

CANADIAN TV NEWS ON BUSH AND IRAQ: NO MORE HOSTILE THAN TOP US NETWORK

Stephen J. Farnsworth, Stuart Soroka and Lori Young



Content analysis of Canadian and US television news during 2004, 2005 and 2006 found that CBC's *The National* and the *CTV News* treated the US, President George W. Bush and the occupation of Iraq either similarly, or even less negatively, than did NBC's *Nightly News*, the top-ranked US broadcast news program. The 16,220-item cross-border news analysis, which covers the most violent periods of the Iraqi occupation and the contentious US elections in 2004 and 2006, refutes claims that Canadian television news projects an anti-US bias.

Selon une analyse du contenu des informations télévisées canadiennes et américaines de 2004 à 2006, les émissions *The National* de la CBC et *CTV News* ont couvert l'action du président George W. Bush et l'occupation de l'Irak de façon semblable sinon plus positive que *Nightly News*, tout premier bulletin de nouvelles américain diffusé sur le réseau NBC. L'examen de 16 220 reportages outre-frontière, consacrés aux épisodes les plus violents de l'occupation irakenne et aux litigieuses élections américaines de 2004 et 2006, contredit les allégations selon lesquelles la télévision canadienne afficherait un parti pris antiaméricain.

News reports on the US government and its policies on Canada's most prominent evening television news programs closely track news stories on the top-rated US news network, suggesting that Canadian reports about its southern neighbour are not nearly as hostile as some media critics have claimed.

In fact, news stories of President George W. Bush and the US-led occupation of Iraq on CBC's *The National* and the *CTV News* during the past three years have been somewhat less negative than reports on the president and the occupation during that same period by the *NBC Nightly News*, according to a new television news study by the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada's Media Observatory.

The analysis compares all news stories on NBC from January 2004 to December 2006, and every news story that discussed President Bush and/or the US government on the Canadian networks' evening newscasts during the same period. A total of 1,739 CBC and 1,358 CTV news stories are included in the study, along with 13,123 NBC news reports. The study tracks subject matter and tone in all the stories, using a new computer-assisted coding procedure. Topics and nations are captured through keyword searches. Tone is captured using software that counts the number of positive and negative words in a story, relying on an annotated list of these words drawn from well-established content-analytic dictionaries.

The study period covers times of particularly harsh domestic and international criticism of President Bush and the trouble-filled Iraq occupation. The first news reports in the study were aired seven months after President Bush stood atop an aircraft carrier and declared that major combat operations in Iraq had ended (an event remembered for the "Mission Accomplished" banner on top of the aircraft carrier). The data include news about the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo prisoner abuse controversies, concerns over whether Iran and North Korea were developing nuclear weapons, as well as the intense debate over future US policies regarding Iraq during the 2004 and 2006 elections in the US. The study period ends a few weeks after Bush proposed a "surge" of US troops to quell the continuing sectarian violence in Iraq and just days before the Democrats took control of Capitol Hill and started investigating the Bush administration in earnest.

In short, we find that Canadians watching the CBC or CTV saw news reports on the US that nearly mirrored, in topic and tone, NBC's government news coverage. And where cross-border differences in tone existed, the Canadian reports were almost always more positive than the NBC reports. This more positive Canadian news coverage is particularly noteworthy given the fact that NBC has been consistently more supportive in its treatment of Bush than either ABC or CBS, its two leading competitors. (Past work has found, for instance, that

Bush was treated more positively by NBC than by its two main rivals during three key periods: the weeks after the 2001 terrorist attacks, the six-week long combat phase of the Iraq War in late March and April 2003, and the first six months of the occupation of Iraq, starting May 1, 2003.)

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These findings may come as a surprise to news consumers who assume that Canadian networks have a unique, Canadian voice where US foreign affairs are concerned. Our finding that Canadian coverage of the US is more positive than even the most pro-Bush broadcast network in the US also undermines claims that Canadian news coverage is distinctly anti-American.

Iraq dwarfed all other foreign news coverage relating to the US on CBC, CTV and NBC during the three-year study, as shown in Table 1. The Persian Gulf nation was by far the country most covered by those media outlets (not counting the US and Canada), even though Canadians were not part of the coalition that deposed Saddam Hussein more than four years ago.

Fully 21.5 percent of the US-related news reports on CBC and CTV dealing with a foreign country (that is, not Canada and/or the US) during 2004-06 dealt with Iraq, a more than 6 to 1 advantage in coverage when compared with coverage of Afghanistan, the number two national topic in the Canadian news por-

tion of the study. (More than 2,000 Canadian troops are deployed in nearby Afghanistan as part of a NATO deployment there.) Iraq also was a much larger presence on NBC's *Nightly News*, where 43.7 percent of the news stories relating to the US government dealt with the violent occupation, more than double the

frequency of US-related Iraq stories on the leading Canadian news outlets. (We combined the CBC and CTV coverage to allow for more reliable assessments of tone, but for a comparison of the two networks, see figure 3 below.)

Although the US also has thousands of troops in Afghanistan, that country was only the sixth most covered in NBC's reports on the US government policies, amounting to 2.8 percent of the news coverage we could classify by nation. Clearly the Bush administration's intense focus on Iraq has limited the attention reporters in both the US and Canada paid to another volatile occupied state in the region.

On NBC, Israel received 3.8 percent of coverage over the period, making it the second most covered nation. Even so, Iraq news dominated news of Israel by a margin of more than 10-to-1 (2,494 stories versus 219 stories). Israel ranked third in Canadian coverage of US-related news, with 2.5 percent of the coverage, roughly one-eighth the volume of US-Iraq news coverage on CBC and CTV. The news organizations largely agreed as well on

the importance of Mexico, which joined the US and Canada in an international free trade agreement more than dozen years ago. The US's southern neighbour was the fourth-ranked national topic among US government stories on NBC and the Canadian newscasts.

US and Canadian media disagreed strongly on the importance of some nations. Jordan, a key US ally in the region, was the key topic in 3.8 percent of stories on NBC, giving the country third place on that network. But that nation did not make the top 15 nations on the Canadian news coverage of US-international relations. (In fact, US relations with Jordan were examined in less than 1 percent of stories on the two Canadian networks during the three-year period.) Italy, likewise, was a subject of differing interest: 2.3 percent of stories on NBC

concerned Italy, as compared with less than 1 percent on CBC and CTV. That difference likely stems from the heavy coverage in the US over whether Italy would leave the US-led military coalition in Iraq (Italy did pull its troops out after a new government took power in 2006).

In terms of tone, NBC was more negative than positive in its coverage of all 10 highly covered nations. The Canadian media were negative for 9 out of their top 10 — saving positive treatment only for coverage of the US pertaining to Mexico.

In all, 8 of the 10 countries on the NBC list of leading areas of international attention for the US government were also on the Canadian news list for US foreign affairs. Of those countries, the US news media were more negative than the Canadian media in 7, including the hot-button nations of Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Iran and Pakistan. Only in the relatively low-profile file of US-Vietnam matters, which ranked 9th on the Canadian coverage list and 10th on NBC's, were CBC and CTV more negative than was the US coverage.

There was also considerable overlap between US and Canadian news coverage when we compared them by news topic, as shown in table 2. Foreign affairs and defence matters were top priorities in the coverage of President Bush and the US government on NBC and Canadian television news, as would be expected given the high priority given to the Middle East in recent years. Health care, politics, crime, and energy/environmental matters took the next four places in the national media of both countries.

Some modest differences emerged here as well. Canadian reporters devoted a greater share of news coverage of the US to immigration matters (3.3 percent) than did NBC (1.2 percent). Trade was also a far bigger story north of the border, where it ranked 7th with 3 percent of the news coverage of Bush and the US government. (Trade matters failed to make the top ten list on NBC, where it was a topic in less than 1 percent of government news stories).

Once again, 8 of the 10 topics made both news lists. And once again, NBC was more negative of Bush and the US government than was the Canadian media in seven of the eight cases where the two lists overlap. Only for news reports on energy/environmental matters (the 5th ranked topic on both lists) were the Canadian reporters more negative, and then only by a tiny margin. Overall, NBC was more negative than positive on 6 of the top 10 topics. Canadians were more negative than positive on only 3 topics (foreign

TABLE 1. COVERAGE BY REGION

	United States (NBC)				Canada (CBC & CTV)		
	Volume		Tone		Volume		Tone
	%	N			%	N	
Iraq	43.7	(2,494)	-2.43	Iraq	21.5	(469)	-1.81
Israel	3.8	(219)	-2.33	Afghanistan	3.3	(72)	-0.61
Jordan	3.8	(217)	-0.74	Israel	2.5	(55)	-1.01
Mexico	3.2	(182)	-0.59	Mexico	2.1	(45)	1.10
Britain	2.9	(164)	-1.06	Iran	1.8	(39)	-0.37
Afghanistan	2.8	(158)	-2.95	Britain	1.7	(37)	-0.23
Iran	2.4	(136)	-0.59	North Korea	1.5	(32)	-0.79
Italy	2.3	(134)	-0.52	Pakistan	1.1	(24)	-1.57
Pakistan	1.9	(111)	-2.02	Vietnam	1.1	(23)	-1.65
Vietnam	1.8	(102)	-0.66	Lebanon	0.8	(18)	-0.26
Total ¹		(5,712)		Total		(2,186)	

Source: Media Observatory, McGill Institute for the Study of Canada (MISC).

¹ Total sample size is based on the number of articles for which a region (other than US or Canada) is identified.

TABLE 2. COVERAGE BY TOPIC

	United States (NBC)				Canada (CBC & CTV)		
	Volume		Tone		Volume		Tone
	%	N			%	N	
Foreign affairs & defence	31.4	(4,126)	-1.96	Foreign affairs & defence	34.2	(1,059)	-1.12
Health	10.1	(1,327)	0.10	Politics	12.7	(393)	0.52
Politics	8.2	(1,082)	-0.32	Health	7.9	(244)	0.21
Crime	5.8	(756)	-2.50	Crime	7.4	(230)	-1.74
Energy, environment resources	4.2	(547)	-1.00	Energy, environment resources	4.6	(144)	-1.06
Education	3.5	(454)	0.24	Immigration	3.3	(102)	0.10
Economy & employment	1.5	(197)	-0.85	International trade	3.0	(92)	1.04
Law & legislation	1.4	(189)	0.99	Agriculture	2.4	(73)	0.39
Immigration	1.2	(153)	-1.12	Education	2.3	(70)	0.92
Civil rights	1.1	(139)	3.19	Law & legislation	1.5	(45)	1.82
Total		(13,123)		Total		(3,097)	

Source: Media Observatory, MISC.

affairs/defence, energy/environment and crime) of their high US government coverage themes.

This three-year compilation of all news content relating to President Bush and the US government during the flagship broadcasts of NBC, CBC and CTV — more than 16,000 news stories in all — allows us to examine differences in how these news outlets treated the US government on a month-by-month

For all 36 months in the study period, NBC was more negative than positive in its coverage of the US government. This is consistent with most past content analyses of news coverage of government, which find that reporters tend to focus on critical matters as they monitor the government for the public. Other research has shown that reporters have been particularly critical of the US government during the Iraqi occupation of Iraq, when many media outlets concluded they had not been aggressive enough in challenging the Bush administration's prewar claims about Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction programs.

basis. The results show, once again, that Canadian media treatment of the US government was very similar to that of NBC. Nearly all of the shifts in the tone of NBC's government coverage shown in figure 1 are also evident in the tone of Canadian news coverage of the US.

There is one important difference here, however. For all but a few brief periods — most notably when the Abu Ghraib scandal emerged in early 2004 and the weeks after the November 2006 elections that put the Democrats in charge of Congress — Canadian coverage of the US was less negative than NBC coverage. Often the cross-border tonal differences were substantial, with the Canadian media markedly more positive than its US counterpart.

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larly critical of the US government during the Iraqi occupation of Iraq, when many media outlets concluded they had not been aggressive enough in challenging the Bush administration's prewar claims about Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction programs.

Canadian news coverage of the US, in contrast, included several positive periods of coverage of the US (overall there were 11 positive months and 25 negative

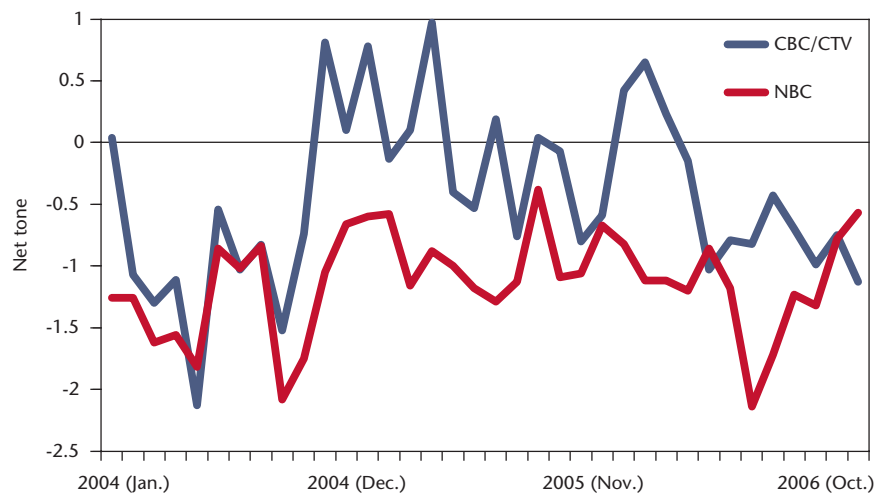
ones) during the study period. The most positive treatment of the US occurred in late 2004 and early 2005, around the time Bush won a second term. (Note that this does not mean that Canadian journalists were positive about the Bush win, only that the information being conveyed was more positive — he won — than negative.) Another period of relatively positive

Canadian coverage of the US took place at the end of 2005 and in early 2006, during Stephen Harper's bid to be prime minister, which led to good tidings from Bush and a flurry of speculation about the end of frosty Canada-US relations under a Conservative government.

A particularly large tonal gap between the US and Canadian media occurred in the summer months of 2006, when the more negative NBC reported about the continuing chaos in Iraq and the deep problems that Republican incumbents faced going into the 2006 congressional elections. Although the Canadian news coverage also was more negative than was positive during that period, CBC and CTV were less negative than was the US network, likely because individual Senate and House campaigns would be less interesting to Canadian viewers than to NBC's viewers.

More positive Canadian coverage may be in part a function of our two different samples. The NBC sample includes all news stories, whereas the Canadian sample consists only of those articles relating to Bush and/or the US. We might expect issues of domestic cov-

FIGURE 1. TONE OF COVERAGE, ALL STORIES



Source: Media Observatory, MISC.
¹ The net tone is the proportion of positive words minus the proportion of negative words in a story. A score of zero is perfectly neutral; positive scores indicate increasingly positive coverage; negative scores indicate increasingly negative coverage.

erage (including crime, along with all the minor domestic difficulties and scandals) to be more negative than that of foreign issues, regardless of the countries involved. It is important, then, that the modest tonal differences we see between US and Canadian news cover-

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age of the US disappear almost entirely when we examine only those stories that discuss President Bush. Once again the US and Canadian media moved largely in tandem into periods of more positive and less positive treatment of Bush, as shown in figure 2. The Canadian media's notably more positive coverage of the US overall largely evaporates when Bush is the subject (through Canadian news reports on the President still remain slightly more positive than those on NBC).

The Canadian media was most negative about Bush when the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal first came to light in early 2004. This period also marked one of the few times when Canadian media treated Bush more harshly than did NBC. During the controversy, Bush insisted that the problems were caused by low-level military personnel and resisted demands by Democrats to fire Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. The Canadian media was more positive than its US counterpart in its their treatment of Bush in early 2005, as he began his second term, and in mid-2006, when NBC frequently reported that Bush's unpopularity was dragging down Republican candidates around the country.

There appears to be modest evidence here of a "two-step flow" in television news reports on Bush — that is,

Canadian reports following US reports, in both subject matter and tone. In a number of instances during this three-year period, news coverage of Bush on NBC shifted slightly before news coverage of the president on CBC and CTV. (This is even more evident when the

data are analyzed weekly.) This dynamic may be truer for coverage of Bush than of that of other subjects — there may be greater media attention paid to US media content relating to the president than to other parts of the US government, where Canadian and US reporters would be more likely to concentrate on different things. Where Bush is concerned, however, the US media appear to lead. Media markets may have much to do with this: because of the deep penetration of US television into Canada, Canadian television news reporters compete with US journalists far more than do European reporters. The relationship between

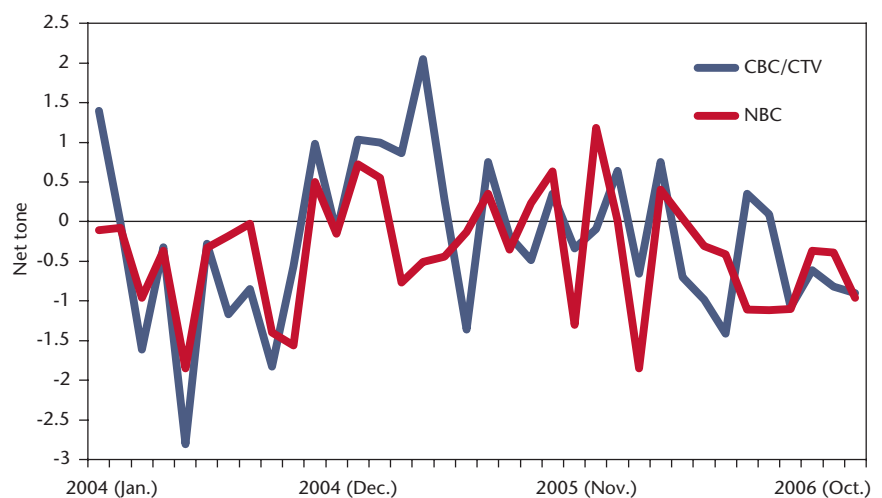
Canadian and US content may accordingly be relatively high.

While international news media — particularly the CBC — have been criticized for their alleged anti-American tendencies, three years of evidence demonstrates that, far from being anti-American, the CBC and CTV evening newscasts are more positive in their coverage of the US than is NBC, consistently the most pro-Bush of the three major networks in the United States. It is notable, too, that the CBC is not obviously more negative about the US than is CTV. Figure 3 provides

one comparison between the networks: there is no clear difference in their coverage of the Bush government.

This pattern of generally more positive coverage of the US by the Canadian media holds whether the topic is US actions involving Iraq, Afghanistan, Mexico, Britain or Pakistan; or foreign affairs, health, crime or politics. In addition, the pattern of more congenial treatment of the US holds throughout the three years of the study. Even in its treatment of Bush — one of the most polarizing figures now on the international scene — Canadian media appears to be marginally kinder than is

FIGURE 2. TONE OF COVERAGE OF PRESIDENT BUSH, CBC/CTV AND NBC, 2004-06



Source: Media Observatory, MISC.

the NBC. Although the tonal differences are smaller with Bush than for the government generally, once again the data refute the claims made on both sides of the border that Canadian news reports about the US are distinctly anti-American.

The tone of reports on Bush in Canadian media may be more similar to that of media across the border than the treatment of other news topics because Canadian reporters are as susceptible to White House media manipulation as are American reporters. Executive branch media management strategies are designed to limit the range of action of television journalists, who face great pressure to use the “picture of the day” provided by the administration to shape ongoing news coverage. Indeed, Canadian reporters seem less able to resist the White House pressure applied to all television reporters. This is not because Canadian reporters are less sophisticated in the ways of Washington, but rather because they face greater difficulties in getting information from sources. Opposing party senators and congressmen, the most important voices for anti-President Bush sound bites, are much more likely to grant television interviews to US-based media. (That makes sense for the law-

makers, who are trying to both influence US policy and be seen by their constituents back home, but it can leave Canadian reporters out in the cold.)

Where Canadian reporters have more room to manoeuvre, say in feature stories about US government policies as they affect the US and the

environmentally friendly legislation than has Washington. South of the border, many Republicans have dismissed climate change as nothing more than liberal hype, a far cry from the close attention environmental matters receive in Canada.

But the Canadian media is not more negative in other places where one

Where Canadian reporters have more room to manoeuvre, say in feature stories about US government policies as they affect the US and the world, they more likely to offer news reports that differ emphasis and tone from the stories that air on NBC. The television networks in the two countries are aimed at different audiences, after all. Canada is more dependent on US trade than vice-versa, and so it is not surprising that Canadian reporters would say a good deal more about US trade policies than do US media.

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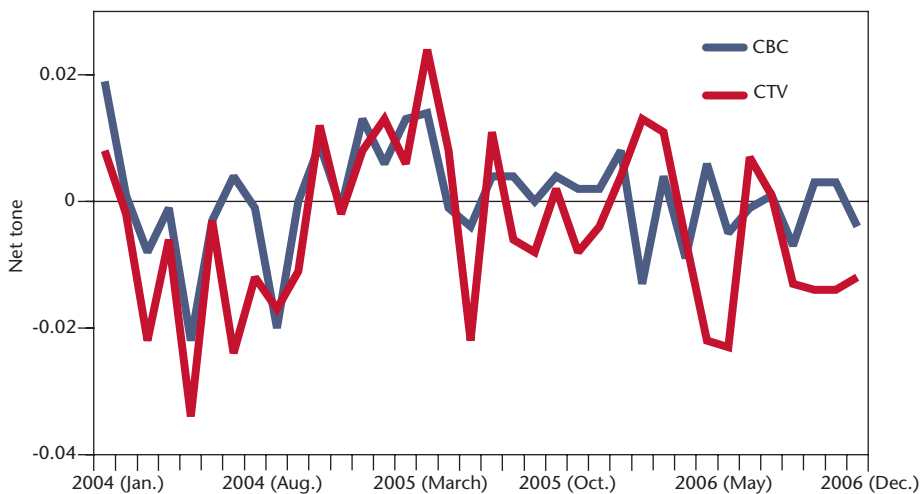
Canada is more dependent on US trade than vice versa, so it is not surprising that Canadian reporters would say a good deal more about US trade policies than do US reporters. Nor is it surprising that Canadian reporters would treat the US government more negatively on environmental matters, since Canadian governments have done more to pass

might expect them to be. Canada does not have troops in Iraq, and previous Liberal governments were quite vocal in their unwillingness to join their long-time ally in that war. But NBC coverage of Iraq was far more negative than was CBC or CTV coverage of US-Iraq matters. Many international political observers have faulted the Bush administration for being too pro-Israel, but NBC reports more negatively on its Israeli policies than Canadian media do.

All in all, these findings suggest that Bush and the rest of the US government would be better regarded if US citizens in border states had spent the past three years watching the newscasts on CBC and CTV, instead of those on NBC.

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FIGURE 3. TONE OF COVERAGE, OF PRESIDENT BUSH, CBC AND CTV, 2004-06



Source: Media Observatory, MISC