



FRAMING ECONOMIC INEQUALITY IN THE NEWS IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

Vox Media
Occupy Wall Street occupy
Zuccotti Park in New York
(Stan Honda/AFP/Getty Images)

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INTRODUCTION

News frames represent *how* complex issues are presented in news coverage. What is emphasized or deemphasized? Which perspectives and explanations are privileged over others? People often learn about issues through news coverage. These news frames can impact public opinion, which can then influence policy responses. Thus, it's important to understand how newspapers frame economic inequality.

Data and Methods

The authors conducted a content analysis and logistic regression models with a dataset of 2,109 news articles about economic inequality published from 2000 to 2014 in the *Toronto Star*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.



Financial Times
Thousands of protesters
converge at Times
Square in New York
(Rebecca Letz)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS & FINDINGS

Economic Conditions

To what extent can we see the negative economic consequences of the Great Recession reflected in attention to inequality and to news framing of inequality as a social problem?

Figure 1 shows that there was no change in the volume of news articles about economic inequality following the Great Recession in 2008. Figure 2 shows a small increase in the percentage of articles that identify economic inequality as a social problem in 2008, but logistic regression models show that this effect was not statistically significant.

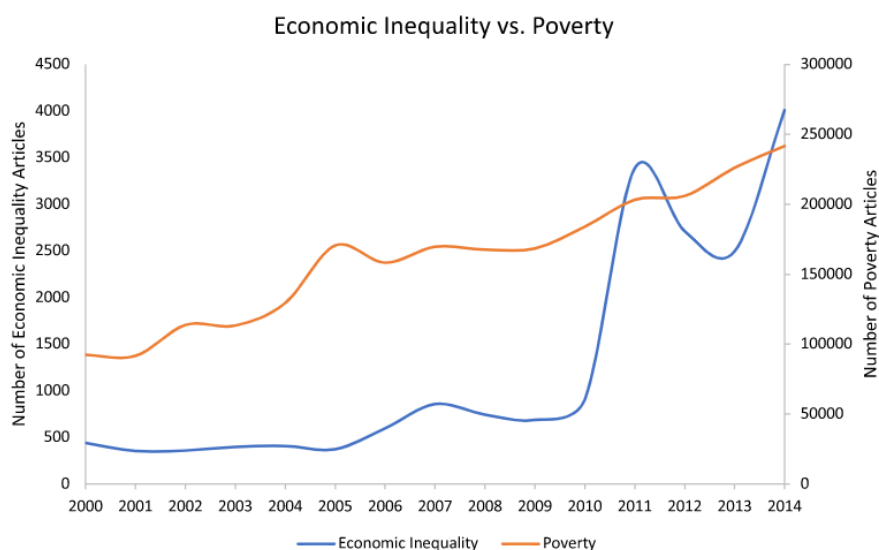


Figure 1. Number of articles per year under subject keywords "Economic Inequality" and "Poverty"

Social Movement

Did attention to economic inequality increase after the Occupy movement, and did framing of economic inequality as a problem with corporate sector causes increase, while framing of individual-level and corporate sector solutions decrease?

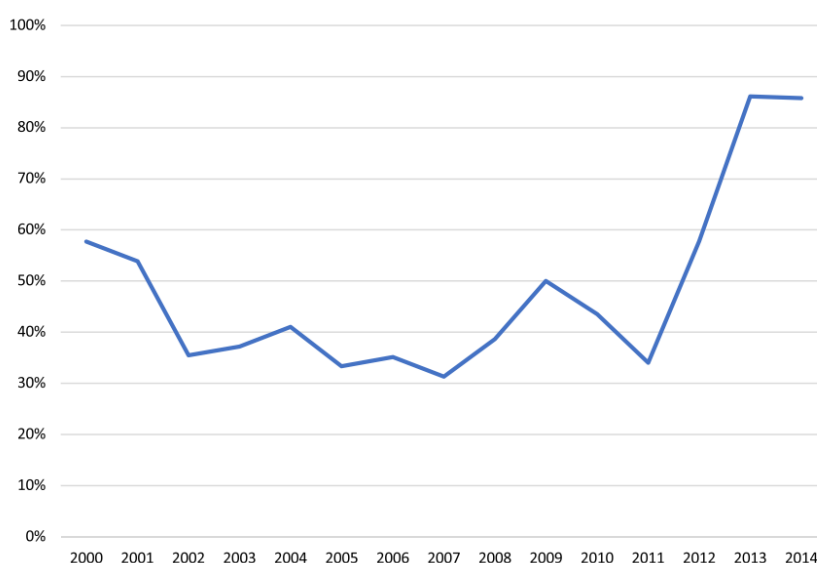


Figure 2. Percentage of articles in dataset per year identifying economic inequality as a problem

Figures 1 and 2, and logistic regression models, show that there was a strong and enduring increase in attention paid to economic inequality as a social problem following the emergence of the Occupy movement in September 2011. However, Occupy had no effect on whether the newspapers framed economic inequality as having corporate causes or individual-based solutions.

In further contrast to the movement's messages, articles were significantly more likely to reference corporate solutions to economic inequality after the emergence of the Occupy movement. The authors note that it's possible that corporate ownership of the media (Herman and Chomsky 2002; McChesney 2008) produced a bias that prevented Occupy's core messages on the causes and consequences of economic inequality getting reflected in the overall coverage.

Political Leaning of Newspaper

Did liberal newspapers more often than conservative newspapers identify economic inequality as a social problem with state-based solutions, and less often frame inequality as having individual-level and corporate solutions?

The liberal-leaning newspapers didn't consistently frame inequality similarly to each other and differently from conservative-leaning newspapers. The conservative *Globe and Mail* was more likely to reference corporate solutions than the liberal *New York Times*, but there was no effect for the conservative *Wall Street Journal*.



The Atlantic
Protesters in Zuccotti
Park, New York
(Brian Shumway / Redux)

National Context

Are we likely to see economic inequality more often framed as a social problem needing state-based solutions in Canadian news?

The Canadian newspapers didn't consistently frame inequality similarly to each other and differently from the US newspapers. The Canadian *Toronto Star* was less likely to reference state solutions than *The New York Times*, but there was no effect for *The Globe and Mail*.



It's possible that the limited results are due to political and national contexts interacting with each other. For example, what may be a conservative newspaper in the Canadian context could be closer to a liberal newspaper in the US context.

The authors label the framing of economic inequality they find in their study as “urgent but ambiguous.” It's framed as a clear social problem, but there's a lack of consensus regarding its multiple causes and solutions. In this way, the news frames may be working hegemonically (Gramsci 1971). That is, they present inequality, a socially produced phenomena, as inevitable and without clear and viable solutions.