IMPACTING PUBLIC POLICY:

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE MEDIA,

THE PUBLIC AND POLICYMAKERS

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ABSTRACT

Agenda-setting research over the past 30 years has focused on how the media impacts what the public and policymakers think about. A review of recent agenda-setting literature along with literature that considers media effects on public attitudes and policy-making leads to the conclusion that media may not often have significant *direct* impacts on the agendas and actions of policymakers, but may sometimes have significant *indirect* impacts when public opinion is viewed as the link between the two. This paper looks at how these impacts can be observed in another component of the policy cycle – decision making.

The paper develops a model that first considers classifications dealing with issue complexity and issue attributes as they relate to core moral and economic values and distinguishes issue domains as either "easy" or "hard". The model then accounts for when the media may have an impact on public opinion in the case of easy issues. Such cases indicate the *indirect* impact of media on policymakers – where media have an effect on public opinion, which is then reflected in the decisions of policymakers. The role of media in hard issue cases is more likely to be *direct* – where policymakers accept information directly from the media as useful in decision-making. Such cases of direct media impact are expected to occur less often than cases of indirect media impact.

The four classifications in the model reflect the role of the public and the media on the basis of how easy or hard the issue is. The easiest issues are termed "Pure public issues" – where public opinion is important to policymakers but the media have little role in affecting it. "Framed Public Issues" are easy issues with some complexity where the media can impact opinion forming on such issues. "Elite-driven issues" are harder issues where only a small percentage of the public is engaged on such issues, and where the media may possibly have a direct impact on policymakers in select cases, but little indirect role. Finally, "Non-public issues" are issues which are very complex and where decisions are made by policymakers without regard to public opinion or the media.

For Christine

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION – BEYOND AGENDA-SETTING

Agenda-setting research over the past 30 years has focused on the role the media plays in affecting what the public and policymakers think about. The agenda-setting literature has more recently come to show that both the media and the public are significant in affecting the policy agenda, and has expanded understandings of impacts on the policy process. An influential agenda-setting study in 1984 by John Kingdon indicated that there were relatively small media effects directly upon policymakers. However, Kingdon's conclusions are based only on policymakers' perceptions of direct media impact without regard for how media might be influential in indirect ways, and his study "illustrate[s] the potential pitfalls in trying to synthesize policy research and media research" (Borquez 1993: 34).

Recent agenda-setting literature looks at media impact at the public and policymaking levels, while political persuasion and voting-behaviour literature consider media effects on public attitudes and decisions. These areas of study, along with newer literature considering public opinion impacts on policymakers, suggest that although the media may not often have significant *direct* impacts on policymakers, it may have significant *indirect* impacts when public opinion is viewed as the link between the two.

This project will look at ways of classifying how these impacts may take place. The study is not designed to simply better understand media impacts on the policy agenda, but rather to go beyond the agenda and show how the media may have an impact – whether direct or indirect – on the policy decisions that are made. The study is significant because it carries implications for further research on an issue that has as yet received very limited attention. That is, categorizing "issues" within a framework that leads to expected outcomes in terms of the media's direct or indirect role in influencing public policy and considering these issues in terms of the nature of media coverage accorded them.

Layout of the project

This introductory chapter describes the project, the methodology and data, and the purpose of the research. Chapter two consists of five sub-sections considering the possible links between the media, public opinion and policymaking. It begins with a brief look at the history of agenda-setting research. Second, this chapter presents a review of how media is thought to influence public opinion. The purpose of this section is to illustrate that there can be notable media impacts on the opinions and actions taken by significant portions of the population. This section looks into the roles of issue priming, framing and learning as the means by which the public is led to prioritize certain issues and be persuaded regarding what problems exist and what sorts of solutions might be considered for them. It also looks at how the public can be engaged by certain issue debates when they relate to core values or belief systems, while other issues tend not to engage the public in a significant way. This section also shows that the nature of media

attention to an issue is a key component in whether media impacts on the public will be significant.

The third section considers the next step in the causal chain of events – that of public opinion having impacts on policymakers in processes of policy agenda-setting, problem formulation, and decision-making. This section looks briefly at theories of the policy process as well as the influence that the public may have on policymakers. It also looks at public opinion expression as a factor in policy development, and at how politicians' anticipation of how to capitalize on the public interest leads to a notable effect in shaping these politicians' actions. Fourth, this chapter briefly considers how the media can have a direct influence on policymakers without real measures of public opinion acting as the intervening variable. Finally, the chapter presents the model upon which this project is centrally based, and which is used to further explore how issue dynamics may play out in the policy arena in the following chapter.

The third chapter examines a number of studies that help exemplify the issue dynamics portrayed by the model presented in the previous chapter. These studies include measures of media content and public opinion and exemplify the differing roles public opinion can have on policy decisions depending on the type of issue to be dealt with. The studies are also useful in attempting to classify, in rather broad terms, what sorts of dynamics should be expected with respect to particular issues in further studies.

The final chapter summarizes the findings from the preceding chapters, as well as presents some questions that arise as a result of this study, and suggest further implications or studies that might follow from this research.

Methodology and data

This study began with a review of the recent literature and some classic works on the role of the media in influencing public opinion, media and public opinion influences on public policy, and issue complexity. Insights gained were then used to develop a model. The core tenets of this model are further explored through studies that have been selected for the purpose of highlighting media and public impacts on policy decisions. These studies were selected through surveying the literature dealing with media impacts on public opinion and public policy, and by selecting the cases that appeared most useful for examining the classifications set out in the model. The reason for using these studies is to expose trends in the relationship between media coverage of issues, changes in public opinion on such issues, and changes in policy or actions by policymakers on such issues.

The indicator of the media agenda in these cases is actual media content or lack of content. The indicator of public opinion includes public opinion polls on the particular issues in question. Indicators of policy actions include the actions or lack thereof by policymakers on the issues being studied. These studies will then be used to draw conclusions about issue attributes and broader trends in the media and/or public opinion influences on policymaking.

In analyzing these cases, initially, trends in media coverage (i.e. positive versus negative portrayal of a particular issue) will be treated as independent variables and changes in public opinion (i.e. increased public interest toward a particular approach in the case of a particular policy area) as well as changes in policies or policy decisions over

time in the same or similar policy areas will be treated as dependent variables. Policy changes will be indicated by distinct changes in policy goals, instruments or settings regardless of whether they tend to be incremental changes derived from past policies or a more dramatic (or "paradigmatic") restructuring of policy (Howlett 2002; Hall 1993). However, most cases will be based upon policy instrument or setting changes, as paradigmatic change is quite rare.

Both media and public opinion will be treated as independent variables with possible impacts on policymakers or policy outcomes. When compared over time, dependent variables should show distinct changes following changes in the independent variables in order for the relationship to suggest that the independent variable had some impact on the dependent variable.

The issues that will be considered are drawn from a number of studies relating to issues and agenda-setting in policymaking, as well as studies that consider media impacts on the policy process. Most of these are taken from secondary sources that involve research not originally designed to meet the criteria that are demanded for this project, but each is useful in evaluating some aspect relating the purpose of this project. The final issue studied uses primary data and was designed specifically for this project, using a media content analysis, a time series of public opinion polls, and a specified policy change directly related to these variables.

Research purpose

As was previously noted, the following chapter will include a model upon which will form the core tenets to be highlighted by this project. Formulation of the model is based on the literature reviewed within the chapter and considers classifications dealing with issue complexity and issue attributes as they relate to core moral and economic values, and distinguishes issues as either "easy" or "hard" (Pollock et al. 1993; Carmines & Stimson 1980). Easy issues are those about which the public is more likely to hold opinions and feel strongly toward, and ones on which policymakers might be expected to make decisions consistent with public opinion. Hard issues – those which tend to be more technical in nature, or that are not easily recognized in terms of general economic or moral values – will warrant little regard for public opinion from policymakers. The terms "easy" and "hard" thus distinguish issues in terms of when the public is likely to impact policy. The model then accounts for when the media may have an impact on public opinion in the case of easy issues. Such cases indicate the *indirect* impact of the media on policymakers – where the media have an effect on public opinion, which is then reflected in the decisions of policymakers. The role of the media in hard issue cases is more likely to be *direct* – where policymakers accept information directly from the media as useful in decision-making. Such cases of direct media impact are expected to occur less often than cases of indirect media impact.

This model will be built upon the following inferences, which are based on the literature:

1.) The media tends to have strong indirect impacts on policymakers in domains where public opinion tends to have clear impacts on the actions of policymakers, and where public opinion is changed as a result of media impacts.

2.) The media will have very little indirect impact in domains where public opinion tends not to have a clear impact on the actions of policymakers, though the media may have direct impacts on policymakers in these cases.

3.) The media should have very little impact in the "easiest" issue domains where public opinion is not likely to change based on media coverage.

4.) The media should have very little impact in the "hardest" issue domains where policymaking is generally closed to external influences.

The four classifications in the model reflect the role of the public and the media on the basis of how easy or hard the issue is. The easiest issues are termed "Pure public issues" – where public opinion is important to policymakers but the media have little role in affecting it. "Framed Public Issues" are easy issues with some complexity where the media can impact opinion forming on such issues. "Elite-driven issues" are harder issues where only a small percentage of the public is engaged on such issues, and where the media may possibly have a direct impact on policymakers in select cases, but little indirect role. Finally, "Non-public issues" are issues which are very complex and decisions are made without regard to public opinion or the media.

CHAPTER TWO

DIRECT AND INDIRECT LINKS: THE MEDIA, THE PUBLIC AND POLICYMAKERS

Past research considering the relationship between the media and policy has usually only attempted to determine whether the media affected the policy agenda, but has rarely considered whether the media affected policy decisions themselves. Indeed, it is clearly more difficult to measure media impacts on actual policy outcomes than media impacts on voters or elections, or on public or policymakers' opinions regarding issues. After looking briefly at how media-policy studies have evolved and some of the weaknesses with past research, this chapter will explain how a new approach may help our understanding of media influences on the decisions of policymakers.

The earliest studies in the field of media impacts on society began early in the 20th century and lasted through the 1930s. The "magic bullet" or "hypodermic needle" model suggested that the media was so powerful that audiences could not help but be influenced by it (Perse 2001). "This model was based on observations that the technological improvements of public communication and mass production of popular culture had created a mass audience attending to the same messages" (Perse 2001: 24). This period was followed by studies that noted the public's ability to be selective in its exposure to,

attention to and selection of various forms of media. These studies led to the "minimal media impacts" paradigm that was prevalent from the mid-1940s through the 1960s (Rogers et al. 1997).[1]

Selective exposure was later questioned with the rise of television use. While the late 1960s and 1970s did not mark a return to the "magic bullet" concept of media, it was referred to as "the return to the concept of powerful mass media" (Noelle-Neumann quoted in Perse 2001: 26). This new "agenda-setting" research focused on the "indirect, cognitive effects" (Rogers et al. 1997: 227) of mass media on audiences, and is often traced to a landmark study by McCombs & Shaw (1972), commonly referred to as the Chapel Hill project. This study, and many that followed it, tended to agree with Bernard Cohen, who, in 1963, stated what became the basic thrust of agenda-setting research – that the print media "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (quoted in Soroka 2002: 7). These studies looked more closely at the effect on the public's focus of attention – "as distinguished from our attitudes, opinions and feelings" (David Weaver quoted in Edelstein 1993: 85). As studies of agenda-setting progressed, further insight was gained into the role of media, the public, and of policymakers in the policy process. Recent media research has not only looked at agendas, but has also studied the media's impact on public preferences. It has become apparent that understanding public preferences is an important step in moving beyond agendas to outcomes. More research has also been done to determine actual influence from the media on policymakers themselves, apart from public preferences.

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[1] This period has also been termed "limited effects" by some scholars. See Perse 2001.

John Kingdon's (1984) contributions in the area of policy agenda-setting – the "Policy Primeval Soup" and "The Policy Window" – are significant and the latter will be considered later in this chapter when dealing with policy influences. However, his work is generally more valuable in looking at the policy process itself rather than the media's role in the policy process.

Kingdon's empirical work suggests that, although many scholars have conducted studies showing various and sometimes high levels of media impact in agenda-setting models that involve public opinion (McCombs & Shaw 1972; Iyengar & Simon 1993; Zaller 1996), media impact on policymakers is minimal. His work is, however, focused narrowly, given that he bases his findings completely on self-reporting by policymakers themselves and, as a result, his research model cannot account for the indirect role the media may be playing.[2]

Kingdon used an approach whereby policymakers were simply asked whether or not the media, among various other factors, was significant in bringing a particular issue onto the policy agenda. Kingdon found minimal effects when looking for the media's impact. However, he found much stronger results when looking at the impact of public opinion on the policy agenda. It is possible, therefore, given the connections between the media agenda and public agenda, that there is a relationship between the media and the policy agenda. It is very likely that in cases where public opinion was important in setting the policy agenda, that the media affected public opinion.

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[2] Kingdon does note that media may have an indirect impact on policy through public opinion, but does not test for this in his study.

It is also likely that in many of the cases where important media impacts were reported that important public opinion impacts would have been evident as well. Hence, research in this area would be well served by understanding what areas of policy are likely to be most affected by public opinion, and where mass media effects may well be more indirect and easier for policymakers to underestimate. Such work would contribute to our knowledge of where the media has a significant impact on policymakers and likely on policy outcomes as well. That is, if the policy agenda is affected by these factors, then the actions and decision of policymakers may be affected as well.

In considering possible ways that media impacts might play out across a range of policy areas, a first consideration should be the sorts of issues on which the public is likely to play a significant role in policy outcomes, versus where it will not. It is also important to consider when the media might play a role in changing public opinion on particular issues. This, in turn, gives us four possible categories for a media/policy relationship. These are:

- Cases where public opinion, unaffected by the media, impacts policy decisions;
- Cases where only the media, but not public opinion, impacts policy decisions;
- Cases where both the media and public opinion impact policy decisions; and
- Cases where neither impact policy decisions.

The research for this study is partly grounded in the literature dealing with agenda-setting dynamics, both traditional (McCombs & Shaw 1972; Downs 1972; Kingdon 1984) and current (Soroka 2002; Iyengar 2001; Dearing & Rogers 1996;

Baumgartner & Jones 1993) which indicate that the media clearly has a role in influencing public and policy agendas. Also significant to this area of study is literature dealing with media effects on public attitude formation (Zaller 1996; Zaller 1992; Ghanem 1997; Iyengar & Simon 1993), public opinion impacts on policymakers or policy decisions (Soroka & Wlezien 2002; Wlezien 2003; Stimson et al. 1995; Kingdon 1984), and finally the media's direct impact on policymakers (Yanovitzky 2002; Dearing & Rogers 1996; Kennamer 1992; Pritchard 1992; Protess 1987).

This project follows the example charted by Soroka (2002) and Anthony Downs (1972) by highlighting the nature of issues in the theorized links between the media, the public, and policymaking. In classifying types of issues, Pollock et al. (1993) and Carmines and Stimson (1986; 1980) provide classifications for issues that are based on complexity/difficulty and the degree to which the public identify with particular issues. The classification of issue types and showing how different issues affect the role that the media and public can play in policy cycles is central to the purpose of this project.

The media-public link

The mass media acts as a means of collecting and distributing information in a democratic society, allowing the electorate to know the issues of the day and to evaluate how particular issues and events might be of significance. Cobb and Elder refer to the media's role as "purveyors and interpreters of the public record". They further state that: "Popular reactions to policy actions and actors are thus likely to hinge on what media choose to report and how" (quoted in Kennamer 1992: 5-6).

Public opinion, at least for scholars of communication, has been defined as "group consensus about matters of political concern which has developed in the wake of informed decision" (Doris Graber quoted in Perse 2001: 83). Some studies have looked at public opinion without directly addressing the definition of the term, but use phrases such as "citizen's preferences" (Page & Shapiro 1983) or "measured levels of public support for an issue" (Zaller 1992). Other scholars, such as Shamir and Shamir (2000), question the notion of defining public opinion at all and attempt to accommodate various components of public opinion without a singular definition.

This paper will use the following definition – that public opinion is *the distribution of public preferences about issues of political relevance.* Public opinion is not assumed, as suggested by Graber's definition, to be based on informed decision, though it is shown within this study that information can sometimes have an impact in reinforcing or changing public opinion. With this definition, any preference on a given matter that is not shared by a large number of people is a preference that is not considered part of the public opinion on that matter. Finally, public opinion is understood to have various influences, some of which will be explored briefly within this section.

The Chapel Hill study by McCombs and Shaw is considered the first empirical study testing media effects on the setting of the public agenda – what the public "thinks about" – and helped set the stage for current conceptions of agenda-setting (Soroka 2002). That study, and many since, have focused on issue "salience" and the media – the measure for which tends to be where an issue rates in the results of public polls asking what each respondent feels is the "most important problem" (Edelstein 1993; Dearing &

Rogers 1996). To better conceptualize meanings included in the term salience, it should be considered in its relation to the meanings of both the terms "important" and "problem" (Wlezien, 2003). In the agenda-setting and persuasion literature, these dimensions are addressed using two key concepts: *priming* and *framing*.

The level of importance accorded a particular issue is the *priming* effect of the news media. "By lavishing news coverage on one issue while ignoring other issues, the mass media draw attention to certain aspects of political life at the expense of others" (Dearing & Rogers 1996: 63).[3] This makes particular cues "accessible" while inhibiting access to other issues that might also be worthy of attention (Shamir & Shamir 2000). Priming is significant because it refers to issue placement on or off the media agenda that can have significant effects on the public agenda or the perceived importance of a particular issue. Earlier studies in agenda-setting, such as that of McCombs and Shaw, looked primarily at the priming role of the media and its effect in getting particular issues onto the public's agenda.

Johnston et. al.'s (1992) study of the 1988 Canadian election shows how focusing on a particular issue can lead individuals to support a party they might not have supported if other issues had been given higher priority. In this particular case, it was the decision of political parties as well as the media to highlight a trade agreement rather than a constitutional amendment as the defining issue of the election that had an effect on how the electorate divided. Here, very little persuasion was identified, rather issue priming appears to have been important enough to determine their vote for many voters.

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[3] See also Iyengar & Simon 1993.

The second term, *framing*, focuses on the "problem" aspect of issue salience. Framing of an issue "works to encourage a particular interpretation of the news story," (Perse 2001: 95) and therefore is significant in determining what people think the actual problem is. When issues can be framed as problems, then they are viewed in regard to actions that can be taken to remedy the problems. While priming has the effect of placing an issue on the agenda, framing is more particular in identifying the actual problem or reason for dealing with the issue. Framing will generally suggest either indirect or direct implications for solving a problem whenever one is presented. Indeed, many issues have importance in people's day-to-day lives, but it isn't until these issues become public problems that people come to expect action on them. Much research now shows that the media can affect not only what the public thinks about but also how thoughts are framed and how opinions regarding alternate solutions are formed. More evidence regarding this will be considered later in this section.

Priming and framing move us toward understanding what it is that members of the public draw from the media, and some of the ways in which media affects their knowledge and opinion formation. A third concern relevant with respect to media effects is *learning*. Learning is the process by which "some aspect of human behaviour (e.g. beliefs, attitudes or actions) is acquired or changed through an individual's encounter with events, mental or physical" (Jamieson 1985: 5).

Learning, as it occurs by an audience of the media, is expected to be relatively infrequent. Most media users do not remember much of what they have seen or read, and usually about half is forgotten completely (Perse 2001). With most political issues, the

public remains relatively apathetic and disinterested, (Strouse 1975) and outside of the electoral process, experiences a link to policymaking in only abstract ways (Lemert 1992). As the public becomes engaged on issues and takes a direct interest in problems and solutions, learning can become significant. Both Perse (2001) and Noelle-Neumann (1999) refer to the "active" or "passive" role of public attention in the media learning process. In the passive state, members of the public will receive information without paying a great deal of attention to it – in other words, engagement is very low. In such cases the audience is usually either unable or unmotivated to engage in the topic being covered (Perse 2001). The active state of learning, on the other hand, requires motivation, effort, and the opportunity to learn (Ibid). The degree of engagement by the public in issues is usually related to how particular issues fit into a particular value system or ideology with which the audience can identify.[4]

According to Edelstein, the responses of the public to particular issues can also be related to "the history of one's experience with an object" (Edelstein 1993: 86). He notes that in cases of high-experience issues, "idiosyncratic agenda-setting effects" – or effects based on each individual's varying experience with the given object – can occur, while in cases of low-experience issues, audience responses "would correspond more to media cues" (Ibid: 87).[5] Other aspects that can affect responses by the public to media cues include the duration of media coverage of an issue, how abstract an issue appears to be to

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[4] Added to these concepts of priming and framing is the problem of what exactly the media's role in society is. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer an extensive view of the theories related to this question, it is important to note that the media is often viewed not only as an amplifier or a conduit of issues (Borquez 1993) but also as source of social and political change. The media generally acts as a filter – selecting particular stories, framing those stories in particular ways, and giving particular meanings to the stories covered (Graber 1993). See also Hackett et al. (2000) on the news media as a filter.

[5] See also Soroka 2002: 16-17.

the general public, and how dramatic or surprising particular events are (Soroka 2002). These factors will understandably affect the impact that particular coverage has on individual audience members, and how they perceive the issue to relate to their own lives or values.

Pollock et al. (1993) use the term "easy" issues to suggest those issues that are easy for the public to become engaged with. Such issues are those that are easily related to, or understood in terms of, two core values. These include:

> *Economic* values, which array the supporters of capitalism and business against the supporters of egalitarianism and collective responsibility, and *moral* values, which animate conflict between those socialized by religious authority and those for whom religious belief is of less importance (Ibid: 30).

Such values, according to Pollock et al., are familiar to virtually all members of the general public and issues relating to them require very little political attentiveness. As issues become more complex, it becomes more difficult for members of the general public to apply these core values, which should allow for some outside influences and opinion-forming to occur. Often, in such cases, "the media become the final, simplifying arbiters"(Ibid: 33). Carmines and Stimson (1980) further suggest that easy issues will tend to be those that are symbolic rather than technical, and those that deal with policy ends rather than means. Thus easy issues are deemed to be easy "not because the 'correct' position seems obvious, but because it involves values and ideas that are familiar and accessible to most people" (Gilens & Murakawa 2002: 19).

At the other end of the scale are "hard" issues – those that involve technical or unfamiliar aspects, where "cultural entrepreneurs" may be able to frame issues as a battle over values although the connection between the issue and public values may lack clarity among the public at large. In such cases, "when the public must rely on elites to construct and supply the link between issues and values, political involvement will become an important gradient" (Pollock et al. 1993: 32). It is expected that policymakers will not view public opinion as very important in these areas when issues become too difficult for the general public to grasp or pay much attention to.

The manner in which issues are approached and understood by the media and public will affect the impact they have on policymakers. Charles Perrow (1984) points to the fact that the "rationality" that the public uses in forming opinions may differ from that of experts or policymakers. In looking at public and policy responses to nuclear technology risks, Perrow notes that the public often does not understand issues well and can be swayed by the means by which information is presented. Perrow does not suggest that people are irrational or simply ignorant, rather, the public may sometimes be prone to "bounded rationality", where people make the most rational decisions possible given the limits of their knowledge as laypersons in any particular field. The decisions made by the public may include "a quite efficient and understandable logic ... even though it is technically faulty" (Ibid: 320). Thus, even though an expert analysis may show an extremely remote risk related to a particular technology, the public may be more prone to demand that any related risk be eliminated and that another technology be used. Perrow suggests the public is also prone to "social and cultural rationality" – which "emphasizes diversity and social bonding" (Ibid: 321-323). Such a form of rationality may be

understood as a "human" rationality, not based on intelligence as much as the context and values with which one might choose to evaluate given information. Decisions and opinions will be more reflective of personal preferences and identities and less reflective of an attempt by the individual to objectively analyze the situation. Johnston et al. illustrate this type of rationality, in relation to the issue of the Canada-U.S. free trade agreement in the 1988 Canadian election. "The [free trade] agreement was so complex and so subject to uncertainties that it naturally invited voters to assess it in terms of the trustworthiness of its negotiator" (Johnston et al. 1992: 20). Such opinions, however, though not based in informed analysis of the issue, do not mean that individuals are less engaged with it. While the public's views on some issues may be based on social rather than technical rationality, there is likely a cost to policymakers who ignore the public's preference on issues that engage social or cultural values, even if those preferences are rooted in incorrect information or what may be viewed as faulty evaluation (Perrow 1984).

These concepts of rationality are important in developing a conceptual model for policy impacts because, first, it shows that there can be clear differences in how opinions might be formed or decisions made. They can range from decisions that are made on purely technical grounds to ones that are very much framed or subjective. (Perrow seems to suggest that policy elites and analysts tend to make decisions on the technical side, while the public is more likely to make decisions more based in bounded or social/cultural rationality.) Second, it indicates that defining "easy" may not be as simple as one might assume, because what is most important is how easy it becomes to frame an issue in terms of core values, not necessarily whether the issue itself is a very simple one.

Along with rational and cultural values, as well as ideological beliefs, come social groups and communities of influence with which people often tend to align themselves. The old "minimal effects" paradigm was based on the notion of selective perception, that people could choose their sources and pay attention to similar viewpoints while shutting out those they disagreed with. Social group reinforcement is another key aspect of this perspective, and must be considered. P.F. Lazarsfeld, one of the pioneers of the "minimal effects" school of thought, stated that "The media don't change attitudes, they just reinforce them" (quoted in Noelle-Neumann 1999: 57). Lazarsfeld and Katz "maintained that the networks of personal associates in which individuals are embedded fulfil (*sic*) ... the function of screening and filtering incoming media messages" (Schmitt-Beck 2003: 237).[6] If media messages are not accepted by a given social group in which an individual places trust, then the message will not be accepted. If the message is accepted, then the media message is simply a reinforcement of a previously held position. However, Schmitt-Beck tested exactly this hypothesis with respect to voter preferences for particular candidates. The study showed that in four diverse democracies – the U.S., Britain, Germany and Spain – the media exerted a notable influence on electoral behaviour, while the filtering process of personal communication had different effects depending on the candidate. It was found that "where the media tend to favour particular parties or candidates in their political reporting, they may alter the considerations that their recipients bring to bear when deciding how to vote" (Ibid: 257). Meanwhile "personal political communication within voters' circles ... is similarly influential. Yet political conversation also plays a more indirect role, it moderates the influence of mass

[6] The second portion of this quote precedes the first, but remains accurate to the context of the passage.

media" (Ibid: 258). In other words, social groups or communities do play a role in the process, but the view that they negate the influence of the media is not supported by this research.

Similarly, Zaller (1996) considered media impacts on electoral behaviour by looking at how the media affected previously held political views of individuals. According to Zaller, it is necessary to test 3 key aspects relating to persuasion when considering the impact of the media on its audience: exposure, reception, and yielding/accepting. The first two aspects relate to two of the media roles observed earlier, but from the receptor position instead of the media position. Thus, exposure refers to the amount of information that an individual is exposed to on a particular issue from media sources (similar to priming), and reception refers to the learning that occurs as a result of that exposure. Yielding/accepting is essentially the persuasion step in the process – where one is not only "taking in" or "cognizing" the given message, but also actually being persuaded into taking the position or preference advocated by the message. (Ibid: 21)

Using knowledge of political events as a measure of media use, he found that "the true magnitude of the persuasive effect of mass communication is closer to 'massive' than to 'small to negligible' and that the frequency of such effects is 'often'" (Zaller 1996: 18).[7] Zaller showed that when people tend to hold very strong beliefs, the media usually only plays the role of reinforcing such beliefs, and when media coverage contradicts firmly held beliefs by individuals, it tends to be ignored by those individuals.

[7] It should be noted that Zaller's (1996) research is focused on election campaign issues, which are not always analogous to policy preferences.

However, where beliefs are not deeply rooted, there tends to be a significant impact on persuasion and attitude change.

Finally, it is important to note that the direction of impact between the public and the media remains a debatable issue. There does not appear to be any doubt in the recent literature about the influential role of the media upon the public. However, empirical studies have shown both a uni-directional impact, where the media alone appears to be impacting public opinion (Iyengar & Simon 1993), and other studies showing a somewhat more bi-directional link, where public opinion also has an impact on what is covered in the media (Soroka 2002). Often the agenda of the media reflects stimuli from either the public or the policy agenda, but it is difficult to take the next step and determine if the framing of issues by the media follows as a result of public opinion that was formed without the influence of the media. What should be highlighted, however, is that this study is not necessarily concerned primarily with where the media agenda has originated, but whether the focus given to the issue by the media appears to have clear impacts on the public and/or policy outcomes. Regarding public opinion specifically, if media coverage on a certain issue appears to change the public's view on that issue, then it is unlikely that media coverage can be attributed to prior public opinion.

To summarize, studies regarding the media have come a long way from previous viewpoints that purported only minimal effects, to empirical research showing significant media effects on agendas, opinion and evaluation of issues through priming and framing. Because priming and framing are significant factors of influence, the nature of coverage given a particular issue by the media must be considered in evaluations of media impact

on policymaking. Further, the nature of the issue at hand is also of importance, as the ability of the public to become engaged depends upon the issue's relationship to core values. It is exploring how the public evaluation of an issue – when it occurs because of media priming and framing – may affect policymakers that will form the next section of this paper.

The public-policy link

This section will explore how public opinion can, in turn, have a notable influence on policymakers (Stimson et al. 1995; Borquez 1993; Kingdon 1984). It is generally expected, though not always observed, that policymakers will reflect the wishes of the electorate in their actions, or they will experience some degree of sanction for not doing so (Wlezien 2003; Stimson et al. 1995). In classical democratic theory, legitimacy for governing is dependent upon the consent of the governed, and it is thought that policymakers generally should not take actions that are outside of the limits placed upon them by the public they serve. For this reason, public opinion is a legitimate consideration for policymakers when making decisions (Stimson et al. 1995; Pritchard 1992).

Public policy is broadly defined as any "organized government action or inaction" usually involving some form of "conscious decision-making" (Pritchard 1992: 104). Policymaking is a process that is generally considered to be highly institutionalized and characterized by long periods of relative stability (Baumgartner & Jones 1993). Changes in policy are not necessarily random – but do tend to be opportunistic, and the policy process is relatively chaotic (Dearing & Rogers 1996; Borquez 1993; Kingdon 1984).

Kingdon refers to opportunities for policy change as the "policy window" – where the various streams (problems, policies, politics) combine upon a particular issue and permit it to be considered on the policy agenda. These windows can, in some cases, follow shifts in what Kingdon terms "the national mood":

> People in and around government sense a national mood. ...[this] is the notion that a rather large number of people out in the country are thinking along certain common lines, that this national mood changes from one time to another in discernible ways, and that these changes in mood or climate have important impacts on policy agendas and policy outcomes (Ibid: 153).

Baumgartner and Jones (1993) refer to the policy process as one of "punctuated-equilibrium." In other words, policies are generally stable and changes are incremental – in a state of equilibrium – but with occasions of disequilibria that force issues onto the political and public agenda. "Dramatic changes in public policies are constantly occurring ... as public understandings of existing problems change" (True, Jones & Baumgartner 1999: 97). The concept of punctuated-equilibrium is centred in two theoretical policymaking frameworks: political institutions, defined simply as "enduring rules for making decisions" (Baumgartner & Jones 2002: 24) and bounded rationality, defined as persons being "intendedly rational but only limitedly so" (Ostrom 1999: 46). The first posits that the foundation of policymaking is dependent upon established norms that are stable and not easily changed, while the second posits that decisions can be made to suit the interests of decision makers but with only limited information for calculating future risk and benefit. This rationality on the part of policymakers is where the public is likely to have the most impact on policy decisions. Stimson et al. (1995) observe that

politicians tend to be rational actors who need to make predictions for their future election and act accordingly on present policy issues. In attempting to make these decisions, policymakers, at least elected ones, will need to consider the views of constituents in their calculations. If the public supports a current policy, then there is little reason for policymakers to seek change, but if the public begins to question current policies in significant and lasting ways, then considerations for change must eventually catch the attention of politicians.

> As issues are defined in public discourse in different ways, and as issues rise and fall in the public agenda, existing policies can be either reinforced or questioned. Reinforcement creates great obstacles to anything but modest change, but the questioning of policies at the most fundamental levels creates opportunities for dramatic reversals in policy outcomes (True, Jones & Baumgartner 1999: 97-98).

In this way, institutions should not be considered only as independent or causal variables in the policy process – they also have the potential to be dramatically impacted by the policy process (Baumgartner & Jones 2002: 4-6). However, when institutions are not changed substantially, policy decisions will generally follow a process that maintains stable or incremental outcomes. This change will be "at the margin" so as to both satisfy the public in the short term and maintain stability at the same time (Stimson et al. 1995: 545).

Sabatier presents a view of the policy process as an "advocacy coalition" framework – which involves a competition of groups consisting of various actors with similar interests in particular policy goals (or a "policy subsystem"). Institutional factors

and a small and stable group of subsystem actors lead to stability in policy. However, factors external to this subsystem – which can be wide-ranging, including the media and public opinion, but also including governing coalitions or other non-institutional factors – can be influential in causing change (Sabatier 1991). According to Sabatier, coalitions tend to center around core beliefs (or "policy paradigms"), and such coalitions and beliefs are rarely unstable, so that most policy change is marginal. (See also Howlett 2002; Howlett & Ramesh 2002; Hall 1993)

Not all issues can be considered by the political system simultaneously. Issues are usually "disaggregated into a number of issue-oriented policy subsystems ... [which] can be dominated by a single interest, can undergo competition among several interests, can be disintegrating over time, or may be building independence from others" (True, Jones & Baumgartner 1999: 99). Such subsystems allow various issues to be processed simultaneously, which also means that policy development can sometimes be "insulated from the glare of publicity associated with high-agenda politics" (Ibid: 100). These subsystems – sometimes referred to in policy literature as "iron triangles", "systems of limited participation" or "policy monopolies" – are policy groupings that have a "degree of autonomy from the broader political system" (Baumgartner & Jones 2002: 11). Clearly, within this system, some policy issues will involve the public more than others, depending on various factors including the nature of the policy subsystem.

The influence of subsystems is notable and has a clear impact on policy change (Howlett 2002). This study looks at issues where, in at least a few cases, it is likely that subsystems are important factors for policy stability. However, the main purpose is to

show cases where the external factors of media and the public were influential in either overriding the stability that existed, or where the public or media were of little importance. Therefore, decision-making will be viewed mainly within democratic institutions, where the influence of the public is expected to be greatest, and where the proceedings are generally more transparent.

Stimson et al. (1995) test the hypothesis of "dynamic representation", where policy representation responds to general public preferences, by looking at preferences for increasingly liberal or conservative policies in the past 50 years in the U.S. They show that there are two key ways in which policy might respond to public preferences. The first is by voters electing particular politicians who are most likely to represent the voters' expectations; the second is by politicians acting rationally to meet the public expectations in anticipation of a future election. The latter of these is of importance to this project, though both show that the public has some degree of influence in policy outcomes.

Stimson et al. looked at shifts in public preferences over time as well as shifts in policymaking within four policymaking institutions over time – the presidency, the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Supreme Court. In each case, the institution has a notable impact on how responsive policymaking is to public preferences, as well as the nature of responsiveness, that is, whether policy responses to public preferences were based on election turnover or on "rational anticipation" of future consequences by policymakers who depend on future election to office. The first, electoral turnover, will mean a change in policy outcomes, but not in the decisions of

policymakers themselves. The second, rational anticipation, requires policymakers to analyze their choice options and make decisions that they feel will be most beneficial in the future. In other words, either elected officials will be influenced in their decision-making by public opinion and remain elected officials, or else they will remain in disagreement with public opinion and have a greater likelihood of being replaced by a politician of a slightly different liberal-conservative standing.

Stimson et al. use "Domestic Policy Mood" – a measure of mood regarding policy preferences from aggregated survey research – which classifies the public's mood about policies on a left-right scale. Policy changes are measured by decisions of the various institutions – such as congressional votes in the House[8] – and classified in a similar left-right way. The results show that each institution, including even the Supreme Court which does not depend on re-election as the other institutions do, are all influenced by public opinion in terms of increases or decreases in preferences for liberal or conservative policies. However, the U.S. Senate stands out as the single institution of the four that does not show actual influence on the individual policymakers. When electoral turnover is factored into policy decision changes, public opinion has virtually no effect. On the other hand, the President, House of Representatives, and Supreme Court[9] show significant signs of rational anticipation. Overall, according to the measures employed in the study, a single percentage point change in public opinion "produces a rational anticipation response of seven-tenths (.712) of a point in policy" (Ibid: 557). Referring to

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[8] Policy decisions, measured this way, do not always translate into actual policy change.
[9] Stimson et al. (1995) suggest that the Supreme Court, though not elected, still has some interest in monitoring public opinion, partly due to the fact that "justices care deeply about substantive outcomes" and because they "share policymaking authority with elected politicians" (555).

the presidency and the House, Stimson et al. conclude: "Hardly indifferent, these politicians are keen to pick up the faintest signals in their political environment. Like antelope in an open field, they cock their ears and focus their attention on the slightest sign of danger" (Ibid: 559).

Based on recent research in the U.K., Wlezien (2003) and Soroka & Wlezien (2002) add some key aspects to this question of policymakers' responses to, and representation of, public preferences – in particular, in budget allocation. Their studies consider broader, less-specific classifications of policy preferences than those employed by Stimson et al.. Most polling questions query respondents on the "most important problem" or whether particular expenditures should be "increased" or "decreased", but rarely ask about specific preferences among large groups of people (Wlezien 2003). But, politicians tend to represent public preferences within particular domains, although this appears to be more prevalent in the U.S. than in the U.K. For example, in the U.K., if there is a general signal from the public toward more spending in social programs, policymakers will move collectively to respond to the general signal, but in a less general way – focusing on health sometimes, education other times, but attempting to meet the public's general expectations (Soroka & Wlezien 2002). It is difficult to conclude from this research if there exist specific preferences that result in specific policies in the area of preference (for example: spending preferences for different aspects of health services that result in actual policies that alter health spending). This research shows that there is a clear policy response in the case of public opinion about broader domains, but evidence for policy responses on particular issues is lacking.

For these reasons, there are certain cautions that must be followed in looking at public salience and representation as specifically issue-focused rather than domain-focused, or simply on a left-right scale. Soroka (2002) certainly suggests the nature of issues plays a key role in the agenda-setting framework, but whether such issues directly translate into policy outcomes that result from public opinion cannot yet be assumed.

As noted earlier, public learning may follow the lines of being either passive or active. The motivations and degree of interest the public displays about particular types of issues are of key consideration to policymakers. Here, it appears that policymakers are generally more responsive in areas that engage core values, as these tend to be the areas where the public is likely to be the most opinionated and the most concerned regarding policy outcomes.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the public's direct influence in policy decisions is evident, and that it may potentially have a role in more specific issues rather than simply in broad terms. The next section will now consider the role that the media may play directly in policymaking.

The media-policy link

It has now been established that the media has impacts in certain cases that affect public opinion, and that public opinion can have impacts in certain cases on policymakers. However, in some cases the media can also impact policymakers *directly*. It is important to note that policymakers, as individuals, focus a large amount of time and

energy on the media.[10] It was noted earlier that, because of long periods of stability and policymakers' reluctance to promote change, it is often necessary that a number of factors be present in order for policy change to occur. It is also recognized that the media frequently offers early indicators of policy change opportunities, and these indicators are often picked up by policymakers, thus policymakers may choose to use these indicators to promote and support changes or oppose them (Yanovitzky 2002). Media coverage then affects the ability of politicians not only to have policies considered, but also to have them adopted and implemented (Dearing & Rogers 1996).

There are two key conditions under which the media may do this. The first is when the media is regarded as a surrogate for the public mood on particular issues; the second is when the media acts as a means of communications within a policy network. Each of these will be discussed briefly in this section.

First, there is significant evidence that policymakers use the media as a surrogate for public opinion (Yanovitzky 2002; Howlett 1999; Dearing & Rogers 1996; Kennamer 1992; Pritchard 1992). In fact, Kennamer (1992), who argues that the media functions as the main link between the public and policymakers, seems to suggest that the public has only indirect links to policymakers, while it is the media that has the direct link most of the time. Policymakers may use the media to measure the salience of a particular issue or to see what the general mood of the public is toward a particular problem or solution. Kennamer, citing an earlier study by Miller and Stokes (1963) notes that "the most important determinant of a legislator's vote was not constituent opinion, but the

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[10] According to Yanovitzky (2002), U.S. legislators spent an average of 1.8 hours per day reading newspapers and 1.5 hours per day watching television news (424).

representative's perception of constituent opinion, and that these perceptions were often far off the mark" (Kennamer 1992: 11).[11] Bernard Cohen quotes a U.S. state department official stating "We all read the press carefully; not only *The Washington Post*, but *The New York Times*, *The Baltimore Sun*, the Louisville papers. So we know pretty well what the country is thinking" (quoted in Kennamer 1992: 11).

Policymakers may also use the media and its representations of issues to "attribute responsibility to a problem ... learn about some of its solutions, or use it as a benchmark against which to evaluate their own performance in dealing with the problem" (Yanovitzky 2002: 426). Doppelt (1992) notes that in a survey of government officials, 30% said that news coverage led to recent changes within their agencies' operations. These changes included "firings, internal investigations, and the privatization of services"(Ibid: 125).

All of this is not to say that the media's roles of priming and framing issues will necessarily lead to swings in the opinions or preferences of policymakers. Notable influence on policymakers' knowledge or opinions on a particular issue is rare. This is partly due to the fact that, as Yanovitzky states, policymakers usually have a greater amount of knowledge and experience of political issues and are less susceptible to media information as an influence on their preferences. However, policymakers do tend to follow the media's prescriptions for problems when those prescriptions fit their own ideology, or if the perception exists that some political gain will occur as a result of a particular action.

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[11] Howlett (1999) notes that no politician can personally experience "the public" at first hand, and suggests that the media is a key means by which politicians attempt to gage public opinion (776).

What is significant about the use of the media as a surrogate is precisely the fact that it does not always provide an accurate portrayal of the public mood. Here the nature of attention given to a particular issue is, again, of particular importance in terms of the influence it may have. Pritchard (1992) suggests that a direct link between the media and policymaking should not exist. If the media influences policymakers, then the influence should only be indirect. In keeping with a classic, if not idealistic, understanding of democracy, only the public itself should enjoy a direct influence on policymakers. However, he notes that the direct link of the media with policymaking is both highly evident and bi-directional, with both influencing each other. As will be seen in the case studies in the following chapter, media coverage of issues sometimes contributes to the media or journalists being defined as having some expertise or as being a representative of the public mood on an issue, thus allowing them to be influential in the policy process even though media coverage of the issue itself had little or no influence on the public.

Second, the media is sometimes used as a communication device between members of the policy community (Dearing & Rogers 1996; Kingdon 1984). This is because certain forms of media may be the only sources with which all policymakers or community members commonly come into contact. Media coverage can act as a common reference point and one by which policymakers plan further strategies and actions. Evidence of this second impact will not be shown in the cases considered in the next chapter, as an approach different than the one adopted here would be necessary to understand this particular media influence.

Constructing a model using Easy and Hard issues

Given what we have seen about the influence of the media on the public, the influence of the public on policymakers, and the influence of the media on policymakers, in constructing a model of media influence it is important to first construct a model showing the issues on which public opinion is significant for policymakers. We can then better identify cases where the media impacts policymakers, showing both where it may influence the public, therefore impacting policymakers indirectly, and where it may influence policymakers directly without notable public impact.

In designing a model for media impacts on public opinion, it is necessary to consider what sorts of issues will engage the public's core values, and when such issues will, in turn, have effects on policymakers. It can be assumed that frequency of coverage will be a factor in any case that is explored for media impact (Protess et al. 1987) – if a particular issue doesn't appear in the news media in a way that makes it highly visible to the public, it seems obvious that the media will not be influential in opinion-forming on the issue. This is not to say that opinions will not change on the issue, but the media clearly cannot be leading the change. In addition, for the media to be influential, it must "portray an issue in an unambiguous way with dramatic, convincing, and clear evidence." (Protess et al. 1987: 180) In cases where issues have coverage that is ambiguous or reflects current public thinking on the issue, the salience of the issue may increase, but significant changes in opinions regarding approaches to the issue may not occur, or at least are not changed as a result of media coverage. As well, the likelihood of opinion change will increase as issues are presented from one particular viewpoint or slant, as

opposed to involving a good balance of competing viewpoints – which is more likely to be viewed as *ambiguous* to the public. Therefore, even after identifying the kinds of issues on which the media can potentially have strong impacts, it will still be necessary to determine the nature of the issue coverage (i.e. the position taken on the issue is positive, negative, or neutral) before it can be determined if there were media impacts.

For the most difficult issues: "as attentiveness declines, so too should the elite-driven connection" (Pollock et al. 1993: 32). Here issues are abstract and the public is disengaged, or elites do not attempt to involve the public.

Figure 1 uses the same terms and employs the same meanings as Pollock et al., for the broader issue types, labelled above the continuum line, then distinguishes more specifically the different dynamics that occur along the continuum, labelled below the line.

Figure 1 – Continuum of Easy and Hard Issues

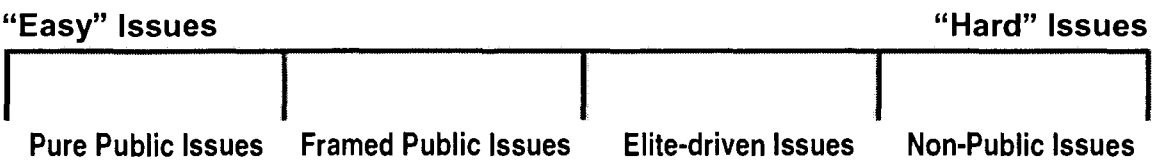

Figure 1 shows how these issues might be related to the discussion of impact on policymakers. In the first section of the continuum, *Pure Public Issues* consist of issues that are easily distinguishable by the public. Members of the public believe they can easily understand how issues impact them directly or impact their cultural and/or core values without any additional information or explanation. This is an area where, as noted

before, social groups play a bigger role, as may the media, in simply reinforcing viewpoints or beliefs, which are already in place. Most of the electorate maintain "embedded ...[in] personal environments that are politically homogeneous and serve as social 'anchors' for opinions and attitudes" (Schmitt-Beck 2003: 237). External influences that suggest disagreement with personal beliefs on such issues are generally ignored, while agreeable influences tend to reinforce already held beliefs. On these pure public issues, media coverage may still be substantial and the positions taken by elites may be varied, but public opinion does not usually change in any significant way as a result of these factors. Rather, the public is relatively unlikely to look to the media for cues for opinion-formation on such issues (Gilens & Murakawa 2002). In such cases public opinion is expected to be of importance to policymakers and, where public opinion is clearly one-sided on a given issue, policymakers are expected to make clear attempts to follow it.

The second section, *Framed Public Issues*, includes issues where the media is most likely to have indirect impacts upon policymakers. Here the issues are highly publicized and usually engage the public, which in turn is important to policymakers engaging in rational anticipation, but public opinion can be changed based on how the media increases available information or mediates the framing of issues. Additional information will often provide the necessary link to core values so that the public believes it can understand how issues have a direct personal impact, hence the nature of information available may have an impact on how public preferences are formed. In such

cases, where the framing of issues does not reflect dominant opinion among the public,[12] it is expected that changes in public opinion will follow media framing, and changes in policy will tend to follow public opinion. Such issues are still considered "easy" in terms of the public's ability to understand and become engaged with it, but public opinion about these issues may be less "anchored", and interaction with the media, may help to form or change opinions. Thus, on such issues, the nature of media coverage will play a role in whether changes in public opinion occur. Clearly, if the media does not provide an alternative view in a manner so as to affect public opinion on the issue at hand, no media role is likely to be observed.

The third section, *Elite-driven Issues*, is where the media framing of issues tends to have a minor impact on the public, but a potential direct impact on policymakers. Issues are far more complex and it is difficult for the public to grasp the substance of the issues or perceive a direct relationship to their individual values. In such cases, it is possible that there may be less media coverage than in Framed Public Issues either because of the complexity of the issues at hand, or because of a lack of public interest in such types of issues. However, the media have the ability to frame issues in a manner that can potentially have a direct impact on influencing policy decisions. Coverage may frame issues to appeal to core economic and moral values, but the public response will likely be limited and only significant among those who are highly attentive to political issues (Pollock et al. 1993). In such cases, direct effects from the media on policymakers might be observed as media coverage is used by policymakers to gauge public interest

[12] An example of this would be cases where the media as a whole appears to send an unbalanced message, and/or one that is significantly different than that reflecting public opinion.

and support for certain positions on issues. Further, members of the media may even take on roles as experts in particular areas or become actors in the policy community itself. A lack of clear public involvement on such issues means that the media can influence changes in policy when it appears to advocate changes, but the public is unlikely to have any significant impact.

The fourth section, *Non-public Issues* consists of highly technical or legalistic issues, or areas where disclosure of information is either not pursued to any extent or, in some cases, not permitted. It is expected that there will not be significant media coverage, and when they make policy decisions on such issues, policymakers are unlikely to take account of public opinion or the media.

As is suggested by Figure 1, the public is not attentive to all, or even many, issues. In fact, Dearing and Rogers (1996) refer to issue agenda-setting as a zero-sum game, in which "the public agenda is an ongoing process of competition among a relatively small number of major-issue proponents" (66). Carmines and Stimson (1986) suggest that most policy dialogue begins with politicians, who provide many different issue conflicts to be considered, however, the electorate responds to only a few of these issues. They state that: "The issue space – that tiny number of policy debates can claim substantial attention both at the center of government and among the passive electorate – is strikingly limited by mass inattention" (915). These considerations about issues and public opinion help to suggest how the model in Figure 1 might work. The "easy" issue space is the area in which the public is most likely to be engaged, but clearly there are issues of policy to which the public does not pay attention. The competitive process for

placing issues on the public's agenda might involve varying factors, including the media. Policy issues that do not fall within this area may not necessarily fall from the policy agenda completely – they may still be dealt with, possibly because of necessity or elite interests – but politicians are less likely to gain any electoral benefit from dealing with such issues. Here, the impact of factors beyond public opinion will be greater, including possibly the media, but also interest groups, experts or other policy network members.

Therefore, two interacting dimensions must be considered when viewing media influences on policy change using the above model. First, the nature of the issue depicts where on the continuum an issue is likely to be placed. Second, the nature of media coverage must be considered, as coverage that does not appear to advocate any change from the status quo is unlikely to lead to changes in public opinion or policymaking on any type of issue, while coverage that appears to advocate change should tend to influence change in the issue categories where media influence is expected. With this model for looking at policy impacts by both the public and the media and how some of these impacts may theoretically be understood, the following chapter will explore how these issues might sometimes play out in actual political situations.

CHAPTER THREE

FOUR CLASSIFICATIONS IN ISSUE-DYNAMICS AND POLICYMAKING

This chapter will now explore studies that have looked at cases that help to provide an elaboration of the issue dynamics suggested in the model developed in the previous chapter. Because of availability, these studies look at policy issues dealt with mostly within the U.S., but also include studies from Canada and Britain. What can be observed is that the nature of particular types of issues as "easy" versus "hard" and their degrees of complexity appear to lead to predictable outcomes in terms of public and media influence on policy decisions based on the model presented. In other words, issues that are less complex and which the public can easily identify as having a clear impact on their lives or values are the issues on which the public is most likely to play a direct role in policy making. The media is influential on these types of issues when additional information is necessary to make this impact clear to the public, therefore the media can have an indirect influence on policymakers. When issues are harder, the role of the public drops significantly or completely, and here the media can retain a directly influential role. And on the hardest issues, external influences by both the media and public on policymakers are insignificant.

The first section looks at issues studied by Hewitt (1974) and Madison (2000), which show examples of "non-public" issues. The next section looks at a study by Protess et al. (1987) and makes the distinction more clearly between "framed public" and "elite-driven" issues. This is followed by two other issues that have been identified as showing the difference between "framed public" and "elite-driven" issues – war and weapon production.

The final study, conducted specifically for this paper, shows a pure-public issue. It considers media impact and public impact on a federal government decision regarding NHL tax-subsidies in Canada. This case study differs from the other studies in that it employs primary data, because a study showing evidence of such an issue was not available in the literature surveyed for this project.

Non-public issue dynamics: The nuclear deterrent in Britain and "Big Science" in the U.S.

Policymakers must deal with a variety of issues, many having little or no public salience, so it is not difficult to conceive that such cases exist. However, it is difficult to find a study that adequately provides measures of the necessary variables in order to identify the public, media, and policy dynamics surrounding such issues. Still, there are cases that indicate policy actions, which do not appear to have been directed by either media or public expectations.

Hewitt (1974), in testing for pluralist versus elitist approaches to policymaking in post-war Britain, finds some policies that were enacted without public opinion or media influence. On the first such issue, in which British policymakers opted for creating an

independent nuclear deterrent during the early Cold War era of the mid-1950s, Hewitt found that the media was against the idea, while the public, as should be expected of hard cases, was undecided. Interestingly, on this issue none of the measures of interest group opinion analyzed by Hewitt, including measures of business, religious, or unions opinion, yielded evidence that any of these groups were in favour of the actual policy outcome. On military policy issues such as this one, government policymakers likely have access to information that is not accessible to the media, interest groups, or the public, and they tend to evaluate such issues based on strategies and risk-assessments by various government and military experts, making such issues ones that are "non-public". This does not mean that in every case of defense strategy the government will act independently of public and media opinion, but clearly such cases do exist. It can safely be suggested, as another study considered later in this chapter will also indicate, that cases of defense strategy typically fall within the two "harder" categories of elite-driven or non-public.

Hewitt tests other foreign policy issues as well, issues on which the British public generally tended to be either divided or undecided. Again the evidence on these cases suggests that they probably fit the "elite-driven" classification. The exception to these is the case of Indian independence, in which government policy followed public opinion, which was in favour of independence.

A second issue area that fits the Non-public issue classification is "Big Science", as it is referred to by Madison (2000). Madison considers how the Superconducting

Super Collider (SSC)[13] and the Human Genome Project (HGP)[14] came onto the agenda of the Reagan Administration in the U.S. in the 1980s and was subsequently funded in the 1988 Fiscal Year federal budget.

Madison states that both high-energy physics and molecular biology are areas of low visibility on the policy agenda, and that "Decision-making and debate are confined to eminent researchers, ... officials at the Department of Energy and the National Institutes of Health and members of congressional committees" (Ibid: 38). Madison describes the big science policy agenda as separate from what he terms the "general social problem-solving" policy agenda. The latter is characterized by issue attention being gained through brokering cooperation between disparate interest groups, and by increasing public salience. Gaining issue attention in the big science agenda, on the other hand, is achieved by "[gaining] the commitment of the institutionalized advisory apparatus ... [and] implementing an inside strategy for support by partnering directly with key advisors to the President" (Ibid: 45). Agenda-setting for this topic appears to have been focused only on policy and academic elites, not the public, as publicity of the SSC and HGP issues included publication of articles in refereed journals and in non-scientific literature, but not publication in newspapers and magazines. The main purpose for focusing attention on academic and policy literature and avoiding mainstream media was to inform members of the scientific research community and high-level policymakers

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[13] "The SSC was proposed as an endeavor to study the most fundamental particle of matter (the Higgs particle) which, in turn, would lead to a conclusive understanding of differences in the most fundamental forces that determine the Standard Model of the elementary particles and forces of matter... The SSC initiative proposed the world's largest and most powerful particle accelerator, which would be 20 times more powerful and 13 times larger than the most powerful existing accelerator" (Madison 2000: 37).

[14] "The HGP was proposed to determine the order of approximately 100,000 genes that make up and control the human genetic structure. Genes in this structure contain all the instructions that characterize and operate the human organism"(Madison 2000: 37).

without drawing any more attention to the issues than absolutely necessary. Madison notes:

> Key members of the Congress were informed from the beginning, and frequently thereafter, about the issues surrounding the SSC and the HGP. This was a conscious strategy to avoid public exposure, debate and opposition in congressional oversight hearings that were usually held to review matters of this importance (Ibid: 41).

Advocacy groups were comprised mainly of prestigious and highly educated members of the scientific community and some business interests. These groups were highly influential with high-ranking policy officials, which were in turn highly influential with the president. These advocates similarly influenced individual members of congressional committee hearings. Madison states that the opinions of these advocates were trusted by the committees, and these committees consequently "conducted only an unusually cursory inquiry into the feasibility of the multi-billion dollar initiatives after presidential approval" (Ibid: 41).

The public played virtually no role in these processes. At about the same time that these issues were prominent on the limited policy agenda to which they were strategically channelled, a poll conducted by the National Science Foundation showed that 40% of the U.S. public had a high degree of confidence in the leadership of the scientific community. No public opinion support for particular projects was noted although public funding was supplied to them.

The two cases by Hewitt and Madison discussed above show that policies on highly technical matters or strategic foreign policy, will often be decided upon

completely within the confines of the policy subsystem, and high-level policymakers will not look for public input in deciding on policy outcomes. In other words, they are among the kinds of policies most likely to fall into the non-public issues category.

Framed Public vs. Elite-Driven issues: Degrees of public engagement

As was noted earlier, the media should generally have indirect impacts on policy decisions when the issue at hand is moderately easy. That is, the public should become engaged but the media can play a key role in opinion-formation. However, on issues that are moderately hard, media coverage will not result in significant public engagement, though the media coverage may have direct impacts on policy decisions. A study that helps to provide elaboration on the difference in issue dynamics between these two components of the model is one by Protess et al. (1987) which shows investigative reporting impacts on public opinion and policymaking. An important factor to consider in such a study is that investigative reporting tests short term responses to information that often comes as some surprise to the public. At the same time, it should be recognized that policy changes on such issues, as well as policy changes that occur as a result of longer-term coverage cases, may still be dependent upon other factors besides simply the media and the public.[15] The Protess et al. study looked at the impact of investigative reports on toxic waste disposal practices at a major Chicago university. The study traced the impact of news coverage on both the general public and policy elites by

[15] Other factors may include, for example, those used by Kingdon (1984) in explaining the "policy window" (173-204).

conducting before-and-after surveys,[16] and tracing the effects of the news coverage on policymaking in Chicago.

The waste problem was portrayed as a potential danger because of the way the waste was being stored. The procedures being followed violated fire department regulations and those of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, while the solution of standard storage facilities was a relatively inexpensive one. The coverage aired for three nights and looked at the university's delay in implementing the necessary solution. Members of the public were interviewed both before and after the coverage of the problem, and separated into those that were "aware" and "unaware" of the coverage. However, those who were aware of the coverage showed no significant change in their attitudes toward toxic waste or environmental hazards. The only area specifically noted as bordering on significant change was that respondents who were aware of the coverage were more likely to say that "environmental news stories cause confusion" (Ibid: 173). Both aware and unaware respondents actually reported being somewhat less concerned about improper storage and disposal of toxic waste after coverage concluded, though not in significant numbers.

As should be expected, policymakers did not see toxic waste as increasing in importance as a policy issue, though action did result in a response to the media coverage. Policy elites within organizations that had no direct role in making and enforcing relevant regulations, however, did tend to change their opinions of the effectiveness of the role of the organizations that did have a direct role in enforcement.

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[16] In this case, the researchers knew in advance that the story would be airing on a television news station (Protess et al. 1987: 169).

Among these latter organizations, which were in positions to effect changes regarding the waste disposal problem, poll respondents stated that they expected to spend more time enforcing regulations in the future, and increased enforcement occurred within a short timeframe. (It should be noted that some officials were made aware of the problem by the television station before the coverage aired, and had said that they would increase enforcement but not before the coverage aired.) Further, the changes that occurred were limited to enforcement of regulations, and no further policy changes (legislative, regulatory, or budgetary) occurred. Thus, Protess et al. noted that the media coverage resulted in no public impact, but a notable policy decision impact and a policymaking change, though the change was "individualistic" in nature (Ibid: 197).

It is possible in this particular case that the media was simply ineffective in portraying the waste disposal issue in a way that would concern viewers. While the coverage did point toward stricter enforcement as desirable, Protess et al. note that the news series was "stylistically ambiguous" and the "harm alleged was more *potential* than actual" (Ibid: 180, italics in original). Toxic waste as an issue did not significantly increase in importance to the general public. However, policy changes still resulted from the coverage. Journalists involved in this particular case were able to position themselves to lobby with local Fire Department officials. This lobbying may have had a greater impact than the news coverage itself.

This issue gives a good indication of the dynamics of an elite-driven issue. The media was effective in promoting policy change, however it was not effective in engaging the public through coverage. Notwithstanding the efforts of the media on this

particular topic, many respondents in the public sample suggested that environmental and chemical waste topics are difficult to understand. However, classifying all such cases as elite-driven would likely be premature. It is possible that in cases where the public felt directly endangered by the problem, or where the issue was seen as more systemic or universal and requiring an immediate policy solution, this issue may well have displayed a sharper shift in public opinion.

Protess et al. also provide evidence from previous studies to further elaborate on the model by noting cases where media reports led to the public becoming highly engaged, which then became the key catalyst for policy change. By considering the differences between these issues and the toxic waste topic, it is possible to identify better the conditions under which the media is able to relay a clear message that engaged the public on core values. This lack of engagement can be attributed to issue complexity – as in the case of the toxic waste story, an issue that was found to be confusing and remained somewhat abstract in terms of clear impact on individuals.

In studies reviewed by Protess et al. in their article, researchers found that in two media series dealing with police brutality and home health care, audiences viewed "brutalized victims and action shots of identified 'villains'", which helped the public to recognize clear impacts on core values (Ibid: 180). Policy changes also occurred in these cases, but Protess et al. suggest that shifts in public opinion regarding policies in those areas were more likely to have caused the changes. Thus, although this second set of cases deals with issues that were primed through investigative journalism, they appear to be more appropriately characterized as involving Framed Public Issues. Here, the media

was able to present a clear frame for the problem and one that allowed the public to make a connection between the issues and public and core values. For example, with regard to the police brutality issue, Leff et al. (1986) explain that media coverage showed that the police department systematically whitewashed brutality changes, and that millions of taxpayer dollars were being spent paying those who successfully sued the department in brutality cases. Respondents who were aware of the coverage of this issue showed significant changes in attitudes toward police brutality. Even though elite positions on this issue did not change in any substantial way, policy changes did occur and the changes were much more significant than those noted with the toxic waste issue.

What is of key importance in these studies is the indication that where an impact on economic or moral values was clearly implicated, the public reacted to the information. On the toxic waste issue, where information did not help the public to make a connection to these values, no public engagement occurred, though policymakers (in this case members of the bureaucracy) responded to the media coverage itself, and to what members of the media proposed as a solution to the problem. Ideally, it would be helpful to be able to observe media coverage and public opinion changes over a longer period of time, but in these particular studies we can observe at least some policy changes that can be attributed either directly or indirectly to media coverage of the issue.

The following two sections deal further with framed public and elite-driven issues by looking at two different, yet related, areas of U.S. foreign policy – one dealing with war, the other dealing with nuclear weapon production during the Cold War.

Framed public issue dynamics: Vietnam and the 1991 Gulf War in the U.S.

While there is some evidence that foreign policy is a relatively hard issue that often precludes public engagement, some components of foreign policy and foreign relations seem to strongly engage the public and on these occasions policymakers are concerned about public opinion. The best example, though perhaps not in every instance, is military action against other states. Possibly the most notable case in recent history involving the role of the media in foreign policy is where the media showed a particular view of the Vietnam War and subsequent shifts in public opinion against the war appeared to be significant in the U.S. government's decision to pull out of it (Summers 1994; Hammond 1989). Given this example it seems likely that military action would be a framed public issue. It should engage the general public insofar as popular values are concerned, given that wars tend to be fought over differences in moral or economic values in the first place, and they involve the endangerment of a large number of humans. However, citizens are not generally well informed regarding external affairs, and often require compelling arguments about why particular wars are necessary as opposed to other potential solutions. As well, the risks, with regard to both human life and economic aspects, mean that people should not be expected to simply give blind support for just any military action.

Hammond (1989) surveys opposing positions in the literature regarding media impact on public opinion of the Vietnam War, with some sources suggesting that the role the press played in changing public opinion about the war was very significant, while others suggest it to be highly questionable. However, he does not question that the

public's ultimate lack of support for continuing the war had a strong influence on policymakers.

Zaller (1991) examines what effects the media may have had on opinion during the Vietnam War by looking at both media exposure and reception/acceptance of the messages in the media by the public. Using data from the Center for Political Studies surveys conducted during the Vietnam War, he notes notable shifts in favour of the war during the 1964-66 period, and shifts against continued participation following 1966. Various measures of the overall media agenda were taken using content analysis, showing that news coverage was very strongly pro-war in the early years, with anti-war coverage gaining through the period to reach general parity with pro-war coverage in the later period of the war. In 1966, both pro-war media coverage and pro-war sentiments among more liberal policy elites declined. During this period media coverage of anti-war views increased, while total coverage of the war also increased as both pro-war and anti-war camps attempted to increase media exposure of their viewpoints.

Individual predispositions among the public play a significant role in Zaller's research, showing that as overall media coverage increased, those more likely to hold "liberal" views were more likely to accept anti-war viewpoints, while those with "conservative" views were more likely to accept pro-war viewpoints. Over this period, the number of "no opinion" respondents declined significantly as information increased. Mainstream support for the war appeared to drop as media coverage of the war increased both coverage of negative views of the war and total coverage of the war. These messages, which became polarized toward pro-war and anti-war camps, appear to have

been significant in leading the changes in public opinion. Thus, Zaller's study does not show a one-message model where one-sided media coverage polarizes the public, but rather a two-message model that divides the previously pro-war public, and causes those who previously held no opinion on the matter to become opinionated. This change, in conjunction with the position put forth earlier by Hammond and Summers that public opinion was clearly significant in the U.S. war policy, indicates that media had a significant, but indirect, role in the ultimate decision of the U.S. to pull out of the Vietnam War.

The case of Vietnam clearly affected the government's approach to the public with regard to military actions in future conflicts. In fact, the Vietnam experience may have crystallized policy elite opinion around the position that war requires public support, a view clearly adopted by the U.S. government since the 1970s. In 1984, Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger stated that "before the U.S. commits combat forces abroad, there must be some reasonable assurance we will have the support of the American people and their elected representatives in the Congress" (Summers 1994: 54). Still, the view existed among others in Washington that the decisions of the public are not rational, and that experts should decide, in the case of war, what course to take, rather than allowing the public to dictate which actions to take. This view, which had some influence in the time of Vietnam, was discarded following that period. This, according to Summers "set the stage for the successful prosecution of the Persian Gulf War," in which President George Bush clearly set out to garner public support (Ibid: 55-56). By the time the war began, 83% of the U.S. public supported going to war, while 71% disapproved of domestic protests toward the war (Ibid: 57).

Iyengar and Simon (1993), document the role of television media in influencing the U.S. with regard to preference for military action in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Iyengar and Simon employ a mix of both self-reported media use and general political knowledge to measure actual media use by those surveyed. Besides posing questions to tap the salience of the war issue (i.e. "most important problem"), the survey asked specific questions regarding policy preferences for the U.S. forces in the Gulf. However, Iyengar and Simon did not analyze media coverage of the Gulf issue specifically for positive or negative stories toward a particular policy. Rather, they argue that because the surveyed media coverage was episodic, which tends to focus on particular events and groups, rather than thematic, which tends to focus on social and cultural factors and causes and tends to be more abstract from particular problems, that it would tend to persuade viewers toward a military action. They state that:

> Under episodic framing ... viewers attributed responsibility for national problems not to societal or structural forces, but to the actions of particular individuals or groups. ...In this respect, episodic framing encourages reasoning by resemblance—people settle upon causes and treatments that "fit" the observed problem. ... Given the pervasive use of episodic framing, it was anticipated that exposure to television news coverage of the Gulf crisis would strengthen a preference for punitive (i.e. military) as opposed to diplomatic or economic remedies (Ibid: 379).

As should be expected of a framed public issue, partisan and ideological preferences, as well as other factors including race and gender, affected the influence the media had. Still, however, exposure to television coverage did have a significant influence, showing that increased exposure led to an increased tendency to favour a

military solution in the Gulf. This study included both surveys in advance of the military as well as following the Gulf War.

It should be noted that the media role in military action is not lost on policymakers, and that following Vietnam, U.S. policymakers have made a significant effort to present a positive front when preparing for military action. While Iyengar and Simon base their findings on the public's response to episodic coverage rather than to coverage being in favour or against military action, it is also very possible that the actual content, not just the fact that the coverage was episodic, may have played a significant role. In the case of military and war coverage, journalists often do not have access to many useful sources apart from government officials. Thus, the content of coverage is expected to often "repeat the 'party line'" with regard to the information journalists can pass on to the public (Ibid: 382). In more than 50% of the reports surveyed, information for the story was taken directly from official U.S. government spokespersons. In such cases:

> The successes of American technology ...and the "malevolence" of the Iraqis ... were staples of news coverage. Contrary themes, such as the devastation of a Third World nation, the scale of civilian casualties, or the deliberate burial alive of Iraqi conscripts in their trenches, were ignored. The practice of "official" journalism thus ensured that the public's and the president's understanding of this international crisis would be congruent (Ibid: 382).

It is also expected that the citizens of any particular state will be more likely to support military action once their own troops are involved or believed to be committed to involvement in the near future. The "support our troops" mentality may have had some

effect on these outcomes, but even if this was a key influence on public preferences, it is still the case that those with large media exposure were more likely to take this position than those with little exposure.

Based on this finding, and on the suggestion that democratic nations generally require a significant degree of support for military action before policymakers will also support action for going to war, the evidence provided here clearly suggests that war will usually be a framed public issue. However, a caveat should be added that such cases could be led by policymakers. Policymakers can skew media coverage, which is dependent to some degree on sources and events. Unbalanced coverage can, in turn, bring the public onside.

An analysis of media coverage surrounding the 2003 U.S.-led war in Iraq was not available at the time of this writing, but similar dynamics appear to have occurred, at least within the U.S. It can be assumed that media coverage was again led primarily by the U.S. government sources as the principle actor. Further, so-called "embedded journalists" reported pre-war and war coverage while being hosted by military personnel, leading to the assumption that most or all such coverage would have been supportive of the military's role. Opinion polls conducted by CBS news[17] show a notable shift in public opinion toward support for a U.S.-led war over the months and weeks leading up to, and including, military action in Iraq.[18] Increases in support for the war, as well as in

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[17] Various polls relating to U.S. public opinion regarding the Iraq War and dating back several months can be accessed at: http://www.cbsnews.com/sections/opinion/polls/main500160.shtml

[18] However, coalition partner Britain chose to join the war without clear public support, though this decision may need to be viewed in light of other foreign policy considerations facing the country with regard to its relationship with U.S. It is notable that this decision was certainly more controversial on a

presidential approval and the number of people changing sleeping habits to follow news coverage of the war, were all over 10 percent in the weeks leading up to the war. It is highly likely that further analysis of this event will indicate, at least within the U.S. where a clear shift in public opinion occurred, that this was again an occurrence of a framed public issue.

A distinction should be noted at this point, as clearly there was some change in terms of policymakers' recognition of the importance of public opinion on issues of war, and this recognition led to policymakers attempting to use the media for their own ends to a greater degree. The issue of war remains a framed public one, though the dynamics appear to have changed with the media serving, to some degree, as a communications tool for policy elites. This may be a clear indication that policy-elite influence in some framed public issues should be taken into account in determining the media's role in these issues. It might be possible to classify some types of these issues as elite-dominant, while others will have a larger number of interests and positions presented through the media. Alternatively, there may simply be varying degrees of policy-elite influence depending on the number of other dominant groups or interests that play roles in the framing of policy issues. Certainly media coverage of military action should have a high degree of policy-elite influence because of the role of the military as an arm of the government bureaucracy, and the government's access to information that is not accessible to other groups or the public.

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domestic level than that of the U.S., with many members of Britain's governing party voting against the government's proposal for military action in Iraq. (National Post, Feb. 27/'03, p.A13)

Elite-driven issue dynamics: ERW production in the U.S.

When episodic framing and actual military action are not at issue, the case of national defense and foreign policy becomes less engaging for the public. A study that exemplifies an elite-driven issue with a large degree of press coverage and national level instrument policy change is David Whitman's (1986) analysis of the impetus for production of Enhanced Radiation Warheads (ERW) – the neutron bomb – in the U.S. in 1977-78. The study documents the actions of several key policymakers, press coverage, with specific attention to a particular journalist, Walter Pincus, of the *Washington Post*, and public opinion before and after the peak media coverage of the issue.

There are several reasons as to why this case should be considered an elite-driven issue. First, though the neutron bomb had received press coverage during a public controversy over the technology in the late 1950s, it was not an issue on which much of the public in the U.S. were well informed. A poll in July 1977, approximately one month after stories about the bomb began to appear in the news, and at the peak of media coverage of the issue, showed that only "one third of the U.S. public knew enough about the neutron bomb to form an opinion, and that third was split evenly for and against production" (Whitman 1986: 205). ERW was an issue on which there was public ignorance "about the impending production ...[and] also a general lack of awareness about what ER technology was and what its military implications were" (Ibid: 150).[19]

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[19] According to Walter Pincus, even the U.S. army public affairs official that he spoke to when working on his first stories on the subject "didn't know anything about the subject."(quoted in Whitman 1986: 151) As the issue became publicized, Whitman notes that, even in the Pentagon, there was general ignorance on the

A second reason why this issue might be considered an elite-driven issue is that, unlike the previous issues of the Vietnam and first Gulf war, this issue does not involve any actual war, and for that reason was less likely to engage the public. Rather it deals with national security mainly in terms of deployment of weapons for strategic purposes with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Europe during the Cold War. The weapons did not signal a change in the overall U.S. foreign policy of nuclear weapons as a deterrent during the Cold War, although U.S. President Carter did pledge earlier that year to "move this year toward our ultimate goal—the elimination of all nuclear weapons from this Earth" (quoted in Whitman 1986: 154).

The first story on the issue of ERW production appeared in the Washington Post on June 6, 1977. Walter Pincus's story titled "Neutron Killer Warhead buried in ERDA Budget" appeared on the front page and was written in a manner in which to alarm the public. According to Whitman, Pincus's story on, and approach toward, ERW production led most media coverage that followed. The neutron bomb was described in Pincus's story as "the bomb that killed people but left buildings (or property) standing," a description employed in virtually every story by Associated Press, United Press International, and almost every other major newspaper in the U.S. over the following two month period (Ibid:157). Broadcast coverage was similar, with the "repulsive effects of radiation poisoning" first described in Pincus's story dispersed widely.[20] Of the 60 news articles surveyed for the study, 50 contained some form of Pincus's description and

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subject "among key civilian appointees, including the assistant secretary for public affairs, Tom Ross, who had never heard of neutron weapons."(Ibid: 154-155)

[20] This coverage included an NBC News story showing the taped results of 4,600 rads of neutron radiation on monkeys, obtained from the U.S. Armed Forces.

can be considered to be depicting a negative view toward development of ERW technology (Ibid: 157).

Reaction to the news coverage also spread to Europe, where suspicions of the leaders of other NATO member-states were turned toward the U.S. initiative of ERW production. In September, the Baltimore Sun ran a front page story stating that U.S. President Carter "was delaying ERW production while awaiting public support from the Allies" (Ibid: 171).

Over the following months, the Whitehouse and Pentagon made deliberate efforts to avoid giving additional domestic attention to the issue, while both covert and overt efforts to persuade European leaders and publics of the benefits of ERW were made. As well, continued discussions and negotiations with European leaders ensued, but ultimately, in March 1978, Carter decided to defer production of ERWs.

The polls provided by Whitman do not cover public opinion at the exact time of Carter's decision. However, by August, 1977, when the media coverage of the issue had died down, pluralities of 46% and 49% in 2 separate polls opposed production. A plurality of opinion remained opposed around the time of Carter's decision, though "there was never widespread or bitter opposition to producing the bomb in the U.S" (Ibid: 205). According to then U.S. National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the Washington Post stories probably had some influence on the paper's own readers, "but in the country at large, the neutron bomb was certainly not a major issue" (quoted in Whitman 1986: 172). Whitman goes on to state that: "government officials' *perceptions* of the press/public opinion nexus seem to have played a more decisive role in preventing

deployment than public opinion itself" (Ibid: 205). Interestingly, it should also be noted that media coverage does not appear to have influenced the public to oppose ERWs – in fact, one of the August 1977 polls found that people who had "read or heard a lot" about the issue were more likely to support ERW production, while those who were less informed were more likely to oppose it (Ibid: 204).

While Carter's final decision does seem consistent with the plurality of public opinion on this issue, it is probably accurate to state that the public was, for the most part, not engaged on this particular issue, and that those who were most likely to oppose ERWs appear to be those who were less informed on the issue. While journalists attempted to engage the public on moral grounds with coverage that was generally negative toward ERWs, this approach does not appear to have had its intended impact as increased exposure to media tended to lead to increased support for ERWs among the public. However media coverage did appear to have an impact on the policymakers involved – not because they changed their opinions, but because they many of them felt it would be difficult for them to continue with production in light of the dominant media position. Key policymakers "found the image of the bomb projected in the media to be a critical stumbling block" (Ibid, 205). Thus, as laid out in the previous chapter, the dynamics of this case show the media playing a significant and direct role on an issue which the public was not easily engaged on. Because the study includes information showing how much of the public actually understood the issue, it makes it clear to see that complexity was clearly a factor.

Pure-Public issue dynamics: NHL tax-subsidies in Canada

For an additional case to make clearer the distinction between Pure Public Issues and Framed Public Issues, I undertook a study looking at the Canadian government's consideration of tax subsidies for Canadian NHL teams during the years 1998-2000. The issue was chosen because the federal government had indicated early in the process that it would follow public opinion on deciding what policy to follow (National Post, Feb.25, 1999), and because the final decision appears to have been clearly based on public opinion. A very public reversal of declared policy occurred only three days after it was announced in January 2000 and was attributed to public outcry (National Post, Jan. 22, 2000). Public opinion was apparently very important to those in key policymaking positions.

This case is used to exemplify the Pure Public Issue classification because the issue of a subsidy for business probably fits most core economic values already held by members of the public, and hockey itself is a national icon in Canadian culture. It was expected that media framing would not have a significant impact on initial public opinion concerning the matter of a tax subsidy for NHL teams.

The data for the study were accumulated using Canadian NewsDisc to search for newspaper articles in five Canadian daily newspapers[21] with subject terms "taxation" and

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[21] National Post, The Vancouver Sun, The Calgary Herald, The Ottawa Citizen, The Montreal Gazette. The original list was to include other papers not controlled during the coverage period by Hollinger International Inc., (i.e. The Toronto Star) but these other papers appeared afterward to have been excluded, perhaps because of different methods of subject coding. However, inter-newspaper consistency, is still relatively strong in Canada (Soroka 2002). Therefore this error should not significantly affect results.

"hockey" between 1998 and 2000.[22] The search provided 123 cases, but the results clearly did not include every article that appeared in these newspapers over that timeframe on the issue.[23] However, the exclusion of articles is assumed to have been random and not to have affected the resulting measure of the distribution of media opinion.

Articles were coded by date, and whether the article appeared to take a position that was positive, negative, or neutral toward implementing a tax subsidy policy. Classification of a news article's position was based on the title and lead paragraph only. Where the lead source or opinion stated a position on the matter, the article was coded according to that position. In every case where the federal government was the lead source, the article was coded as neutral regardless of position so that the announcement of the initial policy and the reversal would not change the results, and on the assumption that the federal government's position, which was unclear during most of the period, would have little impact on public opinion.

As can be seen in Figure 2 (refer to Appendix), neutral coverage far exceeded that of both positive and negative coverage over most of the period. Negative coverage began to significantly outweigh positive coverage beginning in July 1999.

Figure 3 (refer to Appendix) is modified to take into account only articles contained in the news pages and no letters to the editor. It is assumed that articles in the

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[22] Newspaper coverage has been used as a measure of the media agenda in various public opinion and policy studies (Soroka 2002).

[23] Having personally read coverage of this issue during the timeframe, I have concluded that the total number of articles given for the months of December, 1999 and January 2000 does not appear to be accurate, thus the total number of articles over the entire period is only a sample.

business or sports sections of newspapers will have significantly less effect on public opinion than articles contained in regular news and opinion sections. This assumption is based on differences in both readership levels and interests. Here the negative coverage outweighs both positive and neutral coverage after July 1999, though the numbers are too small to render significant results. Still, it can be assumed that negative coverage tended to increase notably in the latter half of 1999, while coverage up to that point appears to be more balanced – which is similar to Figure 2 on the positive versus negative scale only.

These data were then compared to opinion polls conducted over the same time period. Only polls conducted on a national basis that asked specifically for either support or opposition to the policy, and which were published in the same newspapers surveyed, were included. Three such polls were found over a one-year period leading up to the policy decision.[24]

In Figure 4 (refer to Appendix), opinion polling shows an initial opposition to the subsidy that appears to increase during the first six-month period of 1999 when media coverage of the issue was reasonably balanced. However, this increase of five percent is marginal, barely exceeding the expected margin of error for the poll. Over the remaining six-month period, when negative coverage began to outweigh positive and neutral coverage, public opinion remained unchanged at 71%. It appears, then, that this case does not show us a change in public opinion that can clearly be attributed to media

[24] See Bray 1999; Duffy 1999; Jimenez 2000.

coverage, yet public opinion appears to have been a key factor in the policy decision.[25] It is still possible that the original public opinion shift that occurred prior to July 1999 can be attributed to the fact that the issue was brought onto the public's agenda, but it is unlikely that such neutral coverage of the issues would cause such a change. Further, it is highly unlikely that we can attribute the policy change to this small shift in public opinion. It is more likely that if 66% of the population was opposed to the policy in the first place, an early shift to 71% is unlikely to have made the difference in the policy outcome in this case. The case then exemplifies the expected criteria of a Pure Public Issue.[26]

Some obvious criticisms can be levelled at this particular case study, relating to sample size, coding methods, and omitted samples, to name only a few, but it does give a preliminary picture of how future research might be conducted using a larger and more representative sample of media coverage. The case may, however, be unusual, though not necessarily flawed, in that determining the impact of public opinion was not difficult as the key decision-maker made clear that public opinion would determine which way the decision went and that condition may be difficult to replicate. The problem is finding the means of expanding use of the conceptual model within the Canadian context, where governments are not generally so open regarding the impact public opinion has on processes and decisions.

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[25] It is even possible that public opinion affected news coverage based on the shift in news and not in opinion, which was already highly negative.

[26] It is interesting to note that on both the economic and moral grounds, both the Canadian "economic conscience" – both the Fraser Institute and the Reform Party (now Canadian Alliance) – and the Canadian "moral conscience" – the federal New Democratic Party – all openly opposed the Mills Commission report, which called for federal help for NHL teams. (National Post, May 25, 1999)

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this project has been to layout issue categories under which the media might be expected to have a direct or indirect influence in policy decision-making, and the circumstances under which it might be expected to have minimal effects. This has been accomplished by first looking at the literature dealing with media impacts, public opinion formation and persuasion, and policy processes and influences. Using this literature, a continuum was developed for aiding in the classification of issue types and the expected policy dynamics at each stage along the continuum. These dynamics were further explored by looking at various studies dealing with policy issues ranging from relatively easy to hard, according to the classifications set out in the model. These studies have aided both in exemplifying the expected dynamics according to the classifications, and in drawing conclusions about issue types that are useful for further developing the prescriptive value of the classifications.

By considering these key theoretical and empirical studies, this project suggests that issue complexity and core values are central to determining what role the media and the public will play in policymaking. This project, then, builds on the current agenda-

setting literature by considering the impact that the media has in another area of the policy cycle – that of decision-making. The evidence examined has suggested that the media does, on certain types of issues, play a significant indirect role, while in other cases it can play a more direct role. Meanwhile, there are issue domains at both ends of the easy-hard continuum where there is little expected impact. As the studies in the previous chapter have shown, trends related to certain issues suggest when these media impacts will occur and not occur. This finding is significant in that it enhances current understandings of the media's role in the policy-making process, and provides insights that can be applied in future research studying media impacts and issue dynamics in policymaking. Further exploration in this area could lead to empirical testing of specific issue types for expected dynamics and outcomes.

The examples in the previous chapter exemplify outcomes on policy issues that should be expected based on the model presented in the second chapter. What is telling about these examples is that policy changes do not generally reflect paradigmatic or value changes, rather, the policy changes noted are generally at the instrumental or instrument-setting level (Hall 1993; Howlett 2002). This follows the findings of Baumgartner & Jones (1993), Sabatier (1991), and Howlett (2002) that policy changes will usually tend to be incremental and symbolic in the short term, while paradigmatic changes are rare and usually the product of extensive deliberations and policy subsystem changes. Such changes are not likely to be affected by short-term swings in media or public attention.

What the studies in the previous chapter also indicate is that, as these trends in media and public impact on policy become more apparent, politicians (and certainly

others with interests in particular policy outcomes) will likely attempt to capitalize on the influences the media offers. Therefore, it is to be expected that policymakers will place a high priority on promoting their views in the media on those sorts of issues that would fit into the framed public issues category, while placing a lower priority on issues where political gains through media coverage are less likely. Indeed, in cases where media coverage might simply confuse the public, or simply frustrate policymakers by forcing them to deal with socially rational responses from small but vocal segments of the public on highly complex matters, there may be a concerted effort to limit media coverage (see Perrow, 1984). This topic might be explored further by looking into the roles of politicians and their communications personnel to see how much attention they pay to particular types of issues, and if their behaviours tend to vary depending on the types of issues at hand.

Following this notion of policymakers using the media for their own ends, it might be argued by some that the media acts merely as a communication tool for elites. This suggestion, however, seems overly skeptical in light of the role that the media played in some of the issue areas already noted in the previous chapter such as ERW production and the Vietnam War. The fact that media coverage tends to favour different positions on various issues should indicate that the media is not merely a tool of any single interest.[27] However, as was noted in the previous chapter, there may be degrees to which certain interests can have significant or dominant influences on certain issues. This will be dependent upon the number of influential interest groups focusing on a

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[27] There are various scholars who are concerned about media ownership concentration leading to a lack of diversity in media coverage. This in turn, leads to the concern of particular interests becoming more dominant and having greater influence (See Taras 2001; Alger 1998; Winter 1997).

particular issue and the coverage that these groups, or varying viewpoints, are covered in the media.

Institutional factors can never be excluded from studies of policymaking. It is evident from some of the differences highlighted by Soroka and Wlezien (2002) that policy responses to public preferences tend to vary between the U.S. and U.K., a finding which might well be based on institutional factors, including the differences between presidential and parliamentary systems. Clearly more comparative work looking at the factors in policy processes in these two systems, as well as the Canadian system, would help in further determining how significant public or other external influences can be to each system. However, on a more general level, both systems do show clear evidence of dynamic representation.

It is also of importance to note the nature of policymaking and the policy process, which Kingdon (1984) refers to as a "primeval soup". It is often difficult to determine trends in decision-making in policy sectors as outcomes can often be attributed to various factors, which may sometimes be random in occurrence and impact. The studies considered earlier, while helpful for exploring issue dynamics, would be more valuable if designed for examining the particular concepts that this project has focused on with clear indicators of each of the three variables and a more direct analysis of their impacts on policy decisions. However, there does appear to be a relationship between the media, public and policymakers, and the nature of this relationship appears dependent upon issue types. This suggests that further research on this topic is warranted. This research also suggests that focusing on the media's agenda-setting role alone is somewhat short-

sighted, as the findings reviewed in this project provide evidence to suggest that media can affect policy decision-making.

This is not to say that public opinion on easy issues will always translate directly into government policies. Governments do not always make popular decisions on easy issues, nor do they always ignore the public on harder issues. If this were the case, the fishers of Newfoundland and Labrador would likely not have had their cod fisheries closed as they were recently, and recent closures of hospital emergency rooms and schools in British Columbia would not occurred. Both these examples appear to involve pure-public issues and arguably unpopular decisions – at least within the regions affected. The fact is that governments do close hospitals and schools, and the governments that take these actions do so at the risk of public dissatisfaction. What this paper does try to point out is that in certain cases, governments will be more aware of public opinion regarding issues on which the public are more likely to be engaged, and that the public, or some perception of public sentiment, will be a key factor in the decision that is made. On the whole, if we can extend the findings of Stimson et al. (1995), policies should tend to follow the public's expectations – with changes occurring "at the margin", so as to both satisfy the public in the short term and maintain stability in the long term – when it is possible to do so. This should produce a noticeable trend toward policies that follow public preferences, but not every policy will follow this course. Further, according to this study, this will be affected by media coverage of issues, though again, it is likely that this may be more apparent as an overall trend rather than being evident in each case where media coverage could play a role.

Whether or not each of the issues covered here is either inherently "easy" or "hard" is a more difficult question to answer, and certainly more research on the topic would aid in answering this question. While it would seem that the basic concepts in the model presented here could apply to most liberal democracies, the issues themselves may vary widely based on the experiences, economies, and mores of different societies. Further comparisons of issue dynamics in different states might help to identify whether certain kinds of issues tend to be easy or hard in a more universal sense, and whether some issues follow domestic variables in terms of being easy or hard. Because the focus of this study is on the media's role in affecting policymaking, and because the media tends to be a key source of information for the public on most political issues, clearly more attention needs to be given to the content of the media itself to see if the media affects whether or not the public tends to respond to issues as being easy or hard.

APPENDIX: MEDIA COVERAGE AND PUBLIC OPINION REGARDING NHL SUBSIDY

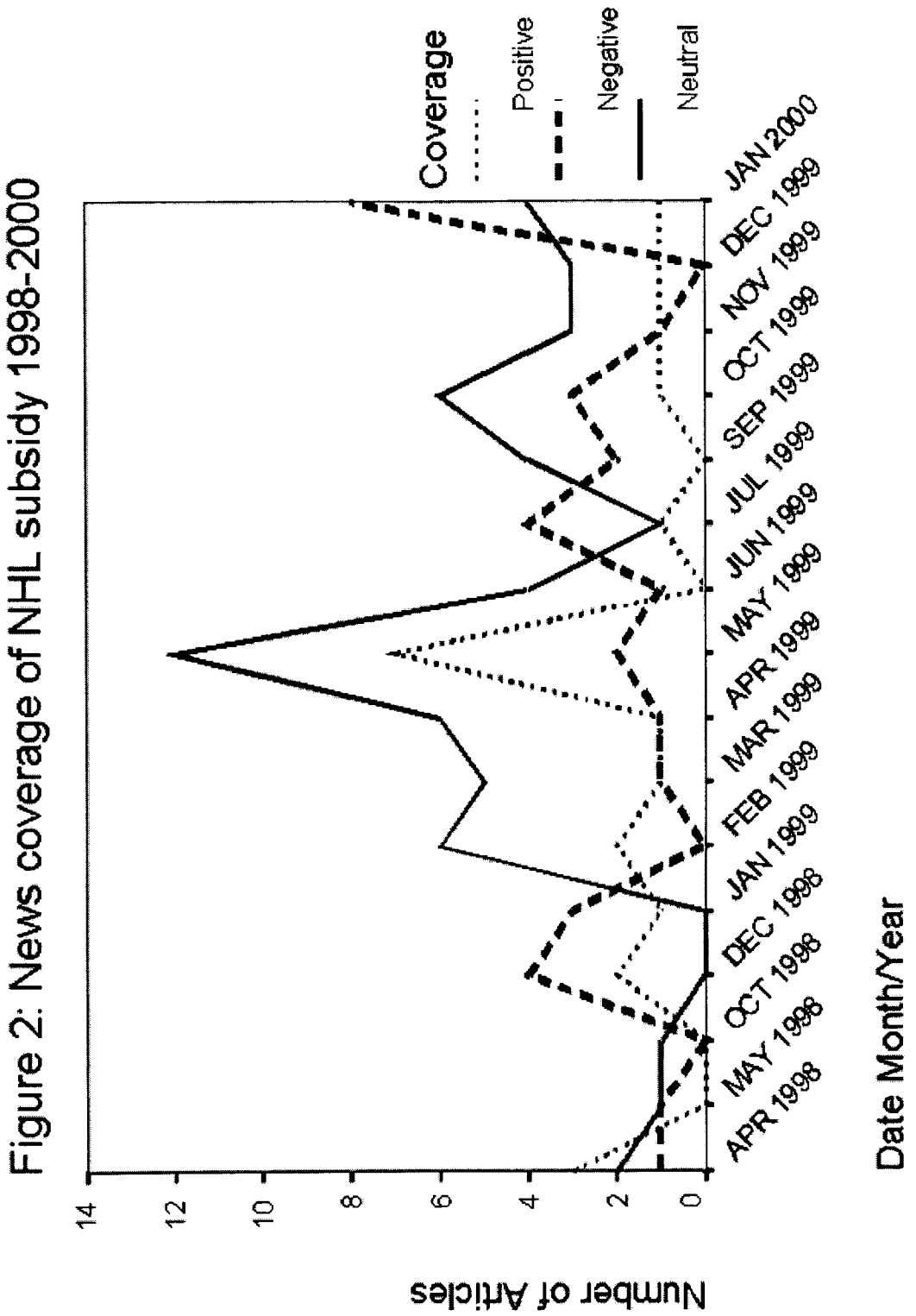


Figure 3: News coverage of NHL subsidy 1998-2000

(News section only)

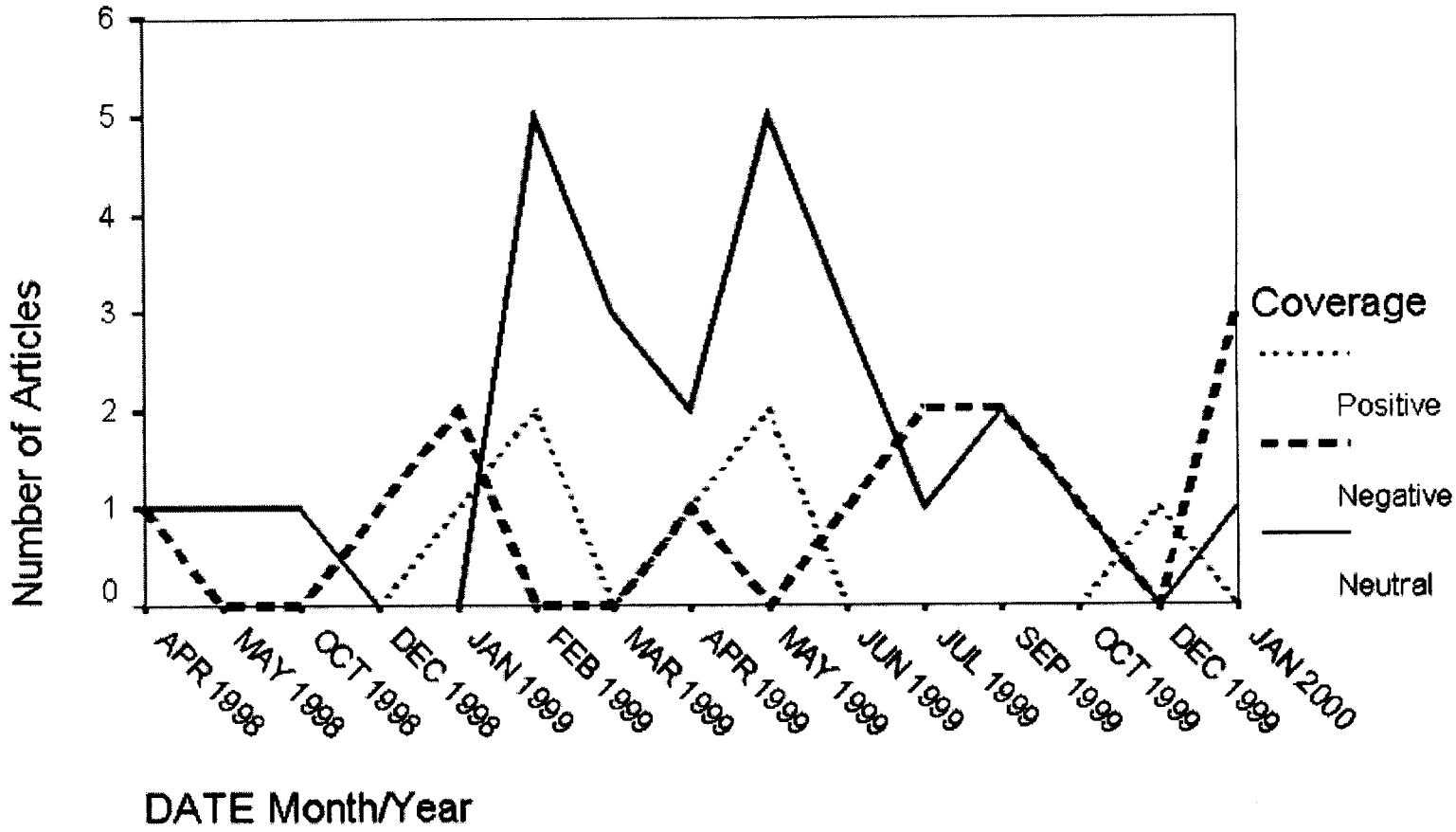
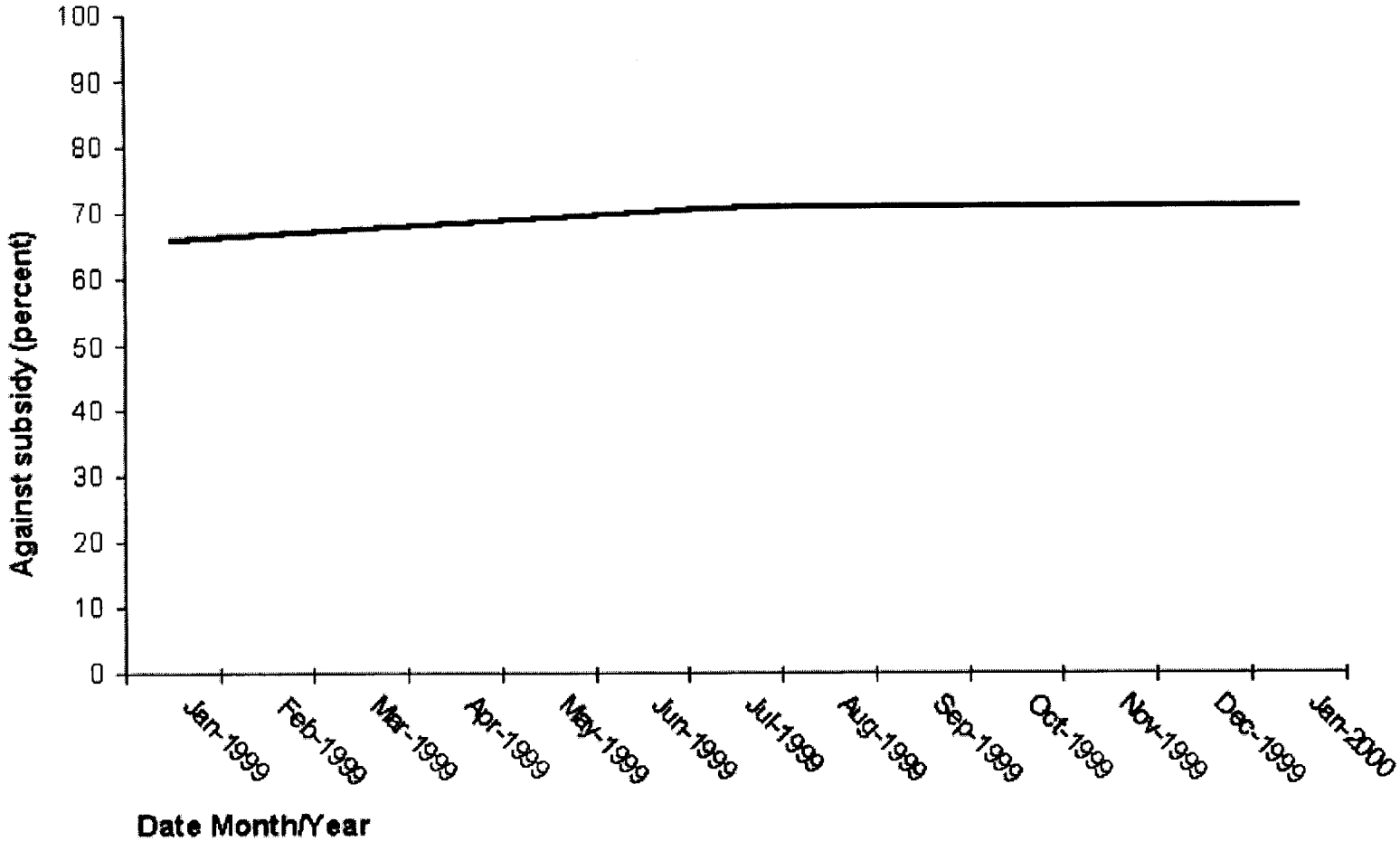


Figure 4: Canadians opposed to NHL subsidy 1999-2000



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