

Understanding Media Perceptions of the Arctic Council

Andrew Chater & Mathieu Landriault

In this paper, we study media representations of the Arctic Council in North American national newspapers. The Council is the Arctic region's foremost international institution, charged to promote environmental protection and sustainable development. Past research on media and the Arctic has focused on public perceptions of the region and its issues. Research on the Council focuses on its role in regional governance. We find that the Council's outreach efforts are reasonably successful, though there is room for improvement. The overall assessment of the Council in the media is positive and descriptions of its purpose are accurate. However, few articles focus on the Council explicitly. We examine 241 articles about the Council found in six national newspapers, all published between 1996 and 2016. Three measures direct our inquiry. First, the frequency of Council mentions and the occurrences of the Council as primary focus measures issue saliency. Second, descriptions of the Council evaluate whether reporting on the institution is positive and accurate. Third, opinion texts reveal whether editorials and guest columns on the Council are positive or negative. This chapter presents a case to understand the importance of media framing. We concluded that media attention for the Arctic Council increased after 2009, peaking between 2013 and 2015 and that the dominant framing in both countries is that the Arctic Council stands for co-operation amid tension.

The Arctic Council is the region's premier governance institution, but is unfamiliar to many Canadians. A 2015 EKOS poll found that only 34 per cent of southern Canadians had even vaguely heard of the Council (Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, 2016: 48). This group is particularly important to examine as past governmental practices in Canada, for example, have responded to concerns about Arctic security and sovereignty raised by non-Arctic residents of Arctic states.¹

The Arctic region itself is inconspicuous; just more than 107,000 people call the Canadian Arctic home. This article will study representations of the Arctic Council in the media. Understanding how news media report on the Council provides insight into the effectiveness of the institution's communications strategy and an understanding about overall awareness of the institution. It is important to interrogate understandings of the Council and its role, as it is the region's premier environmental governance body, consisting of all of the Arctic states, as well as six indigenous peoples' organizations and 32 observers.

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The paper shows that the Council's outreach efforts are reasonably successful in North America, though there is room for improvement. The media describe the Council's mission and purpose accurately and the overall assessment of the institution in the news is positive. Attention on the Council has increased across time. Yet, few articles focus specifically on the Council or its activities, rather equating the forum with regional efforts to combat climate change or as a bright spot of co-operation amidst competition over Arctic resources. This article surveys the two Canadian national newspapers and four national newspapers in the United States to uncover trends among the 241 articles that mentioned the Arctic Council between March 1996 and March 2016. It quantitatively examines the content of articles to evaluate the accuracy and frequency of descriptions of the Council. The first section of this article discusses the media theory employed in this analysis, as well as the contribution to literature. The second section discusses the method employed in this article. The third section provides an overview of the results of the quantitative article analysis and the fourth section analyzes these results.

Theory and Literature

This article contributes to literature on the Arctic Council in three ways. It is the first to study media representation of the Council systematically. The development of a regional institution for the Arctic has been the focus of great scholarly effort, tracking the evolution of the Arctic Council, as well as the relations between states and key civil society groups, such as Indigenous peoples. Most studies of the Council focus on the institution's role and influence in regional governance (Fenge, 2012; Huebert 1998; Koivurova & Heinamaki, 2006; Nord, 2016; Schram Stokke, 2007; Schram Stokke, 2005; Young, 2005). However, the media coverage of this region has seldom been studied in a systematic and comprehensive fashion. Nicol (2013) represents an exception to this pattern, having analyzed media coverage of the Arctic region in Canada over the span of four decades. Recent studies have tried to fill this gap. Gritsenko (2016) found that Russian media coverage of the Arctic between 2011 and 2015 focused mainly on either the development of hydrocarbon resources or security/geopolitical dynamics, reflecting closely shifts in governmental policies (11). Wilson-Rowe (2013) reached a similar conclusion, finding that Russian media framed the Arctic as a zone of cooperation rather than one of conflict, between 2008 and 2011 (239). However, the main focus is the Arctic region, but not the Arctic Council per se. Steinberg et al. (2014) offered the most in-depth analysis of media representations of this circumpolar forum. Media references increased significantly after 2009, spiking notably in 2013 and 2014 (Steinberg et al., 2014: 276). Russian and Canadian media adopted a more protectionist stance, highlighting the dangers of a greater non-Arctic state presence in the regional governance infrastructure and more specifically the Arctic Council. On other Arctic states, media chose to frame that the region has experienced increased interconnectedness, requiring further cooperation and engagement (Steinberg et al., 2014: 279-282).

This article builds on this work by examining media coverage of the Arctic Council over a longer period of time. As Steinberg et al. (2014) focused on the reactions to the 2013 Kiruna meeting, this study will analyze twenty years of media coverage. In order to study such an extensive timeline, the number of cases was limited to only Canadian and American newspapers.

Second, this article contributes a case to literature that seeks to understand the importance of media framing. The media have been the object of important scholarly attention in recent

decades. In fact, researchers have found that the media, especially new media, can impact political behavior by increasing participation, but only in some contexts (Minard & Landriault, 2015; Norris, 2003). Additionally, the media have the potential to shape public knowledge and perceptions about specific political events, actors or institutions, hence undermining or fostering their legitimacy. In turn, the media can represent an important source of political information, making for more informed citizens (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Bailard, 2012).

Studies have focused on how the media contribute to agenda-setting, increasing issue saliency by devoting great attention to specific events. News selection, an intrinsic part of all traditional and new media's filtering processes, influences issue saliency (Parlour, 1978; Soroka, 2002). From this standpoint, the media lead the public agenda and can dictate which stories should be considered salient. Media agenda-setting is more likely on matters that individuals do not experience firsthand and on a daily basis; environmental problems and foreign policy are two prime examples of such unobtrusive issues (Soroka, 2002: 268; Soroka, 2003). In order to evaluate if agenda-setting occurs, an assessment of the media attention for specific events or subject matters is in order.

More importantly, the media also decide how events and actors are covered (Gidengil & Everitt, 2003: 561). With regards to this aspect, the technique of framing has been extensively studied (Bauder, 2005; Trimble, 2007; Vucetic, Malo & Ouellette, 2014). An issue frame refers to "a theme, story line, or label suggesting a preferred interpretation of some policy question" (Richardson & Lancendorf, 2005: 75). Hence, for any given event, issue or actor, a multiplicity of interpretations could be in order; specific interpretations about the intentions of the actor or the nature of the issue will be decided by the journalist. Framing also is performed when specific aspects of a news story are underlined while others are absent or marginalized. This technique can be found both in opinion texts and reporting pieces, although it is easier and more explicit in the former. For the purpose of this article, studying framing is defined as measuring whether specific frames are more present than others and if the frames chosen simplify reality or rather offer an accurate picture of the dynamics at play.

Third, this article indirectly assesses the success of Arctic Council's media outreach, an institutional initiative. It is clear that the Council leadership does not wish to exist below the radar, as it communicates with the media extensively. The Council issues press releases following nearly every Council meeting and invites journalists to media events (for example, Arctic Council 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2000b, 2013). These press releases emphasize the environmental and sustainable development work of the Council, listing projects and describing the nature of the institution. For example, the press release from the May 1999 Council meeting says, "More than 140 delegates actively discussed and debated co-operative measures to promote environmental protection and sustainable development in the Arctic region" (Arctic Council, 1999b: 1). This press release contains no references to security issues or regional tensions. In addition, the Council holds public events around its meetings. For example, in April 2000, the Lieutenant Governor of Alaska, Fran Ulmer, hosted a discussion at the University of Alaska on "Contaminants and Human Health," which the Council streamed on the Internet (Arctic Council, 2000b: 2). In some cases, the working groups that complete Council projects between meetings create specific media strategies and issue press releases, emphasizing the findings of their scientific assessments and audiences that might find the work useful (for example,

Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment, 2013; Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme, 2013; Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna, 2013). The Council's outreach efforts are reasonably considerable.

Recently, Council leadership has attempted to enhance the institution's communications. In 2007, the Norwegian chair issued a discussion paper describing outreach issues in the Arctic Council. It noted that the creation of a permanent secretariat would aid in communication, which states subsequently created in 2011. The discussion paper also advised the creation of new brochures and fact sheets to promote the work of the Council (Arctic Council, 2007: 4-5). In 2010, the Council considered an evaluative report on its outreach efforts, based on a questionnaire of Council working groups, states and indigenous peoples' organizations. It listed many issues with communication and outreach, such as unclear responsibilities for outreach and inconsistent branding (Arctic Council 2010: 3-12). In response, the Council released communication guidelines in 2011. In these guidelines, the chair is responsible for distributing communication, while the secretariat is responsible for organizing and maintaining information, with the aid of a full-time staff member (Arctic Council, 2011: 1). It also called for consistent branding of the Council logo on its products (Arctic Council, 2011: 2). The Council secretariat now plays two key roles in communication, namely 1) maintaining the Council's website, as well as social media, and 2) collecting Council documents into an online archive. It also provides these services for some working groups. This article contributes to academic literature because it illuminates the fruits of the Council's efforts to raise the profile of the institution and improve its communication.

Method

This article employs quantitative content analysis. We focus our attention on national newspapers printed in Canada (Globe and Mail, National Post) and the United States (New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, USA Today). National newspapers were selected for the breadth of coverage they offer to their readership. Since they must adopt such a broad perspective, an empirical investigation of these publications offers the analyst a glimpse at agenda-setting at a country level; we can assess if the Arctic Council is considered a subject of national attention.

The data comes from online sources. Using the database Factiva and the keyword "Arctic Council," 252 hits were first reported. After discarding repeated articles and indexes, 241 articles were gathered on a 20-year period, from March 15, 1996 (the time of the first mention) to March 15, 2016. As expected, the use of the "Arctic Council" keyword casts quite a wide net.

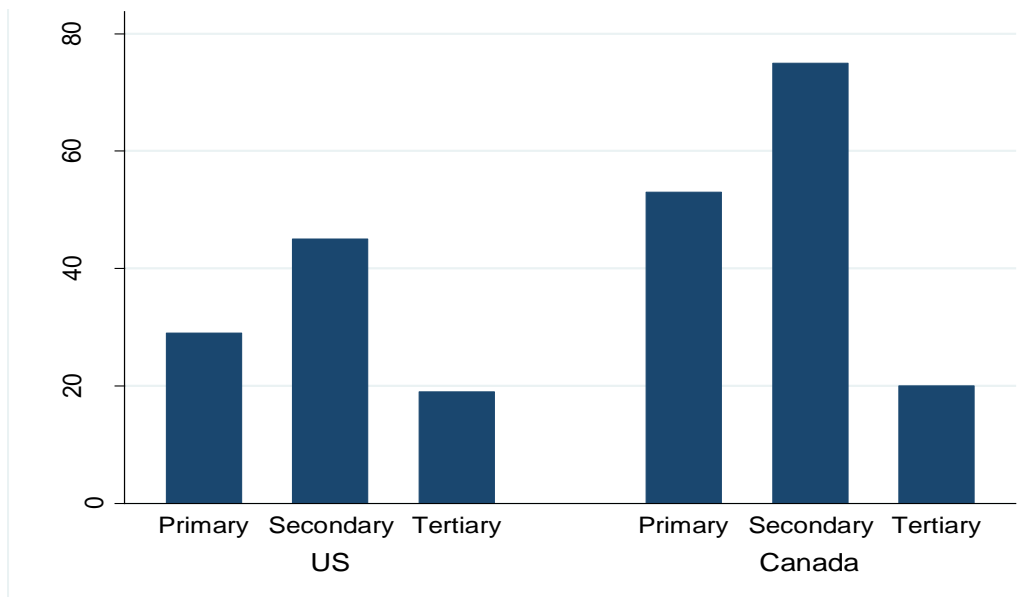
A subsequent analysis was performed to differentiate between articles or editorials in which the Arctic Council was the primary focus of the document, a secondary topic of interest or a tertiary issue. We included in the former category articles or editorials for which the dominant focus was the Arctic Council or initiatives piloted by the body. The secondary category was comprised of texts dealing with Arctic issues without focusing on the Arctic Council. The last category included articles/editorials in which the Arctic Council was named but as a peripheral object of interest in a broader discussion (American foreign policy or global climate change, for example). Coding was conducted by one of the authors. Then, a second coder² was asked to code 10% of texts (24 texts, randomly-selected) in order to ensure the reliability of the initial coding. Intercoder reliability reached 83% similarity, confirming that the coding parameters were valid.

We studied the articles according to three main measures. First, we evaluated media agenda-setting by assessing the frequency of Arctic Council mentions and the occurrences of the Arctic Council as a primary focus in order to measure issue saliency. We hypothesize that Canadian attention will be greater as the Arctic is a subject of national interest and historically, territorial disputes were intensely covered by the Canadian media. Second, we explored media framing by focusing on how the Council is described in reporting articles in order to evaluate if the media are spreading misconceptions about the Arctic Council's mandate and functions. We hypothesize that there will be persistent misconceptions, as the Council is a fairly low-key institution. Opinion texts and journalistic articles were not distinguished on these first two inquiries since we wanted to assess the level of overall media attention (first measure) and media framing. On this latter point, journalistic articles and opinion texts alike deploys issue frames. Finally, we focused our attention on opinion texts (guest columns, letters to the editor and editorials) to uncover whether the opinions printed were critical or supportive of the Arctic Council actions and role. We hypothesize that the opinions expressed in the Canadian media will display a greater level of support for the Arctic Council, as Canadian public opinion is generally highly supportive of norms of multilateralism and of international organizations (Paris, 2014).

Results

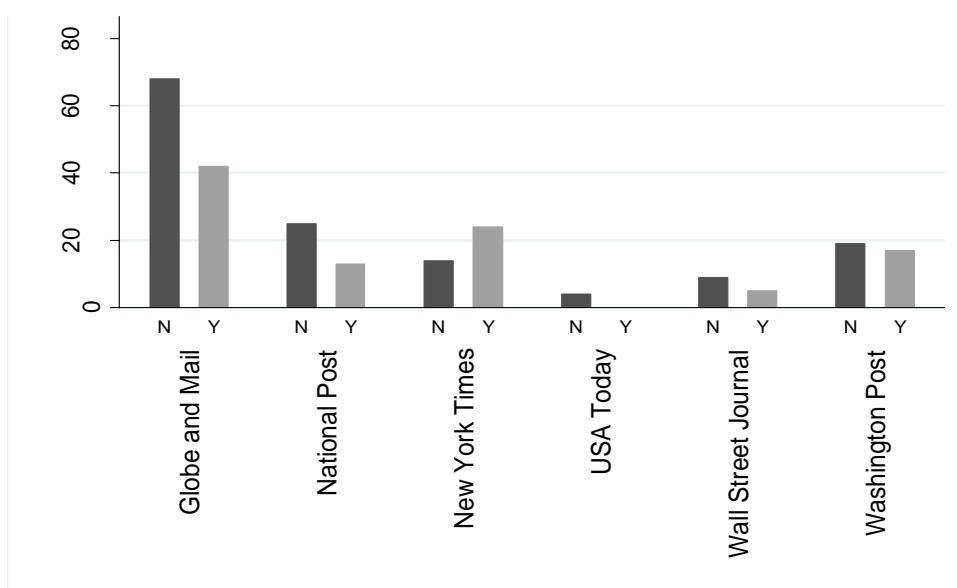
As per the first measure, how frequently do newspapers mention the Arctic Council? It is clear that the Council receives more coverage in Canada than in the United States. Of our sample, 148 articles are in Canadian newspapers and 93 articles are in United States newspapers. The majority of articles in Canada did not offer a description of what the Council does, ($n = 55/148$), while half of the American articles included a description of the Council ($46/93$). This could indicate that editors or journalists assume a certain level of pre-existing knowledge by the Canadian public, indicating issue salience. The difference is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 3.8363$, $p = 0.05$). Articles in the United States, on average, mentioned the Arctic fewer times, compared to Canada (mean of 2.14 in Canada, mean of 1.73 in the United States). The difference is statistically significant ($t = -1.66$, $p = 0.05$). In both cases, articles rarely mentioned the Council in the headline (6 instances in the United States, 14 instances in Canada). As for the level of focus in the articles, the Council is the secondary focus in the majority of articles in both Canada and the United States (see Figure 1). The difference in this case is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2.1080$, $p = 0.349$).

Figure 1: Level of focus on Arctic Council in Canadian and American national newspapers



There are significant differences in the coverage of the Council between individual newspapers. Canada’s Globe and Mail wrote more than twice as many articles about the Council compared to any other newspaper (110 articles). The rest of the newspapers wrote about the Council on roughly the same basis, even the other Canadian national newspaper. The National Post featured as many articles as The New York Times and Washington Post (38 articles). Most articles in all papers did not offer a description of the Council and its responsibilities, indicating that most editors assume people have certain knowledge of the Council, or that knowledge of the Council is not important in the context of the story. The exception was articles found in The New York Times, which frequently made mention of the Council’s role in regional governance. Based on this measure, the Council is a more salient issue in Canada, compared to the United States, but only in one paper.

Figure 2: Frequency of factual description of the Arctic Council in newspaper accounts



As per our second measure, do articles accurately describe and evaluate the Council? In Canada, the majority of articles offered an accurate description of the Council, as a research institution or intergovernmental forum that promoted co-operation on environmental issues. The tones of the articles were either neutral or positive. One article about the Council offered a debatably negative description of the Council. A Globe and Mail article from August 10, 2015, said the Council was an “unchallenged regional forum, although not formal or powerful.” The Arctic Council has a formal structure, with a permanent secretariat. Only two articles about the institution offer slightly inaccurate descriptions of the institution. First, a Globe and Mail article from October 17, 2013, said the Council has the “powers to negotiate treaties,” while in reality, the Council is merely a venue in which states can negotiate international agreements. Second, a Globe and Mail article from August 11, 2007, called the Council an “untested international regime,” when no international agreement exists that establishes the powers of the Council.

In the United States, the majority of articles offered an accurate description of the Council, as an intergovernmental forum that promoted co-operation on environmental issues or a research institution. The tones of the articles were either neutral or positive. Only one article about the Council offers a debatably negative description of the Council. Namely, a Washington Post article from August 22, 2015, said the Council helps address boundary issues, while its mandate focuses on environmental and sustainable development issues, as well as economic issues. As per our second measure, it is clear that newspapers present a fairly accurate picture of the Council’s job.

Articles on the Arctic Council discussed a relatively small group of issues. The majority of articles discussed the institution in stories about climate change (n=48 articles). The largest group of the articles (75) discussed the Council in the context of discussions of some sort of Arctic conflict, such as threats from Russia, China, Arctic Ocean conflict or conflict more generally. The Arctic Council is not an institution that deals with security issues. In fact, its mandate says specifically that it should not address security issues (Arctic Council, 1998: 1). The difference between newspapers in Canada and the United States was not statistically significant. Overall, newspapers discuss the Council in regards to only a few specific set of issues.

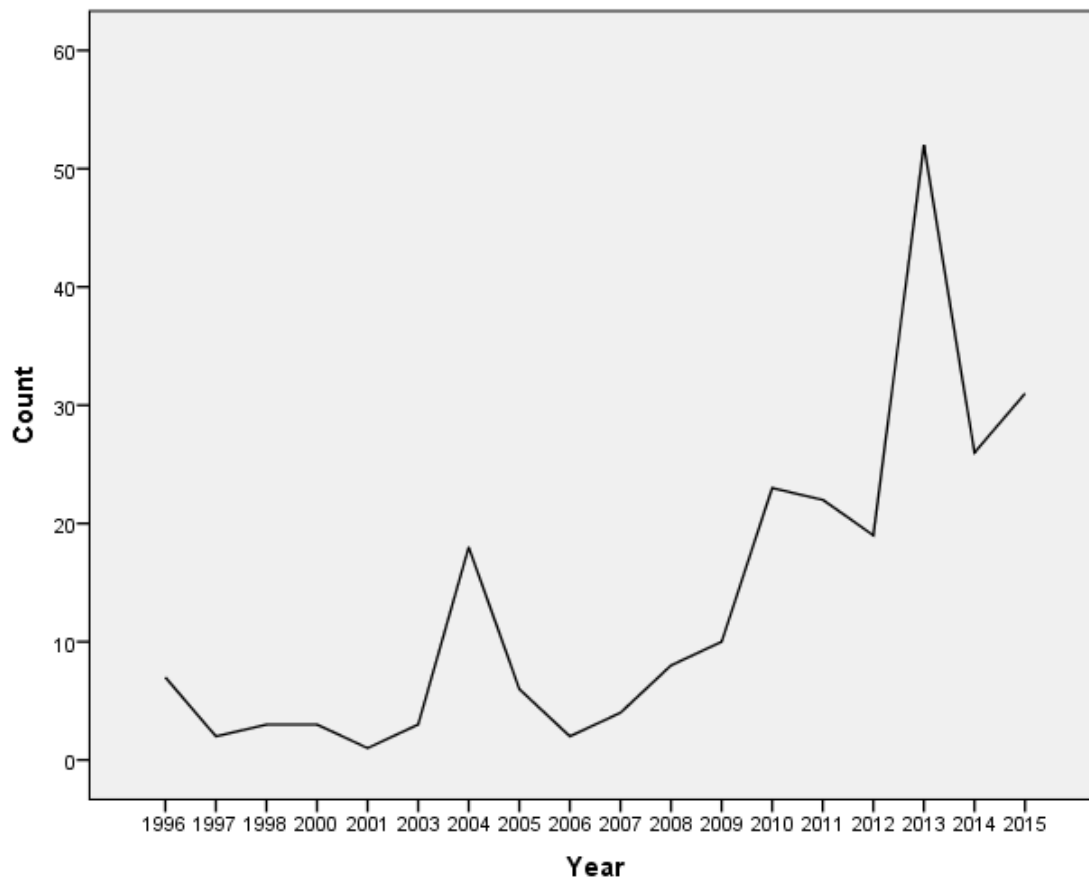
Table 1: Main focus of articles mentioning the Arctic Council

Issue Equated	Frequency
Climate Change	48
Canadian Foreign Policy	28
Arctic Issues (General)	27
Russian Threat	25
Chinese Threat	12
Arctic Issues (G5)	11
Other	91

The coverage of the Council has increased across time, with some spikes in the frequency of newspaper articles. Each year before 2004 saw fewer than 10 articles about the Arctic Council.

Coverage greatly increased in 2004, though decreased until 2011. There have been more than 20 articles about the Council each year after 2010. Four months in particular saw increased coverage of the institution. The first spike in coverage was in November 2004 (n=15), due to the release of the *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment*, a major Council report on climate change. It contained many notable facts about climate change, such as that “The average extent of sea-ice cover in summer has declined by 15-20 per cent over the past 30 years” (Arctic Council 2004: 10). There was a spike in January 2014 due to special series of articles by the *Globe and Mail* (n=15). There were also spikes in May 2011 (n=14) and May 2013 (n=24). In May 2011, the Council released the *Agreement on Co-operation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic*, the first formal international agreement negotiated in the Council. In May 2013, the Council released *Agreement on Co-operation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic*, another international agreement. China also became an accredited observer in the Council. These events were clearly of interest and increased the profile of the Council. Canada (from 2013 to 2015) and the United States (beginning in 2015) assuming chairmanship of the body explain the heightened levels of interest from 2013 to 2015. Rather than the specific achievements of the Council, the print media are more apt to cover foreign policy and geopolitical considerations. In this light, the Council serves more as a backdrop against which state interests and positions can be described. Figure 3 illustrates these trends.

Figure 3: Distribution per year of Arctic Council mentions in six national newspapers in Canada and the United States from 1996 to 2015



Few articles mentioning the Arctic Council were published in strategic locations, such as the front page of a newspaper or the first page of a specific section. Only 33 articles (14 per cent of all mentions) were printed on these pages, of which seven primarily focused on the Arctic Council itself.

As for the third and final measurement, we wanted to know if the Arctic Council was generally supported or criticized. Overall, 85 opinion texts mentioning the term “Arctic Council” were gathered, the first one being written in 1998. Of the 85, only 26 (31%) had the Arctic Council as a primary focus of interest. We analyzed these documents, as the contributions dealing with the Arctic Council as a secondary or tertiary concern did not express opinions on the Council per se. Out of these 26 texts, 22 take a clear position on the Council. As expected, a minority of opinion pieces positioned themselves as critiques of the Council; indeed, only two (8% of all expressed opinions) expressed reservations in regards to the Council. Neither of these opinion pieces express any hostility toward the institution. Rather, in the first instance, the author articulates a climate-skeptic position, questioning the validity of the *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment*, warning that “the Arctic study is surrounded by the same doubts and questionable science that dogs the main scientific reports” (Corcoran, 2004: A4). The second critical contribution, by John Higginbotham, addresses the American policy toward the Conference on Global Leadership in the Arctic: Cooperation, Innovation, Engagement and Resilience (GLACIER). The conference is presented as a challenge to the “Arctic Council’s delicate regional governance architecture” and as part of a “strong, new and welcome U.S. focus on the Arctic” (Higginbotham, 2015: A11).

All in all, voices in support of the body clearly outnumbered the negative perceptions. Opinion texts casting the Council in a positive light represented 80% of all opinions expressed in editorial pages. Hence, the Council gathers near consensual support. However, 40% of these supportive contributions advocated for a strengthened role for the organization, which can be construed as a call for change. The most frequent reform proposal is for the council to deal with military security matters. Voices as diverse as political scientist Rob Huebert and political strategist Thomas Axworthy have advocated for different reasons and at different times to put military issues on the Council’s agenda. For Huebert, such a reform is necessary to address “the growing militarization of the Arctic”, as well as “for the troubling signs that both Russia and the United States have begun to view the region through a geopolitical lens” (Huebert, 2013: A12). Janice Stein and Axworthy both advocated for the same outcome, citing co-operation and constructive engagement present in the region and significant public opinion support for such initiative as central reasons to do so (Stein and Axworthy, 2011: A12). It would appear that experts perceiving both a pessimistic and optimistic view of Arctic relations supported strengthening the Council’s mandate. Comparing Canadian and American newspapers (see Table 1), we can observe that most contributions calling for a strengthening of the Council were published in Canadian publications. Additionally, 75% of these reform calls were formulated by experts from academic and political circles; they also on average occupy more space (757 words) in the opinion section than do contributions only expressing a positive perception of the Council (495 words). Table 3 summarizes these results.

Table 3: Positions on the Arctic Council in editorial pages by country

	Critical	Positive	Strengthen	N/A
Canadian Newspaper	2	5	6	3
American Newspaper	0	8	2	0

Analysis

The Arctic Council is a low-profile institution, but interest is clear. Our findings are consistent with Steinberg et al. (2014). Media coverage of the Arctic region increased after 2009, peaking in 2013. As per our first hypothesis, is attention to the Council greater in Canada, compared to the United States? The Council is of greater interest in Canada, compared to the United States. There are more articles written about the Council in Canada (148 versus 92 in the United States), which discuss the Council more frequently (2.14 average mentions vs. 1.73 average mentions in the United States). This fact is not to say that the Council's strategy on communication has not had an impact in the United States. Most Canadian articles occurred in one newspaper, the *Globe and Mail* (110/148).

Is support for the Council greater in Canada versus the United States, as per our second hypothesis? It is not accurate that Canadian newspapers show a greater level of support for the Council. Papers in both countries offer positive assessments of the Council, contrasting with Steinberg et al. (2014) who concluded that Canadian and American media framing of the Arctic regional governance were quite different. Overall, the articles discussed the Council in the context of conflict (75 in total). The narrative is that the Council stands for co-operation amid tension. It is not accurate to say that there is a definite potential for conflict in the Arctic. Many academic articles have accounted that states manage disagreements well and tensions in the region are low, especially compared to other regions (for example, Riddell-Dixon, 2011).

Are opinions expressed in the Canadian media more supportive of the Arctic Council than opinions in the United States? It is not accurate to say that Canadian perspectives expressed more support for the Council than American perspectives. Editorials in both Canada and the United States are generally supportive of the Arctic Council. Only two Canadian editorials expressed even a mildly critical view of the Council, although calls for strengthening of the institution are common in both countries.

This article contributes to the academic literature because it examines the perception of the Arctic Council. There are two main narratives about the Council. First, articles equate the Council with responses to climate change. As such, this observation fits with other investigations of media perceptions of the Arctic region, framing the AC in relations with broader global dynamics. There is a perception that the body is part of an international effort to combat global warming. This perception is accurate, as environmental protection is a major activity of the Council. Second, articles equate the Council with potential Arctic conflict over issues such as resources or boundary disputes. The second narrative is debatable, as tensions between states are quite low. In addition, the Council is not a venue to discuss military matters or boundary issues.

As for the contribution of the media to agenda setting, overall, we cannot refer to the attention devoted in editorial pages as substantial or amounting to agenda-setting. Few events were able to

generate sustained interest. Agreements (on search and rescue for example) or reports (such as the *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment*) were one-off, instantaneous phenomena. In addition, they do not create controversies or intense debates, receiving consensual, although soft support (or indifference) since they are technical and require a high level of knowledge to grasp their importance. The Council ministerial meetings did not generate attention in opinion pages. In fact, strategic interests and geopolitical interstate relations gathered a heightened level of attention. Exactly 15 articles were published right before and near the end of the Canadian and American chairmanships of the forum. Media interest in both countries is linked to their respective government involvement and broader foreign policy objectives. Without the nation's foreign policy as a primary frame, the Arctic Council did not sustain much interest as a subject of debate in opinion pages.

Conclusion

The Arctic Council exists reasonably under the radar; yet, the Council itself has spent considerable efforts to raise the profile of the institution. This article finds that the Council's outreach efforts are reasonably successful. This success is apparent in that the media describe the Council accurately and positively. Attention on the Council is increasing over time. There is room for improvement, because relatively few articles focus on the Council. Articles often equate the Council with international conflict, which is not an accurate characterization of events. Persistence on the part of Council policy-makers to increase the profile of the Council likely will pay dividends. There was a spike in attention with the release of the *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment*; cutting-edge research presented in an effective manner will attract attention for the institution.

A shortcoming of this paper is that it only focuses on North American newspapers, which future research can address. The Arctic Council is an international body. Media analysis of the Council's coverage in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia and Sweden would provide a fuller, international perspective on perceptions on the Council and the relative success of the institution's outreach efforts.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. See for example Coates et al. (2008). Southern Canadians' anxieties compelled the Government of Canada to react forcefully to the 1969 Manhattan and the 1985 Polar Sea transits for example.
2. The second coder graduated from a Québec university with a degree in English and Intercultural studies and was unfamiliar with Arctic issues.

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