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TV news coverage of evangelical Christians is balanced but journalists' personal views affect some stories, study finds

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BRANTFORD — A study by a journalism professor at Wilfrid Laurier University has found that Canadian national television news is virtually balanced in its positive and negative depictions of evangelical Christians, but the negative depictions are probably the ones being remembered.

The study, conducted by Dr. David Haskell, assistant professor of journalism at Laurier's Brantford campus, is titled "Evangelical Christians in Canadian National Television News, 1994-2004: A Frame Analysis" and is published in the current issue of the *Journal of Communication and Religion*, available this week.

"The findings suggest that Canada's national television journalists, in the main, strive to provide coverage that is objective," said Haskell. "However, it seems journalists find it difficult to play the role of dispassionate, neutral observer when evangelicals' words or deeds directly contradict their own beliefs about what is right."

Polls of evangelical Christians in Canada show that this faith group believes the news media treats them unfairly. Haskell's study sought to validate or negate the evangelicals' claim of media bias by empirically examining reports of national television news.

All reports featuring evangelical Christians and airing between January 1, 1994, and December 31, 2004, on the nightly, national television news programs of Global, CBC, and CTV television networks were subjected to frame analysis (a form of content analysis). In total, 119 reports featuring evangelical Christians were broadcast over the 11-year period.

Major Findings:

1) The positive and neutral frames (portrayals) were almost equal to the number of negative frames (portrayals) used in the news reports and in that regard the coverage was balanced.

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However, the positive frames that were used tended to be dissimilar, depicting evangelicals in many different ways. On the other hand, the negative frames were more uniform, focusing on just a few key unflattering stereotypes. Evangelicals were depicted as intolerant in 25 per cent of all reports, as criminally-minded in just over 13 per cent of reports, and as un-Canadian in over eight per cent of reports.

Other research has shown when an audience sees the same message repeatedly that it penetrates their consciousness; specifically, a correlation exists between repetitive viewing of specific, similar content on television and the holding of specific perceptions or beliefs about the world. Thus, in terms of audience perceptions, it could be said that the concentrated negative frames influenced viewers' attitudes more than the numerically significant, yet thematically disparate, collection of positive and balanced frames.

Coverage was most slanted against evangelicals in situations where their words or deeds conflicted with the heart-felt convictions of the journalists themselves. For example, other research has shown that national journalists are strong supporters of homosexual rights. In this study, reports that pitted homosexuals or gay rights activists against evangelicals evidenced the greatest signs of anti-evangelical bias.

2) Broken down by network, the news reports that aired on CBC TV depicted evangelicals most negatively (i.e., employed the most negative frames); theirs was the only news coverage to not achieve a rating of "balanced overall."

3) Regarding the topic or focus of the reports, evangelicals were most often featured in stories related to politics. About 30 per cent of stories showed evangelical politicians or evangelical citizens involved in politics mostly at the federal level. After politics: 17 per cent of stories featured evangelicals in criminal or immoral activity; 14 per cent showed them involved in social action or protest; 14 per cent focused on involvement in religious observance or theological discussion; about 8.5 per cent focused on evangelicals involved in legal actions or issues; about 7 per cent showed evangelicals involved in educational issues; 2.5 per cent focused on evangelicals involved in church business or governance; likewise, 2.5 per cent of reports focused on evangelicals involved in charity or volunteer work.

Theoretical Background:

Who are evangelicals?

Evangelical Christians comprise 12 per cent of Canada's population but they are not a coherent or unified religious group. While there are certain Protestant denominations known for their large evangelical populations— Adventist; Baptist; Christian and Missionary Alliance; Christian Reformed; Mennonite; Nazarenes; Pentecostal; Salvation Army—almost all of Canada's Protestant denominations have evangelical members. It is what one believes, and not where one worships, that makes one an evangelical Christian.

Put most simply, evangelicals believe in the main historical doctrines of the Christian church; they practice a very traditional or conservative form of Christianity. In fact, the moniker "conservative Protestants" can be used interchangeably with the term evangelicals. The four defining traits of modern evangelicals are a high regard for scripture, a personal relationship

with/commitment to God, a belief that through His death and resurrection Jesus forgives sins and grants eternal life, a desire to advanced God's kingdom through charity and volunteer work and telling others about Jesus.

What is Framing/Frame Analysis?

When they create a news story journalists must use interpretive judgment; that is, they must select and emphasize some facts and leave others out. Communication theorists call a journalist's process of information selection and emphasis "framing." A news story's frame (the end result of the process of framing) selects certain aspects of an issue or event and draws attention to them through inclusion and exclusion of information and language use.

To the best of their ability, we expect journalists to construct neutral frames. A neutral frame relays to the audience the ideas that the subjects—that is, the people the story is about—are putting forward as they intend those ideas to be understood; the ideas of the subjects are not interpreted or filtered by the reporter according to his/her personal worldview. A neutral frame will also place events in perspective by providing relevant background and will allow those who are criticized in the body of the report to respond fully to the accusations of their critics. Finally, in cases where opinion, and not fact, is relayed, a neutral frame clearly distinguished it as opinion. A non-neutral frame (be it negative or positive) would be influenced by the journalist's own opinions and would show evidence (in the selection of information and language usage) of promoting one side/perspective over another.

Frame analysis seeks to determine how journalists frame a particular event, issue, individual or group assessing whether the frames used are neutral, positive, or negative.