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**Who Framed the F-35? Government-Media Relations in Canadian Defence Procurement**

Scholarly Essay

**Abstract**

How did the Canadian news media cover the F-35 purchase proposed by the Harper government in mid-2010? Under what conditions did the media tend to index government talking points as opposed to providing space to oppositional voices and viewpoints? Content analysis of headlines and full text transcripts in five mainstream newspapers revealed news coverage that was mostly negative and that became more negative as consensus within official decision circles dissipated. Overall, the findings fit most closely with the predictions of the cascading activation model of government-media relations, while also underscoring the importance of factors specific to the Canadian context.

**Keywords:** Defence Policy, Media and Politics, Defence Procurement, F-35 Joint Strike Fighter
The news media play a critical role in policy and politics, especially in modern liberal democracies like Canada. One major area where insight on the role of the news media has been lacking is national defence procurement. This is unfortunate, given that carefully scripted media communication—once exclusively associated with savvy advocacy groups and public relations firms—is now practiced by all key decision-making bodies involved in the acquisition of materiel for the Canadian military. Some welcome this practice as indispensable for the proactive disclosure of information and, in turn, for government accountability; others dismiss it as a criticism-deflecting tactic, and still others regard it as an ideological tool—as in the alleged effort of successive Conservative governments led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper to “rebrand” Canada as a war-fighter as opposed to a peacekeeper.

This study is an analysis of Canada’s F-35 fighter jet procurement controversy in the period between 2010 and 2014 from the perspective of government-media relations, or “press-state relations”. The underlying research problem concerns the determinants of

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media independence: under what conditions were the Canadian media most likely to depart from indexing government talking points on this deal, and why? The study subjects to content analysis of a large sample of newspaper articles published on this issue in the Ottawa Citizen, the Toronto Star, the National Post, The Globe and Mail, and La Presse. The main findings are as follows: the press generally eschewed official F-35 story frames in favour of those built on oppositional sources and viewpoints. Next, as consensus within official decision circles dissipated over time, the press gave more and more space to counterframes. In terms of cross-newspaper variation, the Toronto Star was the most consistent in airing voices critical of the planned purchase, followed by the Ottawa Citizen; conversely, the newspaper most likely to tie its coverage to government-managed news was La Presse. Going back to theory, the findings tend to support the cascading activation model rather than the basic indexing hypothesis, while also underscoring the importance of context-specific factors.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. The first section reviews a selection of models for understanding the relationship between the government and the press, and explains how they can shed light on the politics of defence procurement. Subsequent sections deal with research design and findings, respectively. The concluding section offers reflections on further research avenues and on the upcoming decision, to be made by the Liberal government led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, on the future Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) fighter capability.

**Defence Procurement is News**

Canada’s relationship with the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), also known in the media as the F-35 Lightning II, has been a bumpy one. Ottawa first showed interest in the F-35 in
mid-1997, when Pentagon officials circulated the blueprint for this stealthy, “fifth
generation” multirole fighter jet (fighter for short) to America’s closest friends and allies.
Shortly afterwards the Liberal government under Prime Minister Jean Chrétien decided to
contribute funds to the development of the JSF program, a move that established Canada as a
stakeholder in what became a large and controversial multinational undertaking. In Canada,
the F-35 procurement controversy began on 16 July 2010, the day when three ministers in
the then minority Conservative government staged an extravagant press conference to tell
Canadians that the ageing CF-18 fighter fleet flown by the RCAF would in the near future be
replaced by 65 F-35s at the total cost a $9-billion. The announcement immediately sparked
a furore among the opposition parties, and not just them. The ensuing debate on the merits
of the proposed deal—mainly, whether the stated price tag was right, whether the F-35 was
the right warplane for the RCAF, and whether the rationale for sole-sourcing made sense—
came to involve bureaucrats, military officers, former officials, industry representatives and
just about every political commentator and defence policy expert in the country.³

Crucially, two government watchdog agencies weighted in, too. When a March 2011
report by the Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO) questioned the diligence exercised by the
Department of National Defence (DND) in assessing the cost of the planned purchase, the
 politicization of the issue contributed to the no-confidence vote that dissolved the 40th
Canadian parliament and led to the election of 2 May 2011. The Conservatives’ electoral
victory—this time they won a majority of seats in the House of Commons—did nothing to

³ These paragraphs build on Kim Richard Nossal, “Late Learners: The F-35 and Lessons from the New
Fighter Aircraft Program,”  International Journal 68: 1 (2012-3): 167–84; and Srdjan Vucetic and Atsushi
(2012-3): 131-149.
secure the purchase contract, however. On 3 April 2012, the Office of the Auditor General (AG) published a hard-hitting report on defence procurement that included a much-anticipated chapter on the F-35 file (the contents of which had been partially leaked in mid-March). Like the PBO, the AG charged DND and, to a lesser extent, the Department of Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC), for misleading Canadians and their elected leaders about the full cost of this multibillion-dollar acquisition. Moreover, the report offered hard evidence of procedural wrong-doing and of ministerial irresponsibility. Embroiled in “scandal,” the government promptly announced a policy “reset,” which meant that the process of recapitalizing the RCAF fighter fleet would now start over from scratch and be administered by a new agency, the National Fighter Procurement Secretariat (NFPS).

What role did the Canadian news media play in this botched policy-making episode? Answering this question systematically poses a challenge. Scholars who examine the politics of defence procurement tend to focus on more or less path-dependent interactions among states and—for those who prefer the domestic and transnational levels of analysis—among soldiers, bureaucrats, politicians, voters, and lobbyists. While these approaches are entirely warranted, they are nevertheless limited to the extent that they pay insufficient attention to the dynamics of public, mass-mediated exchanges of claims and counterclaims about the desired course of action made on behalf of the nation and its interests. As policy actors themselves always acknowledge, these exchanges are deeply consequential. The

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news media shape public policy by helping construct reality and knowledge via the twin processes of transmitting and transforming information about events and objects. Even more fundamentally, the news media are the embodiment of the tacit, taken-for-granted background knowledge that enables individuals and groups to create meanings for themselves. This is one reason why sociologists and sociologically-oriented International Relations scholars contend that how nations come to talk about defending their sovereignty may well be the most political decision of all. The goal of this study is more specific: to interrogate the relationship between government news management and press independence in Canada. Popular caricatures are well-known: on one end of the continuum, the news media are regarded as public educators and watchdogs; on the other, they are the establishment’s lackeys and poodles. What this paper examines are the structural conditions under which news media organizations are most/least likely to defer to government or, as Bennett puts it, “index the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate


8 Liberals, Marxists, poststructuralists and others have historically advanced a whole variety of ideas about the extent to which the news media can and does protect and privilege elite visions of the state, nation, the world economy and the like. In the Canadian context, see discussions in Marland, Giasson, and Small, Political Communication in Canada; and Taras and Waddell, How Canadians Communicate.
about a given topic”. This perspective, known as the “indexing model”, has been applied in numerous contexts over the past three decades, receiving both empirical support and theoretical refinement. Indexing is thus said to depend not only on the degree of government consensus, but also on exogenous “new events” that disrupt that consensus and provide alternative storylines. An example of a disruptive new event is scandal, particularly one that is perceived to carry ramifications for policy issues being covered.

One influential extension of the indexing model comes from Entman. His model, dubbed “cascading activation”, suggests that the multi-actor and multi-level nature of the news framing process allows news organizations to exert greater independence than heretofore suggested by the indexing model. This model is valuable for three reasons. First, it foregrounds the concept of framing, which refers to the conscious or unconscious practice of using interpretive cues in front of an audience for the purpose of making issues and events meaningful in a particular way. Second, the model specifically considers foreign policy issues, which can be said to constitute a hard case for press independence given that journalists typically deal with a relatively small pool of sources and viewpoints from which

10 For an overview, see W.L. Bennett, R.G. Lawrence, and S. Livingston, *When the press fails: Political power and the news media from Iraq to Katrina* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).
to build storylines, at least initially.\textsuperscript{15} On this logic, defence procurement may well be an even harder case for press independence given that it is characterized by a mix of policy complexity and electoral irrelevance, the likely effect of which is a limited span of oppositional voices. All being equal, indexing in this case should therefore be the norm given that most journalists in most mainstream news outlets will find it easier to follow government cues than to deal with hard-to-access sources and complex information.\textsuperscript{16}

Third, and most important, Entman posits that press independence is a function of the multi-actor and multi-level news framing dynamics that involve most of the key players in the democratic political system. In his model, frames normally cascade from the top government offices (like the White House and the Pentagon in the U.S. context) to the lower rungs of political power, first to the legislature and the rest of the political elite (government watchdog agencies, experts, former officials), then to the mainstream media, and finally to the public. This flow can and does change, however. For one, the more “mid-level” voices are able and willing to supply counterframes and challenged the government, the more active the news media organizations are in offering their own information and interpretations.\textsuperscript{17}

On the basis of existing accounts of the F-35 fiasco, official consensus was the highest between the three-minister press conference of 16 July 2010 and 10 March 2011, when the PBO published its (first) critical scrutiny of the aircraft acquisition cost estimates.

\textsuperscript{15} Also see Hallin, ‘The Uncensored War’.
\textsuperscript{16} On the electoral irrelevance of defence procurement in the Canadian context, see Middlemiss and Sokolsky, Canadian Defence, 69. On complexity, see Alan S. Williams, Reinventing Canadian Defence Procurement: A View from the Inside (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006). Suffice it to say, the inherent lack of personalized drama and other typical attention-grabbing features compel news media organization to allocate fewer resources to covering defence relative to other topics (Michael Schudson, The Sociology of News, 2nd edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).
\textsuperscript{17} So viewed, news outlets are reluctant to challenge political power unless they sense a division in decisionmaking circles (Entman, Projections of Power, 9-10; Ibid., Scandal and Silence, 5-6). Rather than evaluating this model in toto, this study derives a single hypothesis from it.
Conversely, the appearance of the AG report in the spring of 2012 caused a political scandal and, in turn, destroyed the said consensus. Accordingly, it can be expected that the press would most likely to reflect and reinforce the government position on the aircraft before the publication of the PBO report, when the first set of counterframes was activated, and least likely after the publication of the AG report, at which point the counterframes came to dominate the reporting.

Theoretically speaking, it stands to reason that an analysis of government-news media interaction in Canada should account for context-specific factors, too. This analysis foregrounds two: “political bias” and “Quebec”. With respect to the first, one can plausibly hypothesize that the media outlets that endorsed Harper for Prime Minister in the 2008 and 2011 elections would be more likely to give the Harper government’s policy preferences on the F-35 acquisition the benefit of the doubt than the media outlets that endorsed opposition candidates. The Quebec effect can be said to work in the opposite direction: due to a mix of anti-Harper and anti-militarist feelings in the province, the Quebecker media can be expected to be less likely to index government viewpoints on this issue than the media in the rest of Canada.

18 “Quebec” is a convenient shorthand for “regional identity” and “bilingualism” as two separate specificities of the Canadian system. For details, see Marland, Giasson and Small, eds., Political Communication in Canada, 9-10, and Marc Raboy, “Linguistic duality in broadcasting policy: A microcosm of Canada’s Constitutional politics,” in Seeing ourselves: Media power and policy in Canada, ed. H. Holmes and D. Taras (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1996). The predictions that follow are of course based on simplified renderings of Canadian politics and mediascapes.

19 Canadian mainstream news media last expressed open partisanship in the 1960s. Today, they are perceived as politically and ideologically biased, depending on situation and issue-area (Taras and Waddell, eds., How Canadians Communicate).

20 On the Harper government’s unpopularity in Quebec in the period under study, see Chantal Hébert, French Kiss: Stephen Harper’s Blind Date with Quebec (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2007); and Konrad Yakabuski, “Tories still tone deaf in Quebec,” The Globe and Mail, 1 June 2015, A7. On Quebec and Canadian defence, see especially Jean-Sébastien Rioux, Two solitudes: Quebeckers’ attitudes regarding Canadian security and defence policy (Calgary, AB: Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute, 2005),
Data and Methods

This media analysis concentrates on mainstream or conventional daily newspapers for both principled and pragmatic reasons. While they can never stand in for the news media as a whole, daily newspapers can be said to devote greater space and time to the coverage of defence issues than other mass media forms. Furthermore, the so-called national newspapers of record, such as, in Canada, The Globe and Mail (founded in 1844) or La Presse (1884) in Quebec are distinguished by their actual or potential capacity to set the elite-level news agenda. This capacity, of course, depends on situation and context, but it stands to reason that the combination of prestige, superior resources, and high professional standards works to solidify their position as the most reliable daily mainstream media source for information and explanation about defence issues. On a more pragmatic side, a relatively small number of coder-hours prevented an inclusion of general interest weeklies like Maclean’s and L'Actualité or digital-only news sources like iPolitics. The same goes for the television coverage, whose “multimodal” character introduces additional coding challenges given the print-centric nature of this research design.\textsuperscript{21}

Five newspapers were selected for analysis: La Presse, the Ottawa Citizen (henceforth abbreviated as the Citizen), the National Post (the Post), The Globe and Mail

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\begin{itemize}
\item http://www.jmss.org/jmss/index.php/jmss/article/viewFile/143/161 (accessed 5 January 2015); and Jérémie Cornut, ed., “Antimilitarisme et militarisation au Canada et au Québec. Tendances Actuelles et Perspective Historiques,” Études Internationales 44, no. 3 (Special Issue 2013). Also note that this prediction chimes with Entman’s argument about the impact of cultural ambiguity on the likelihood of counterframing (Projections of Power, 14-15). If it is true that big-ticket defence procurement is incongruent with the prevailing discourses of Quebecker identity, then the province’s media are likely to critically evaluate the F-35 deal.
\item Multimodal means that television combines linguistic and visual modes (dress, movement, lightning, camera angle etc.) to produce “integrated” frames and discursive meanings (Gunther Kress, Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication (New York: Routledge, 2010)). Consider, for example, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) programs “Runaway Fighter,” The Fifth Estate, 28 September 2012; and “Canada’s New Fighter Jet,” The National, 7 June 2012.
\end{itemize}
(the *Globe*), and the *Toronto Star* (the *Star*). The selection criteria was varied in terms of the target market, prestige, ownership, circulation, the number of full-time journalists specializing in national defence issues, regional and linguistic variation, and revealed partisan preferences (“political bias”). All five newspapers can be described as broadsheets, whereby the *Post* and *The Globe* market themselves as Canada-wide, while the other three are more regional. In terms of total (print and digital) circulation figures, the *Star* and *The Globe* consistently topped the national rankings in the period under study.\(^{22}\) *La Presse*, the veritable French language broadsheet from Montreal, ranked third or fourth, partly thanks to its large online readership (at Cyberpresse.ca before 2011). The *Post* and the *Citizen* respectively hovered around the 10th and the 20th place in national rankings, and are both known for their consistent coverage of national defence issues.\(^{23}\) In terms of editorial endorsements in the 2008 and 2011 federal elections, here used as a crude proxy for the newspapers’ political leanings, Harper’s Conservatives received support from the *Post, The Globe* and the *Citizen*, while *The Star* and *La Presse* either endorsed other parties or abstained from the practice altogether.

For theoretical purposes, the study focuses on the period between 16 July 2010, when the three ministers unveiled the government’s F-35 plan for the first time, and 31 December 2012. This period can be said to capture the full span of the “F-35 procurement controversy”, from the “breaking news” moment to the “scandal” or “scandals” related to the watchdog agency reports to the point of “resolution”. On 12 December 2012, two of the


\(^{23}\) Partly thanks to its national capital location, the *Ottawa Citizen* has historically paid close attention to the ins and outs of Canadian defence. The newspaper website also hosts *Defence Watch*, a blog specializing in reports on military issues run by the *Ottawa Citizen* journalist David Pugliese since 2007.
original three ministers held a press conference to explain a batch of new documents relating to the revamped fighter recapitalization process; this resolved the controversy for the time being. In order to control for the impact that external developments might have on this period, the analysis also extended to include a sample of relevant articles published outside the aforementioned controversy, covering 1 January 2007 through 31 December 2014.

Table 1. Corpus: Items by Year and by Newspaper, 2007-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Globe and Mail</th>
<th>Ottawa Citizen</th>
<th>La Presse</th>
<th>National Post</th>
<th>Toronto Star</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Shaded area represents items published between mid-2010-2012, period labelled here as the “controversy” (N=291 or 78%). The frequency of newspaper items over time gives credence to this periodization (also see Figure A1 in Appendix). Newspapers item published before 16 July 2010 (N=11 or 3%), were mainly about Canadian industrial participation in JSF, not the RCAF fighter buy.

The unit of analysis in this study is a discrete newspaper item. For our purposes, news and feature stories (both in-house and those supplied by wire services and syndicates), columns, editorials, comments (op-eds), and letters to the editor all count as items; infographics and cartoons do not. The data gathering was facilitated by LexisNexis, Factiva

24 The NFPS, which became operational in mid-2012, issued five documents covering, respectively, the status of the general recapitalization process plan, the references for the new evaluation of options, the updates on the life-cycle cost estimates for the F-35 (essentially acknowledging that the original plan was off), and a report on Canadian industrial participation in the JSF program (72 companies holding contracts worth almost $500 million, with up to $9 billion up for grabs). The release and content of the documents was discussed in virtually all mainstream Canadian news media at the time.
and Eureka databases in which searches were undertaken for relevant newspaper coverage using a series of keywords (i.e. “F-35”, “Joint Strike Fighter”) applied to both headlines and text. Keyword searches were pretested to ensure that they covered a range of relevant angles and authorship (columnist, U.S.-based commentator, etc.). To be included in the study, each newspaper item had to prominently reference the aircraft in the Canadian context. Table 1 summarizes the number of newspaper items selected for analysis—i.e., the corpus—by year and by newspaper. 291 items correspond to the 30-month period of the procurement controversy, and 372 for the extended 2007-2014 period under study.

Table 2 summarizes the corpus by newspaper and newspaper item type. The vast majority of items were news and feature stories, nearly 72%, followed by comments and columns, at 11% each. Editorial, which are defined as opinions collectively expressed by the newspaper’s news department, make 5% of the sample. The Citizen published most of the items in the sample, at 30%, followed by The Globe, at 23%. In terms of the balance between news articles and commentary, La Presse concentrated on the former (all but five items count as new and feature stories), and The Post on the latter (37 or 71% of items published were comments and editorials).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper (ownership)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>News</th>
<th>Column</th>
<th>Editorial</th>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Globe and Mail</em> (Globe Inc.)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ottawa Citizen</em> (Postmedia)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>La Presse</em> (Power Corp.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>National Post</em> (Postmedia)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Toronto Star</em> (Torstar Corp.)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References made only in passing were excluded as, for example, an article about the state of Canadian aerospace industry that mentions the JSF program only once (Marie Tison, “Des québécoises à l’affût,” *La Presse Affaires*, 27 June 2008, A1).
The sample was interpreted using two content analytic techniques for interpreting patterns of text in a systematic and reliable fashion: one focuses on headlines, one on the dominant frame or frames in the subsequent text. Headlines are a valuable source of data for three reasons: they are primary attention-grabbers; they are often the only thing readers read (especially now that headline-shearing has become a ubiquitous social media practice); and they are crafted by editors rather than reporters and commentators. As such, headlines are, first, more influential than the full text, and, second, indicative of newspaper editors’ framing tendencies. Having said this, full transcript analysis is necessary in order to better understand the span and circulation of media frames on a given issue as well as to resolve assorted ambiguities inherent in “headlinese”.

Because headlines and full text often convey distinct representations—they are found to exert an independent impact on readers’ understandings of reality—this study analyzes them separately, enabling a compare-and-contrast in the end. In the headline analysis part of the study, each headline was coded for “tone”. A positive tone was defined as the unambiguous support for, and the understanding of, the activities and events involving the Harper government with regards to the slated purchase of the F-35, a negative tone was defined as the opposite (alarm, incomprehension), while a mixed-tone was defined as the expression of both favourable and critical opinions. Neutral was assigned to those headlines mentioning the aircraft but offering no discernible opinion. Full text coding focused on individual frames within each item. To simplify an otherwise labour-intensive and time-

27 The analysis was done manually in NVivo. Details about the coding process can be found in Appendix. Accessible at https://srdjanvucetic.wordpress.com/publications/
consuming procedure, the analysis concentrated on the so-called diagnostic and prognostic frames. These concepts are borrowed from social movement theory: the former define problems, diagnose causes, assign blame and make moral judgments, while the latter suggest tactical or strategic solutions to problem. Finally, the transcripts were also coded for additional context: for person(s) and/or institution(s) regarded as the most problematic, or the “villains”, and/or most likely to help solve the problem, or the “heroes”.

Data was coded by two coders. Prior to coding, the coders were familiarized with the contours of Canada’s F-35 procurement controversy by reading transcripts of key press conferences and House of Commons debates on the proposed purchase as well as a chronology of events supplied by the principal investigator. After receiving content analysis training using five newspaper items referencing the F-35 deal published in *The Calgary Herald* and *Le Devoir* (broadsheets not included in the study), the coders proceeded to code 80 headlines randomly selected from the corpus, achieving the simple percent agreement of 88%. The test for the full text analysis of frames was based on 30 randomly drawn items, and the results were acceptable: 76% or higher in all categories. The final inter-coder reliability test, based on 40 randomly selected headlines and subsequent full transcripts, exceeded 79% in all categories.

Findings and Discussion

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30 Details are discussed in Appendix, Table A3.
Table 3 summarizes the distribution of the newspaper items published between 2007 and 2014 by each newspaper according to the headline tone. The first finding is that the F-35 never enjoyed a media honeymoon. On all counts, the coverage of Canada’s commitment to the stealthy aircraft was overwhelmingly negative. According to the percentage distribution of headlines by tone (the last column on the right), 52% of all headlines in the corpus can reliably be described as negative, 11% as positive, 5% as mixed-tone and an even third as neutral. Looking across the five newspapers, the most eye-catching finding is that *La Presse* was the least likely outlet to negatively evaluate the proposed acquisition; as the row “net tone” shows, only in this case was the overall ratio of positive to negative headline relatively balanced (-5%). The negative end of the continuum is anchored by the *Star* (-65%), followed by the *Citizen* (-50%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tone</th>
<th><em>Globe and Mail</em></th>
<th><em>Ottawa Citizen</em></th>
<th><em>La Presse</em></th>
<th><em>National Post</em></th>
<th><em>Toronto Star</em></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>6 (7%)</td>
<td>8 (7%)</td>
<td>16 (25%)</td>
<td>16 (15%)</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
<td>41 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>39 (43%)</td>
<td>62 (57%)</td>
<td>19 (30%)</td>
<td>23 (44%)</td>
<td>43 (70%)</td>
<td>192 (52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Net tone</strong></td>
<td><strong>-36%</strong></td>
<td><strong>-50%</strong></td>
<td><strong>-5%</strong></td>
<td><strong>-29%</strong></td>
<td><strong>-65%</strong></td>
<td><strong>-41%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>7 (9%)</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
<td>18 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>35 (40%)</td>
<td>37 (34%)</td>
<td>17 (30%)</td>
<td>17 (33%)</td>
<td>13 (21%)</td>
<td>121 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>87</strong></td>
<td><strong>109</strong></td>
<td><strong>63</strong></td>
<td><strong>52</strong></td>
<td><strong>61</strong></td>
<td><strong>372</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Net tone” represents the subtraction of the percentage of the headlines coded as negative from the percentage of the headlines coded as positive.

Figure 1 summarizes headline analysis between 16 July 2010 and 31 December 2012.

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The *Globe* stands out in terms of the above-average percentages of headlines coded as neutral and ambivalent, while the *Post* stands out as the negative in terms of the overall tone of its editorials (See Appendix Table A4).
Numbers below the zero line predominate; indeed, only in November 2010 was the net coverage positive. Also, the net tone of the coverage dropped by almost 25 percentage points in the aftermath of the PBO report in March 2011, the first mid-level criticism of the proposed purchase, and again broke the -60 mark following the reporting on the contents of the AG report published in April 2012. This is broadly indicative of event-driven reporting, especially considering that December 2012, the month of the putative policy reset, saw the net coverage climb back by almost 30 percentage points.

32 In Figure 1 months with less than five total headlines were characterized by extreme values and were removed for the purposes of simplifying the prevailing pattern of the tone of the coverage. Figure Series A5 in Appendix illustrate cross-newspaper variation. A discussion of the data is included. The net positive coverage in November 2010 as well as the balanced coverage in August-September 2010 and May 2011 do not seem to correlate with any particular F-35-related event at home or abroad.
Turning to the full text analysis, the data reveal the systematic dominance of the diagnostic frames over the prognostic frames. Out of 22 different frames deployed by journalists and commentators between mid-July 2010 through mid-December 2012, 14, or 63%, were coded as diagnostic. As shown in Figure 2, the “lack of due diligence” was by far the most popular frame of all. While the term itself became commonplace in the media after the publication of the AG report in April 2012—this in itself is support for cascading activation—many oppositional voices had from the beginning criticized DND for botching the RCAF fighter replacement process, while castigating the “government”—variously defined as some combination of the prime minister, the cabinet, the minister of national defence, and the relevant parliamentary committees—for failing to keep the military and the defence bureaucracy accountable. Most typically, the lack of due diligence was framed as a
function of one or more of the following three themes: the decision to acquire the new fighter without an open competition, as per existing regulations; the rumor/evidence that the DND statement of requirements was issued ex-post, contrary to regulations; and rumor/evidence that government officials were willfully ignoring the fact that the military and the defence bureaucracy were consistently minimizing costs and complexity of the proposed purchase. Remarkably, every fifth frame in the corpus invoked at least one of these themes.

![Figure 2: Most Common Diagnostic Frames](image)

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34 As a percentage in the total frames, “due diligence” accounts for 18%. Taken together, the total number frames identified in these two bar charts (N=354) account for two-thirds of all frames identified in the sample (N=407). See Appendix, Tables A6 and A7.
Frames coded as “accountability”, “transparency”, and “fiscal irresponsibility” also dealt with issues of due diligence but focused on issues related to defence procurement administration, such as relations between the civilian and military authorities, the nature of decision-making and oversight, the ability and willingness of parliamentarians to hold the government to account, and the risks involved in estimating costs. The third most commonly re-occurring diagnostic frame is “industry rent-seeking”. Here, the JSF lead contractor Lockheed Martin emerges as the arch-villain: a company alleged to be great at lobbying but poor at running large-scale defence projects. Of 36 items elaborating on this problem, only seven—five of them published in La Presse—criticize Canadian JSF contractors for seeking government largesse.  

One additional observation concerns the relative infrequency of frames targeting the F-35 as the “wrong warplane” (N=12, not shown in Figure 2). An implication of this finding is that the newspapers’ problem with the F-35 was not the aircraft so much as the process by which the government selected it as Canada’s next fighter. The “wrong plane” frame also ranks below the “toys for boys” frame, which is an attack on the military’s alleged proclivity for flashy top-of-the-line gear. So presented, the F-35 deal was always and primarily about the RCAF’s search for status symbols and its braggadocio.

The same point emerges from the analysis of prognostic frames. According to Figure 3, the modal problem-solving frame was “competitive tender”—the idea of replacing the sole-sourced F-35 acquisition with an open competition. What is important is neither

35 Indeed, the overall coverage was far more likely to sympathize with Canadian firms participating in the aircraft’s production chain and remind the readers that the full life-cycle stakes of Canadian industrial participation had to be measured in the hundreds of millions and even billions of dollars.  
36 See Appendix, Table A6.
“competition” nor “re-evaluation of RCAF requirements” tended to lead to an endorsement of Boeing’s twin-engined F/A-18 Super Hornet or some other aircraft. “Alternative aircraft” does exist as a stand-alone prognostic frame in the corpus, but what is remarkable is its relative infrequency (N=10). On 7 December 202, for example, The Post declared the Lockheed Martin warplane “dead in the air” on its front page, but shied away from endorsing any of the live alternatives. Next, although Figure 2 lists “industrial benefits” as the second most reoccurring frame in the sample, its frequency is driven by the coverage La Presse—the Montreal-based daily is responsible for 14, or 70%, of all occurrences. Last, the high ranking of “oversight and transparency” is unsurprising; this frame is essentially a mirror image of the leading diagnostic frames discussed earlier.

**Figure 3: Most Common Prognostic Frames**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competitive Tender</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial Benefits</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oversight &amp; Transparency</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-evaluation of RCAF req’s</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Aircraft</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In terms of the blame game, the Conservative government emerged from the analysis as causing most problems most of the time, followed by DND.\textsuperscript{37} At the individual level, Prime Minister Harper, Minister of National Defence Peter MacKay and Associate Minister of National Defence Julian Fantino, in that order, were most frequently framed as villains. Conversely, the PBO Kevin Page and the AG Michael Ferguson were lauded for speaking truth to power.

Taken together, the findings make a strong case for the image of the watchdog press. Unlike Canadian defence bureaucrats, the newspapers exercised due diligence in scrutinizing the proposed purchase, finding ample ways to circulate frames running counter to official position. The fact that the coverage was overwhelmingly negative should not be surprising; “bad press” is one of the more predictable features of defence procurement for a number of reasons—the “sticker shock” usually being sufficient. As one editorial in the Citizen put it, “To the average Canadian, any military purchase would sound ludicrously expensive” (13 December 2012). The F-35, dubbed the most expensive weapons program in history and subject to the steadily climbing price tag in the period under study, had ample shock value. Yet, the fact is that the Canadian press seized primarily on the issue of procedure rather than the cost: frames related to diligence, accountability, transparency and oversight dominate over those related to the merits and demerits of the Lockheed Martin plane.

In terms of the theoretical models evaluated in the study, the findings clash with the indexing hypothesis in its most straightforward form. In this case there is no evidence that it

\textsuperscript{37} See Appendix, Tables A8-9, for the complete breakdown of blame attribution by newspapers and by actors. Note Public Works Minister Rona Ambrose appears as hero and villain at once. Also, the shortness of his tenure as associate minister (May 2011 and July 2012) means that Fantino was a disproportionally large press target in this case. And finally, note that some blame, mainly in \textit{La Presse} and the \textit{Post}, was attributed to the previous Liberal government for signing a memorandum of understanding with the F-35 Joint Program Office in November 2006, in effect committing the RCAF to the Lockheed Martin plane.
systematically tended to forego independent interpretations in favour of those created by state officials. All five newspapers provided ample space to dissident voices and viewpoints on the proposed F-35 deal, the Star’s record can be said to disconfirm the indexing hypothesis most clearly considering that, of the headlines published in the Toronto newspaper, there were on average no less negative towards the F-35 acquisition in mid-2010 than they were in either 2011 or 2012. In contrast, the data support some intuitions derived from Entman’s cascading activation model. As illustrated most clearly by the post-AG report developments, the availability of counterframes activated by officials—and by April 2012 these were high-level officials, too—encouraged the news media to aggressively challenge the government. Having said that, a more comprehensive evaluation of Entman’s model in this case would require further research.38

Turning to the intuitions about the role of context-specific factors, there is weak evidence that the Conservative Party-leaning newspapers were more likely to index government positions on the proposed F-35 deal than those leaning towards alternative political options. The Star’s coverage might be said to fit the political bias hypothesis, but that of the remaining English language newspapers does not; indeed, The Globe, the Post and the Citizen all twice endorsed the idea of the Conservative Party-governed Canada, yet they never warmed up to the proposed CF-18 fighter replacement plan. As for La Presse, its record is prima facie puzzling. As an outlet representing Canada’s least militaristic province and with a history opposing Conservative electoral bids, this newspaper was in fact most

38 Counterframes put forth early on by opposition politicians, political commentators, and defence policy experts received vindication in the PBO and AG reports, but one cannot rely on the news text data alone to understand if and how they spread up the cascade or whether mid-level officials took them up and then spread them laterally to the press, up to the government, and down to the Canadian public. Entman offers ideas on how to these dynamics can be analyzing by invoking power, strategy, motivation and cultural resonance as operationalizable variables (Projections of Power, 12-7).
likely of the five to index the government’s talking points on the F-35. *Prima facie*, this finding is another confirmation that Quebec’s anti-militarism is overblown.\(^{39}\) Based on the data presented here, the outcome is explicable in terms of a combination of the strictures of space and style—*La Presse* sample consists almost exclusively of short news articles—and the above average attention to the preferences of the local defence aerospace sector. As discussed earlier, most F-35-themed articles published in the Montreal newspaper fell on “industry” frames. So viewed, the proposed acquisition was desirable so long as it could be leveraged to ensure participation of Héroux-Devtek and other Quebecker firms in the JSF supply chain, creating and maintaining high-paying job in the province. The fact that *La Presse* was attentive to provincial rather than national developments is unlikely to surprise students of the Canadian media system.\(^{40}\)

**Conclusion**

In July 2010, three ministers in the Harper government proposed that the acquisition of the F-35 fighter was necessary for the RCAF and sensible for Canada’s defence industry. The announcement sparked a major controversy that is yet to recede from Canadian politics. Analyzing government-press relations over the proposed procurement over the course of 30 months, this study found little support for the predictions derived from the basic indexing model. By and large, the media challenged the government, and did so aggressively. The


cascading activation model fares better in the sense that it correctly predicted that the number and span of oppositional frames would grow as official consensus fell apart. In terms of factors specific to the Canadian media context, the Star was predictably the most negatively oriented towards the proposed purchase, while La Presse’s coverage predictably prioritized local policy and politics. In general, however, the divergence in coverage among the five newspapers was relatively low.

In addition to showing an invulnerability to the government’s framing, the Canadian press appears to have actively helped re-frame the procurement issue through quality watchdog reporting. The word “appears” is apt since the goal of the study was not to identify policy-related outcomes caused (or “shaped”) by variations in how the press communicates pieces of information or creates intersubjective meanings. In order to systematically examine the extent to which consistent counter-framing may have contributed to the downfall of the proposed acquisition, one would need to mobilize additional theoretical insights—those on audience reception, media effects and/or elite-media relations would help—as well as additional types of data. Extending from this point, subsequent work in this vein would also benefit from comparing portrayals of defence procurement issues across different historical and political contexts as well as across additional media sources such as public opinion polls, government press releases, military journals, and defence industry publications. Even cross-national comparisons might be required because in big-ticket arms procurement deals, development abroad always impact developments at home. For example, theoretically useful compare-and-contrasts would include case studies such as the Sea King helicopter fiasco or National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy, which the Harper government announced roughly at the same time as the F-35 deal. A study of the U.S. press-state relations over the Lockheed Martin warplane would be useful as well as it
would enable researchers to systematically examine the extent to which the Canadian F-35 controversy indexed the American one in the same period.

At the time of this writing, Canada’s Liberal government, voted into office on 19 October 2015, is on the record of saying, one, that the F-35 is the wrong warplane for Canada and, two, that the RCAF fighter fleet will be recapitalized through an open and transparent competition. Whether Ottawa is also leaving the JSF consortium as an industrial partner remains unclear, but this move would be consistent with the previous statements, which, in turn, are consistent with the electoral campaign pledges made by the Liberals. Does this mean that the F-35 is finished in Canada? Not necessarily. The fighter decision awaits the new White Paper on defence, expected in late 2016 or early 2017. At that point, the government might decide that a truly open competition should include the F-35 after all. If so, the Lockheed Martin warplane is likely to emerge as the front-runner over the Super Hornet, to say nothing of the Gripen, the Rafale or the Eurofighter. The main reason is time, which is working in the stealthy aircraft’s favour. By the time the bids are received, all three versions of the F-35 will have been declared combat-ready, meaning—the usual spin-doctoring aside—that most of the aircraft’s current performance shortfalls will have either been overcome or greatly minimized. The production output will increase as well, driving the acquisition costs down. Lastly, it is increasingly unlikely that the F-35’s rivals will remain in production until 2035, which is when the RCAF is supposed to receive its last new fighter delivery.41

41 According to the latest Defence Acquisition Guide, the contract for the RCAF’s new fighter will be selected by 2020 at the latest, with the deliveries taking place between 2026 and 2035. PWGSC,”About the Defence Procurement Strategy.” Another reason for betting on the F-35 is Canadian industrial participation in the aircraft’s production chain. As the AG report recognized, this gives the Lockheed Martin plane an unfair advantage in any open tender. Also instructive is the story of the fighter competition recently staged by the
Another scenario is a White Paper-mandated selection process that settles on an Australian-style “stop-gap” fleet of Super Hornets, to be delivered in the 2020s, followed by a smaller fleet of the F-35s delivered thereafter. If the return of the F-35 to Canada sounds far-fetched, recall this study’s finding that the Canadian press mostly refrained from endorsing an alternative aircraft over the beleaguered F-35. The same goes for opposition politicians, including many of the now-ruling Liberals. In the time period examined here, it appears that they, too, shied away arguing in public that either the Super Hornet or any of the European warplanes on offer constituted the right gear at the best value for Canada. The F-35 may not be dead just yet.

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Mixed fleets tend to cost more money, but this outcome would be politically attractive to the Liberal government as it would enable it to make good on the 2015 electoral promise, while maintaining Canada’s industrial partnership and related privileges through keeping one door open on the F-35 buy.