for each newsroom also confirm that there was little statistical variation between headlines and stories in this respect. With two exceptions, differences between headlines and stories were consistently insignificant. The exceptions were the *National Post* which primed the horserace more in headlines than stories ( $p < .05$ ), and the *Toronto Star* published significantly more headlines with ideology cues than stories ( $p < .1$ ).

<sup>8</sup> The four issues were selected using the full sample and full stories as the unit of analysis.

and social programs. The exception was national unity. That issue was slightly amplified in market-oriented headlines, but downplayed in CBC news headlines.

[Figure 6.6 about here]

Can we say that CBC reduced the gap for the three issues where the biases in headlines are consistent? In all three cases, the answer is clearly no. The social programs gap between headlines and stories (- 1.9 percent) is identical for both CBC and market-oriented newsroom. Similarly, the gap between headlines and stories for the economy is small: -1.9 percent in CBC coverage and -2.4 percent in market-oriented newsrooms. There is a noticeable difference for the corruption issue, however. Yet the headlines emphasis on this issues is not reduced by the CBC, it is accentuated. The gap is +2.8 percent in CBC headlines compared with +.3 percent in market-oriented newsrooms.

This difference may well be inconsequential. It is an unexpected result though. Two prominent government scandals drove reporting in this case. It would make sense if this particular issue had been played up in headlines by market-oriented headlines. Scandals would seem to be the gold standard of headline news; yet the market-exposed newsrooms were not shouting about them in their headlines. The reverse was true. It was CBC headline producers who were responsible for driving much of the variance on this issue.

This distinction, though admittedly small, may be important because research on the 2004 Canadian election campaign found that the Liberal party lost about six points due to voter anger about the sponsorship scandal (Gidengil et al. 2006). Corruption and accountability was a leading issue again in 2006 campaign, and it was a wedge issue. The Conservative party stood to benefit from scandal in the headlines. The Liberals clearly did not. This result suggests that negative coverage of the Liberal party – mainly about the sponsorship scandal and the income

trust scandal – was more salient in the minds of news skimmers exposed to CBC. Overall, there is no evidence for the expectation that headline biases for salient issues would be reduced by CBC.

A final note on this topic concerns categories of issues more broadly. It is possible that although CBC did not reduce headline biases for a single issue, it may have impacted biases for certain categories of issues. The genesis of sensational and left-wing issues in the news has been a topic for both popular and academic discourse in the past (Miljan and Cooper 2003; Slattery, Doremus and Marcus 2001; Soroka 2002). To investigate potential headline biases in these areas, Figure 6.7 presents results for these issue categories in CBC news and market-oriented newsrooms.

[Figure 6.7 about here]

In both cases, there is little evidence that CBC news reported about these issue categories any differently than elsewhere. There is no evidence, in fact, that headlines bias sensational issues at all. The gap between headlines and stories for CBC news is +.6 percent compared to just +1.8 percent in market-oriented newsroom. Headlines were, then, quite good proxies for degree of story coverage allocated to sensational issues.

In terms of left-wing issues there is some evidence that headlines downplay them. This was true both for CBC (-8.1 percent) and market-oriented newsrooms (-5.8 percent). Did CBC headlines mitigate this bias against left-wing journalism? No, the results suggest the CBC headlines underrepresented the volume of left-wing issue coverage in their stories to a greater degree than market-oriented newsrooms. Results do not lend support to the perspective that CBC journalists infuse their news with a left-leaning agenda (Miljan and Cooper 2003). On the whole, there is little evidence that headline biases with respect to either viability or ideology cues

were reduced by CBC newsrooms. If the CBC had any impact whatsoever, it was to amplify (not reduce) biases of headlines in these areas.

### *Endorsements*

Evidence to this point does not support the expectation that less market-exposed newsrooms reduce variance between headline and story news. There has been little difference generally between CBC and other newsrooms in the way headlines and stories relate. And where differences exist, they tend to be in the opposite direction for what is expected. Gaps are in some cases slightly larger between CBC headlines and stories than elsewhere. Generally though, the parties, leaders, issues, and this election's horserace were all reported with nearly the same degree of headlines bias, regardless of the newsroom.

CBC was exceptional in one critical respect, however. They offered significantly fewer endorsement cues about the main parties and leaders in headlines than anywhere else. Whereas the headlines in market-oriented newsrooms biased positive or negative cues about a party or leader, CBC headlines did not. In fact, not only did CBC headlines not amplify endorsement message from stories, they downplayed them. The public broadcaster's headlines biased this dimension of campaign reporting in a wholly different way from other news providers. CBC nested most of its endorsement cues in stories rather than headlines. All other Canadian newsrooms amplified endorsement cues in their headlines.

To demonstrate the degree of CBC exceptionalism in this regard, consider the differences between endorsement cues in headlines and stories as illustrated by Figure 6.8. It shows the percent difference in the volume of evaluative messages about each party and leader combined, across both CBC news and market-oriented news. A mid-point score of 0 means that headlines reported endorsement to the exact degree as their stories did: no bias. Bars to the right of 0 mean

that headlines amplified endorsements, bars the left side of 0 indicate headlines underrepresent endorsement cues.

[Figure 6.8 about here]

What is striking about Figure 6.8 is that headline bias is in an opposite direction for all parties and leaders. CBC stories were consistently more evaluative than the headlines; market-oriented headlines were consistently more evaluative than the stories. In response to the first question: headlines clearly did not bias the endorsement cue in similar ways across CBC and more market-exposed newsrooms. Market-oriented headlines were, on average, almost 50 percent more likely than stories to provide voters with an endorsement cue: a clearly positive or negative reference about a party or leader. The widest gap (70 percent) between headlines and stories was for NDP news. If the NDP or Layton was featured in a market exposed headline, chances were high that they were also evaluated in a positive or negative light.

For CBC, a headline about one of the main parties or leaders was about 30 percent less likely than a reference to the same leader or party in a story to be framed positively or negatively. The largest bias in this respect was for the Conservatives and Harper. Headlines about the Conservatives or Harper were 40 percent less evaluative, on average, than stories about them. This suggests that people following the campaign closely vis-à-vis CBC stories got considerably more endorsement messages about the Conservatives than people skimming CBC headlines. In short, skimmers exposed to this campaign through CBC headlines got mostly a neutral rendition of it. On the other hand, skimmers exposed to headlines from other sources got a sharper image of journalist evaluation.

Does this mean CBC reduced the bias of headline for endorsement cues? It is difficult to say for sure. Note that bars for three of the four main parties and leaders are smaller for CBC. For

example, while market-oriented headlines amplified endorsements of the liberals by 40 percent, CBC headlines downplayed them only by 18 percent. This pattern was similar for the NDP and Bloc. Yet because the direction of headline bias is opposite to begin with, a comparison of gap size may not be inappropriate. It is perhaps prudent to conclude that they were different – neither clearly better nor worse proxies of their stories.

The question of better or worse also depends on whose interests are in question. If party X's campaign coverage was mostly negative they would no doubt prefer CBC's approach because voters would have to be pay close attention to get to the full dose of 'bad news.' If Party Y seems to be doing well, they would prefer headlines to amplify tone and increases the opportunity that people paying less attention are exposed to the 'good news.'

One thing is certain about this gap between headlines and stories. The fact that one existed in the first place stood to benefit certain parties and leaders in this election. The conventional wisdom about this campaign is that Conservatives and Harper received significantly better media coverage than the Liberals and Martin (Andrew et al. 2006; Waddell and Dornan 2006). If headlines were loaded with tone then the Conservatives stood to gain. The Liberals had the most to lose. From the perspective of Liberal partisans, CBC news exposure was the best they could hope for. If all newsrooms covered the campaign like the CBC then people paying least attention may not have realized how badly it was going for the Liberals and Martin.

This discussion raises the question of balance between headlines and stories? A final point for investigation is whether the degree of negativity (or positivity) conveyed by stories was about the same in the headlines that preceded them? Or did headlines bias (in one direction or another) the balance of coverage a party and leader received in stories? There is, in short, little evidence that headlines were unbalanced in 2006. For the most part they were close proxies for story tone.

And CBC news headlines were not clearly more accurate reflections of story balance than elsewhere.

Figure 6.9 demonstrates that point, showing the balance of evaluative coverage reported about the two main parties and leaders. The first question is did CBC and market-oriented headlines bias coverage in similar ways? In two cases the answer is no. For Martin, CBC headlines were more positive than their stories, whereas market-oriented headlines were more negative. It was the reverse for the Conservative party. CBC headlines were less positive than their stories, market-oriented headlines were more positive than their stories.

[Figure 6.9 about here]

Headlines did bias story tone in the same direction for two cases: Liberal party coverage and Harper coverage. For both Liberals and Harper, headlines from CBC and market-oriented newsroom were more negative than the stories. The degree of headline bias in these cases is quite small, however. Headlines are only about 3 percentage points different for Harper and 5 points different for Liberal coverage. Did CBC reduce headline bias in these cases? They clearly did not for Harper; the gap width is exactly -3.3 percent for both CBC news and market-oriented newsrooms. The CBC headlines-stories gap was indeed smaller for the Liberal party (-3.2 percent versus -7.2 percent). But again, headline biases in terms of balance were relatively small overall. In two of the four cases, biases were inconsistent between CBC and market-oriented newsrooms. When CBC and market-oriented newsrooms moved in the same direction, CBC did not always reduce the gap.

This sub-section has, though, provided evidence that on at least one dimension CBC's headlines-stories relationship stands apart. Endorsement cues from all major Canadian newsrooms were biased in headlines. CBC was a clear exception to this pattern. Practically

speaking, this meant that if stories from market-oriented newsrooms were generally positive (or negative) for one party or leader, then the headlines sharpened that message. CBC newsrooms were more modest in this sense. The public broadcaster's headlines did not amplify opinion embedded in the stories. They downplayed it.

This result makes sense. CBC can least afford allegations of bias – to be seen as playing a favorite during election campaigns. Its funding is partly derived from public finances, and its mandate speaks plainly about equitable and balanced coverage of Canadian public affairs. The public broadcaster's headlines were not necessarily better proxies than anywhere else, however. Endorsement messages were present in CBC campaign discourse. Voters just had to look deeper to find them. CBC headlines were not more accurate proxies for their stories; they represented them in a different way. There is, overall, little empirical evidence to support a thesis of headline-story variance at the Canadian newsroom level based on a distinction between more and less market-exposure.

## **Conclusion**

Over the past couple of years CBC television has broadcast a series of ads claiming that they take their viewers 'behind the headlines.' A prototypical ad begins with a close-up image of a simple recognizable object. Then the camera fades to a backdrop, showing that the original close-up frame was not an especially good summary (or representative image) of the bigger picture. Meanwhile the voice-over reinforces the metaphor of this ad, claiming that only CBC news takes you behind the headlines. The implication is quite clear: headlines do not – maybe cannot – encapsulate a whole story. CBC news offers the degree of depth required to do give the news its appropriate context.

While this claim may indeed be true, this series of CBC ads overlooks the basic fact that even they depend on headlines to frame their news stories. There is no reason to believe that CBC headlines matter less for how people assimilate news than, for instance, the *Globe and Mail* or CTV news headlines. And perhaps most importantly, this paper has shown that there are only mild differences in the relationship between headlines and stories from CBC compared with other major Canadian media institutions. CBC headlines reflected their stories' coverage of parties, leaders, viability, and ideology in much the same way as other media. Therefore, if the allegation of these ads is that headlines do not tell you the whole story then CBC is no less immune from the charge than any other media organization in Canada in most respects.

There was, notwithstanding, one key difference between CBC newsrooms and the more market-oriented Canadian newsrooms following this election. Not surprisingly, CBC journalists were reticent to convey anything but neutral coverage of the parties and leaders in the headlines. They were not, however, nearly as reticent to evaluate them in their stories as one would think. Voters did indeed *have to* go behind the headlines at CBC to find out what the public broadcaster's review of the main parties and leaders was. All other media outlets in Canada wore their endorsement message on their sleeves, so to speak.

In general though, CBC headlines were not clearly better (or worse) than other newsrooms in relating story cues on parties, candidates, viability, or ideology. Headlines and stories offered by the CBC were usually indistinguishable from the other newspapers and networks on five indicators of essential political information. CBC headlines were no less leader-focused than market-oriented newsrooms. And the mix between viability and ideology signals in CBC headlines and stories was almost identical with the overall pattern of campaign coverage at other media outlets. If media bias on the level of headlines and stories exists in the Canadian news

supply, it is not much affected by a newsroom's market-exposure. Citizens who see politics through headlines do not get perfect shorthand for what is actually reported in stories, regardless of where they get it from.

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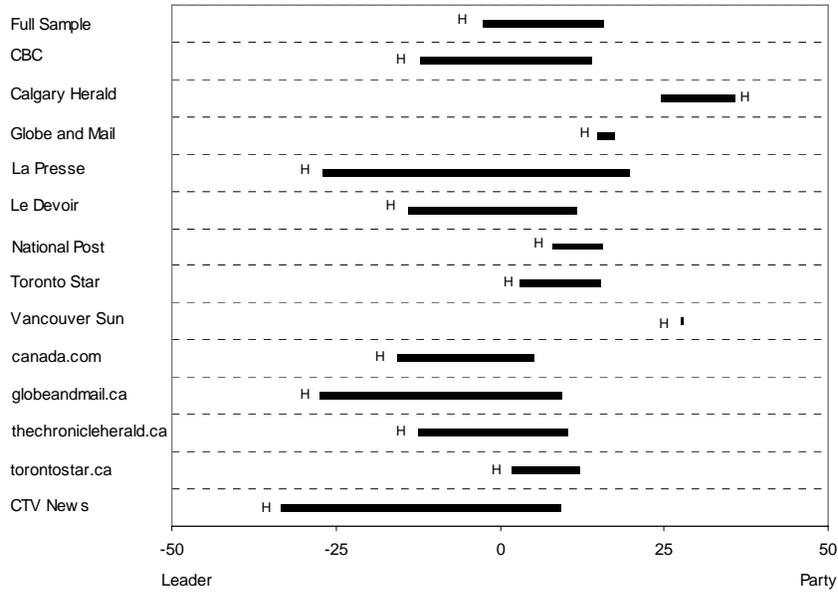
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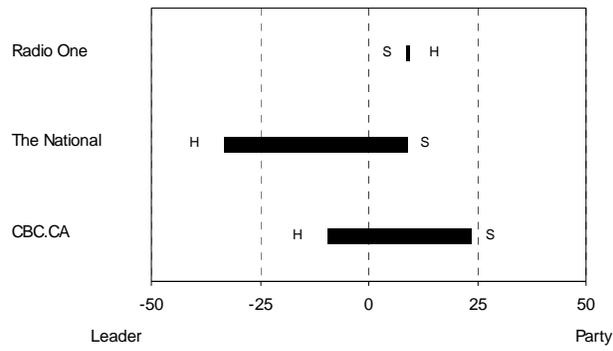
## Tables and Figures

**Figure 6.1 Media Emphasis by Outlet, 2006 Canadian Federal Election**



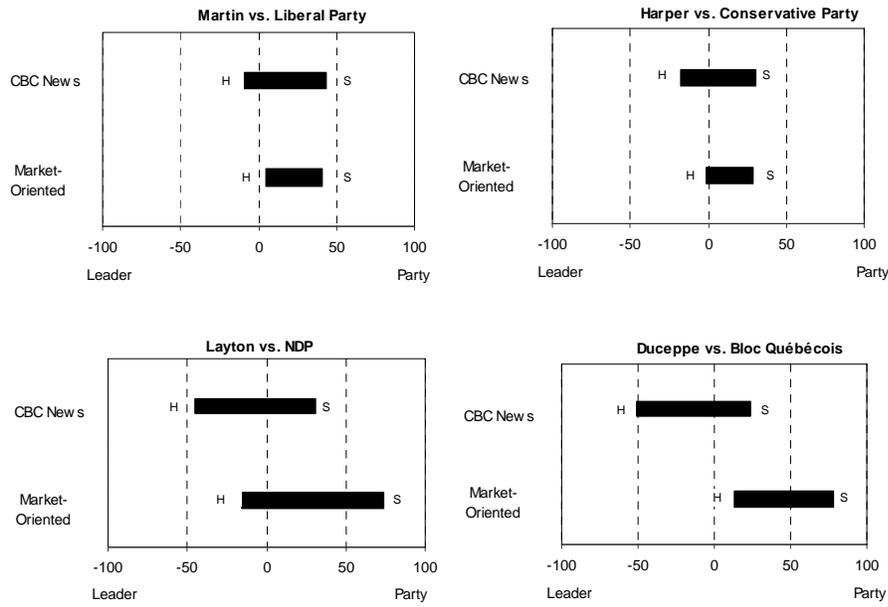
Source: 2006 CENS database. Bars represent the percentage point difference between headlines and stories emphasis on leaders versus parties. Emphasis - represented by the maximum and minimum values of each bar - is defined as the gap between the percent of at least one party mention versus the percent of at least one leader mention, in both headlines and stories.

**Figure 6.2 CBC Media Emphasis, 2006 Canadian Federal Election**



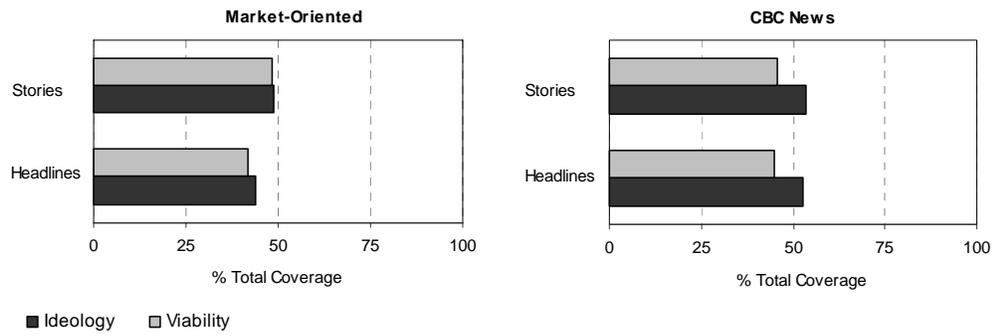
Source: 2006 CENS database. Bars represent the percentage point difference between headlines and stories emphasis on leaders versus parties. Emphasis - represented by the maximum and minimum values of each bar - is defined as the gap between the percent of at least one party mention versus the percent of at least one leader mention, in both headlines and stories.

Figure 6.3 Media Emphasis by Party, 2006 Canadian Federal Election



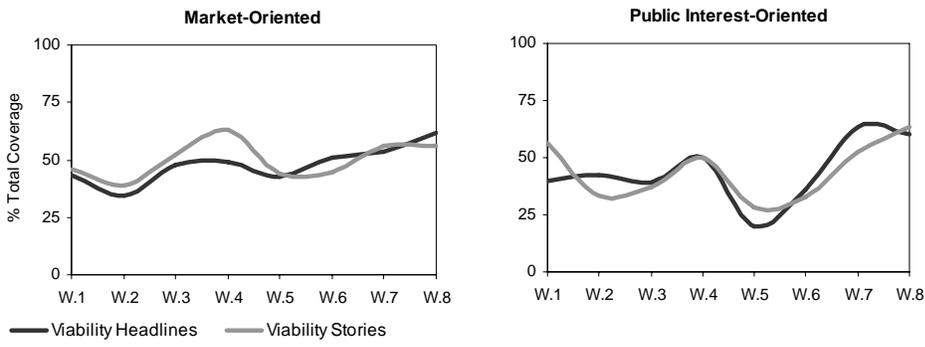
Source: 2006 CENS database. Bars represent the percentage point difference between headlines and stories emphasis on a leader versus a party. Emphasis - represented by the maximum and minimum values of each bar - is defined as the gap between the percent of a party mention versus the percent of a leader mention, in both headlines and stories.

Figure 6.4 Media Coverage of Viability and Ideology Signals, 2006 Canadian Federal Election



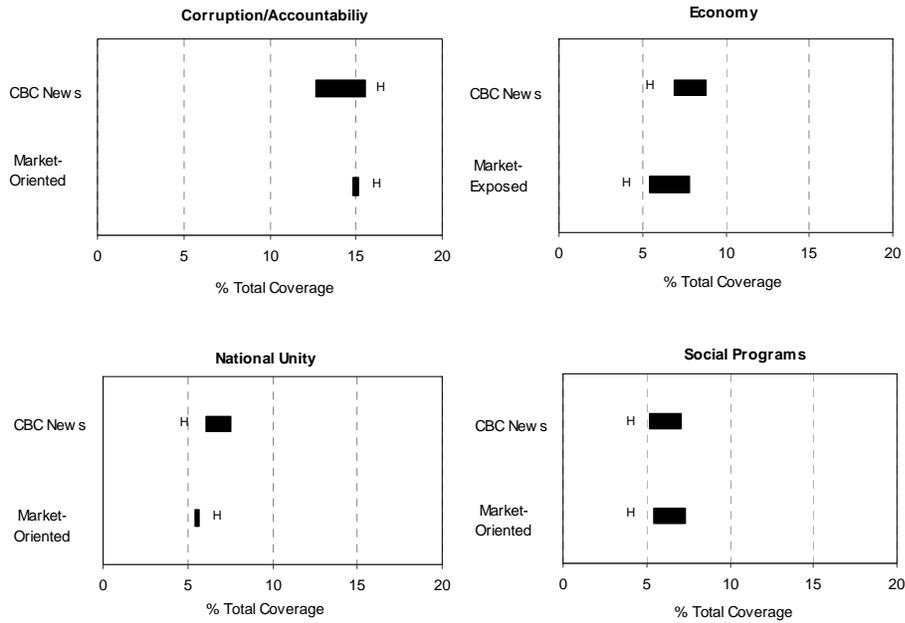
Source: 2006 CENS database. The viability signal is measured as all horserace-oriented stories or headlines, whereas the ideology signal is measured as all issues-oriented headlines and stories.

Figure 6.5 News Emphasis by Campaign Week, 2006 Canadian Federal Election



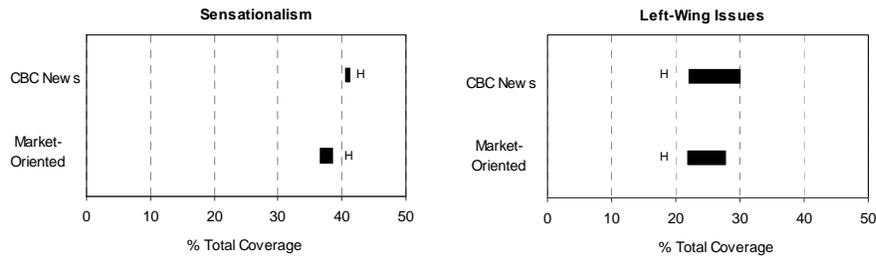
Source: 2006 CENS database. The viability signal is noted if a headline or full story is horserace-oriented. Figures excludes ambiguous headlines and stories.

Figure 6.6 Most Salient Election Issues, 2006 Canadian Federal Election



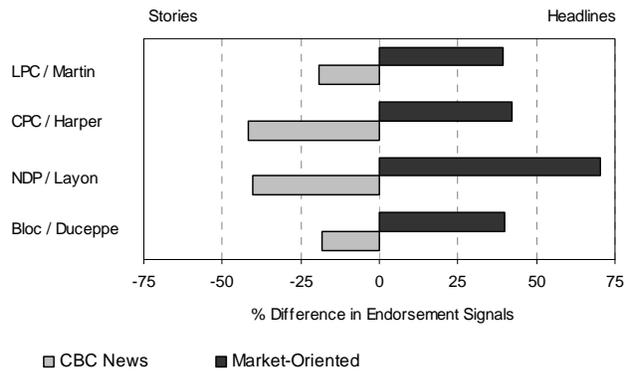
Source: 2006 CENS database. Issues reported are the four leading issues in the full sample using stories as the unit of analysis. Bars represent the percentage point gap of total coverage for each issue in headlines compared with stories.

**Figure 6.7 Media Coverage of Viability and Ideology Signals, 2006 Canadian Federal Election**



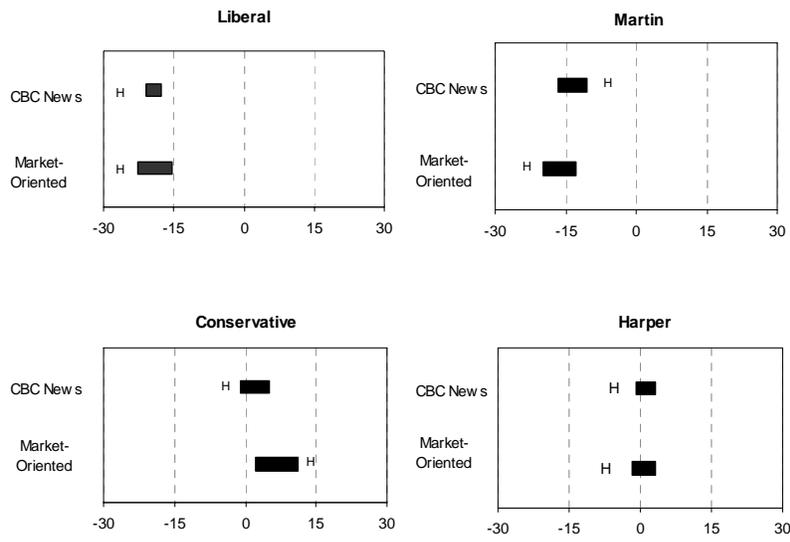
Source: 2006 CENS database. Sensational issues include corruption/accountability, international affairs/defense, crime, national unity, same sex marriage, immigration/multiculturalism, and racism/discrimination. Left-wing issues include national unity, social programs, healthcare, environment, immigration/multiculturalism, and education.

**Figure 6.8 Endorsement Signals, 2006 Canadian Federal Election**



Source: 2006 CENS database. Bars represent the percent difference between headline endorsement signals and story endorsement signals for coverage of each party and leader combined.

Figure 6.9 Balance of Party and Leader Endorsements, 2006 Canadian Federal Election



Source: 2006 CENS database. Bars represent the percentage point gap between net tone - percent positive minus percent negative news coverage - in headlines compared with stories.