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Review by Andrea Lane, Dalhousie University

Srdjan Vucetic’s article is a welcome addition to the rather sparse academic debate on the current politics of defence procurement in Canada. As he notes, defence procurement is in Canada “characterized by a mix of policy complexity and electoral irrelevance,” such that few journalists (or, indeed, scholars) see fit to devote themselves to untangling the various strands of procurement discourse in any systematic way. (236) Assemble academic and policy stakeholders in a room, and there will be a loud bemoaning of the shallow, haphazard media discussion of procurement issues; and yet there has been until now very little empirical analysis of what is actually ‘said’ by the Canadian media on the subject. Vucetic’s article therefore addresses a large and longstanding empirical lacuna in Canada, by providing evidence for—and against—some commonly-held suspicions about media coverage of defence procurement. Vucetic uses for his case study the Canadian procurement project whose public profile makes it arguably the most salient to a discussion of the media’s framing of procurement discourse: the ongoing debacle of the CF-18 fighter jet replacement program. Canada’s fickle participation in the Joint Strike Fighter/F-35 consortium, and the partisan political bickering surrounding the purchase (or not) of these aircraft, has dominated public and academic interest in procurement since the ‘scandal’ of Canada’s intent to purchase the jets broke in 2010.

Vucetic’s research question is straightforward: “under what conditions were the Canadian media most likely to depart from indexing [repeating] government talking points on [the F-35] deal, and why?” (232.) Inherent in the question is the not unreasonable assumption that news outlets tend to cut corners on defence reporting, and instead merely uncritically re-package government press releases or talking points. Vucetic structures his analysis by testing two theories of media behaviour: Bennett’s “indexing model,” which predicts media coverage that echoes government framing of a topic, and Entman’s complementary extension, the “cascading activation” model, which allows for more media independence (235). Using these two models, Vucetic is able to account for the importance of government messaging on complex foreign and defence topics, and for the impact of exogenous ‘disruptor’-type events like scandals or information releases.

To test these theories, Vucetic conducts a content analysis of news ‘items’—stories, opinion pieces, letters to the editor, and editorials relating to the F-35—from five Canadian newspapers (238-239), coding headlines
and body text separately for ‘tone,’ that is, for whether each piece was negative, positive, mixed-tone or neutral with regard to the Harper government’s decisions to purchase the planes. To investigate whether partisan biases played a role in determining news story framing, a balance of right- and left-leaning newspapers were selected.¹ The newspapers included in the analysis are all ‘broadsheets,’ with relatively robust readerships; two are national in scope, and three more regionally-focussed (238). And, to address the perennial issue of Quebecois ‘differentness’ from the rest of Canada (read, in this case, anti-militarism) in the analysis of Canadian domestic politics, a Montréal paper, the French-language La Presse, was included.²

Overall, Vucetic’s results indicate that regardless of whether a newspaper endorsed Prime Minister Stephen Harper or the Conservative Party in previous elections, the tone of most F-35 stories (52%) was negative, with a ‘net tone’—the subtraction of the percentage of headlines coded negative from the percentage coded positive—of minus 41% (242). Most of the media criticism of the F-35 decision centred on the process of the acquisition, rather than the selection of the F-35 aircraft versus other options, and in particular, on the opaque, sole-source nature of the deal (243). Vucetic notes with some surprise that the Montréal newspaper, contrary to his hypothesis, was the least critical of the F-35 decision, with an overall net tone of only -5% (242). The research supports Entman’s cascading activation model, in that Vucetic found “no evidence that it [the media] systematically tended to forgo independent interpretations in favour of those created by state officials” (245). Instead, newspaper framing drew on the language of two reports, from the Auditor General and the Parliamentary Budget Officer, both of which were highly critical of the cost, secrecy, and preemptory nature of the F-35 decision.

Vucetic’s research would seem to confirm, as he concludes, that there exists in Canada a robust “watchdog” press that will hold the government’s feet to the fire when procurement decision-making goes awry (245). Disconfirming the ‘indexing’ hypothesis could be seen as an argument for a relatively independent media, whose framing of defence procurement issues is not directly influenced by the government. However, the empirical results might also be read as confirming that neither the media in Canada, nor the public, are particularly interested in or well-informed on the subject of defence procurement. Indeed, Vucetic finds that, prior to the F-35 “scandal” breaking, the original steps taken by the Chrétien and minority Harper governments to bind Canada to the aircraft “provoked little comment in Canada,” confirming a previous observation by Kim Richard Nossal.³ Certainly, there is a general consensus that media criticism of the F-35 decision began following the 2010 announcement that the Harper government would be proceeding with an untendered, sole-source purchase of 65 airframes.⁴

¹ Partisan affiliation was determined by looking at which Prime Minister candidate or party had been endorsed in previous federal elections (238.)


⁴ E.g. Nossal; Vucetic; Rob Huebert, “The future of Canadian Airpower and the F-35,” Canadian Foreign Policy Journal 17:3 (2011); Michael Byers and Stewart Webb, “Canada’s F-35 purchase is a costly mistake,” Canadian Foreign Policy Journal 17:3 (2011); James Fergusson, “The right debate: airpower, the future of war, Canadian strategic
While it is perhaps commendable that the broadsheets were quick to repeat the process criticism provoked by the release of two audit-style reports critical of the fighter procurement, Vucetic’s finding that media coverage clustered around the diagnostic (or ‘problem’) frames, rather than the prognostic (or ‘alternative/solution’) frames, suggests that the technicalities of the procurement itself—which jet to buy, for how much, and from whom—were beyond the reach of most journalists. Other analyses of the F-35 deal have also identified the sole-sourced, untendered nature of the contract as the root of the ‘scandal,’ and of the problem with the procurement process itself, rather than the specifics of the F-35 qua F-35. This focus on problems in the ‘hows’ of the procurement—the sole-source bid, lack of transparency, etc.—arguably emphasizes the way in which the technical attributes of many discussions of military issues is viewed as a barrier to informed public discourse, with much of the meat of such debates left to retired military commentators and industry representatives.

If the critical audits, and their convenient ‘scandal’ had not been forthcoming, it is not difficult to imagine Vucetic’s findings instead supporting the indexing hypothesis, such is the paucity of media mentions of the technical specifics of the procurement: 10 of 372 items coded “alternative aircraft,” 16 coded “re-evaluation of RCAF requirements” (244). It would be useful to know whether this technophobia plagues all media discussions of defence procurement, or whether this is a peculiar feature of the F-35 and its stealthy, ‘Fifth Generation’ description. It is important to understand whose voices are most prominent not just in the public debate over procurement and acquisition, but in the negotiations between the military and the civilian bureaucracy over statements of requirement and requests for proposals. If civilians at all levels, not just in the media, tend to defer to military ‘subject matter experts’ on technical issues that could have important ramifications.

Vucetic’s finding of a less negative tone to Montréal’s La Presse articles about the F-35 is in the article explained by the newspaper’s more regional focus; and, since the region in question is home to an important aerospace industry, “the proposed acquisition was desirable so long as it could be leveraged to ensure participation of … Quebecker (sic) firms in the JSF supply chain, creating and maintaining high-paying jobs in the province” (246). This assertion hints at one disadvantage of Vucetic’s research design, namely, the extent to which the most important media framing of the JSF may be taking place outside of the national broadsheets, in local and regional newspapers. The benefits of defence acquisition projects in Canada are interests, and the JSF decision,” Canadian Foreign Policy Journal 17:3 (2011). Hoeffler and Ménand note that this tendency, for criticism to coalesce around an audit or arms-length investigation, is not unique to the F-35 (Catherine Hoeffler and Frédéric Ménand, “Buying a Fighter Jet: European Lessons For Canada,” Canadian Foreign Policy Journal 2015, 4.)

5 See also Fergusson, 204.

6 See, for example Nossal, 174.

7 As a rather crude measure of this, a Google search of “Canada Surface Combatant,” a multibillion dollar fleet replacement project currently underway in Canada, returns nothing but government and industry press releases, commentary by retired military members, and news stories quoting the above.

8 Interestingly, academic debate on the F-35 has been more evenly divided between the diagnostic and prognostic frames.
extraordinarily regional, in the sense that the firms involved in major weapons procurement are not evenly distributed nationally: ships are built on the coasts, armoured vehicles in Ontario, aircraft in Quebec, and so on.9 During the 2015 federal election campaign, now-Prime Minister Justin Trudeau highlighted the domestic electoral impact of this regionalism, vowing to invest the money saved by cancelling the F-35 contract into the Halifax-based National Shipbuilding Strategy—a crude bargain that paid off in spades, delivering a Liberal sweep of Atlantic Canada at the polls.10

These observations in no way detract from the validity of Vucetic’s findings; rather, they suggest an avenue for further research, to better understand the context in which the media does (and does not) frame the discussion of defence procurement. In sum, Vucetic’s article provides valuable, empirical insight into an understudied area of Canadian foreign and defence policy: the interplay between government, media, public opinion, and policy. While assumptions are often made as to the impact of media and government framing of defence issues, concrete evidence of these assumptions is somewhat lacking—a gap that Vucetic’s article goes some way to filling.11 It is to be hoped that more such research will be forthcoming.

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