

**Free to Protest, Framed to Divide? The Representation of Canada's 'Freedom Convoy' in
Mainstream and Alternative Media**

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Abstract: In democratic societies, the media play a crucial role in framing political and social events, and the 2022 Canadian convoy protest, known as the Freedom Convoy, provides a recent example of how a single event can be represented differently across media outlets. Initially organized in opposition to the vaccine mandate for cross-border truckers, the protest quickly evolved into a polarizing national controversy, with media coverage revealing sharp differences between mainstream and alternative media outlets and reflecting broader divisions within Canadian society. This thesis examines how the Canadian media constructed and contested interpretations of the Freedom Convoy. More specifically, it asks: How did Canadian mainstream and alternative media represent the Freedom Convoy movement? In what ways did their representations differ? Drawing on Entman's (1993) framing theory, the study examines how each outlet defined problems, attributed causes, and made moral evaluations or proposed solutions for identified themes using a hybrid (inductive and deductive) coding method. The analysis compares coverage from the centrist Globe and Mail, the right-leaning National Post, and the far-right Rebel News between January and March 2022 (N=240 articles), tracing the evolution of media framing of the movement from its inception to the lifting of emergency measures by the federal government. Overall, the analysis revealed significant differences in source selection, framing, tone and the presence of solutions across the outlets. Firstly, Rebel News relied primarily on ideologically aligned (far-right) and self-referential sources, whereas The Globe and Mail and the National Post relied largely on institutional sources, such as political leaders and government institutions. Secondly, Rebel News frequently employed populist framing, whereas The Globe and Mail leaned towards a more elitist framing style, with the National Post not fitting neatly into either category. Thirdly, the outlets adopted distinct tones that shaped which actors and issues appeared sympathetic or problematic, reinforcing each outlet's broader narratives about the protest. Finally, while mainstream news outlets regularly proposed solutions in their coverage, Rebel News emphasized blame and delegitimization of institutions, avoiding offering any recommendations. These findings have broader implications for understanding the role of the news media in exacerbating political polarization and contributing to the spread of populist sentiment in Canada.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

From covering major political events to public health emergencies, the media plays a central role not just in reporting events, but in shaping what citizens think about and how they interpret them. Two key concepts illustrate this influence: agenda-setting and framing. Agenda-setting refers to the process by which the media influences which issues people consider most important (Jasperson et al., 1998, in Linström and Marais, 2012, p. 22). Framing, on the other hand, describes how the media selects and emphasizes certain aspects of reality to promote specific interpretations (Linström and Marais, 2012, p. 22). Framing has a more direct impact on individuals, shaping *how* they think about an issue, rather than *whether* they think about it (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007, p. 14).

These processes become especially consequential during periods of crisis, when uncertainty is high, stakes are elevated, and citizens rely heavily on mediated information to make sense of rapidly unfolding events. In moments of national crisis, major political events, or social protests, media framing becomes especially important, as it can legitimize or delegitimize movements, amplify or suppress voices, and influence public knowledge in subtle yet powerful ways (see Theresa, 2022; Ciurel, 2018; Gottlieb, 2015)

This was especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic, a crisis that affected everyone around the world. The COVID-19 pandemic was caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which was first identified in late 2019 in Wuhan, China and was officially declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020 (Public Health Ontario, n.d). This was the first pandemic of its size this world has seen since the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918 (Mackowiak, 2021). On March 13, 2020, the United States and Canada officially declared states of emergency, prompting similar measures at the provincial and state levels in both countries (Rutty, 2022, para.

12). Each country implemented various restrictive measures, such as closing schools, public places, non-essential businesses, and other safety measures such as social distancing, mask wearing, and lockdowns (Rutty, 2022, para. 12). These measures completely changed the lifestyle of all citizens, who were suddenly forced to stay at home. As a result, “Besides the rising number of cases and fatalities with this pandemic, there has also been significant socio-economic, political, and psycho-social impact” (Banerjee and Rai, 2020, p. 525). When the daily life of all citizens abruptly shut down, one institution became a constant presence in people’s homes: the news media (see Zhang, 2022; Solovei, 2024; Acharya, 2023; Stětka and Mihelj, 2024, Mach et al., 2021). In this context, news media were not merely sources of updates but essential in shaping how the pandemic was understood, experienced, and responded to by the public.

It is within this heightened media environment that the so-called ‘Freedom Convoy’ protest in Canada emerged.¹ This was one of the most prominent and polarizing events of the pandemic period in Canada. The ‘Freedom Convoy’ began in mid-January 2022 and ended in mid-February of the same year. The movement was co-opted by the far-right group *Canada Unity*, which was led by a small number of leaders, including James Bauder, Tamara Lich, and Benjamin Dichter (Gillies et al., 2023, p. 2). It is estimated that 200 commercial trucks, 650 personal vehicles, and 10,000 people were involved in the month-long protest in Ottawa (Roy and Gandsman, 2023, p. 789). This event brought together a highly diverse group of protesters, including truck drivers, working-class individuals, and other Canadian citizens (Roy and Gandsman, 2023, p. 789), with some media coverage emphasizing the presence of participants across races, religions, and age

¹ The name ‘Freedom Convoy’ was the title the movement gave itself, but the use of the term “freedom” has been criticized. Some scholars have noted that many local residents, particularly Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) individuals, did not feel free during the event, reporting experiences of harassment and assault by convoy participants (Guenther, 2023, p. 651). Others have argued that the convoy’s interpretation of freedom is rooted in settler colonialism (McLaren, 2022, p. 867).

groups (Rebel News, 1 February 2022, also see National Post, 1 February 2022). According to Askanius et al. (2025, p.170), even though many members of the convoy condemned the participation of extremist groups, a small but notable presence of far-right and extremist groups also participated (also see Roy and Gandsman, 2023; Kohm, 2025). These groups included leading organisers who have been associated with anti-vaxx and anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment, as well as with anti-Islamic hate groups (Roy et al., 2024, pp. 1-2). Like any large-scale protest, the ‘Freedom Convoy’ provides extremist groups and individuals with an opportunity to spread mistrust and disinformation about the government (Askanius, 2025, p. 170).

The demonstrations were not confined to Ottawa – they also spread to downtown Toronto and included major blockades at border crossings such as the Ambassador Bridge in Ontario, Coutts in Alberta, Emerson in Manitoba, and the Pacific Highway in British Columbia (Public Safety Canada, 2022, “Background”). What began as a mobilization against the COVID-19 vaccine mandate for cross-border truckers quickly evolved into a highly polarized national controversy (Pylartz, 2024, p. 5), with “protesters quickly broaden[ing] their demands to encompass ‘charter rights’ and ‘democracy,’ denouncing not only public health measures but also what they saw as government ‘overreach’ and ‘tyranny’” (Roy and Gandsman, 2023, p. 789). The movement sparked a public discussion about human rights, freedom of speech, and trust in institutions in Canada, which was widely debated in news outlets and social media² platforms. The ‘Freedom Convoy’ is an interesting case to illustrate how media framing operates during crisis conditions, exemplifying the media’s importance and influence.

² Although social media played a vital role in the dissemination of information during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the mobilization and reach of the ‘Freedom Convoy’ protest, this thesis focuses specifically on the impacts of news media. A growing body of scholarship has already examined the role of social media during the pandemic (see Goel and Gupta, 2020; González-Padilla and Tortolero-Blanco, 2020; Cinelli et al., 2020) as well as its use in facilitating organization, communication, and visibility during the Freedom Convoy (see Roy et al., 2024; Boucher et al., 2024; Konopka, 2023).

While the ‘Freedom Convoy’ was widely covered by the Canadian mainstream media, it also featured prominently on alternative media³ platforms. In Canada, where “freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication” (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982, s.2b) is guaranteed by legislation, the reach and influence of such outlets become particularly significant during protests such as the convoy (see Boucher et al., 2024; Kidd and McIntosh, 2016; Shen et al., 2020). These platforms were used by organizers of the convoy and other activists “to share information, reach out to and engage with different segments of the Canadian public, and generate or coordinate mobilization efforts” (Broderick, 2022 in Gillies, et. al., 2023, p. 3).

This centrality of (both mainstream and alternative) media in the ‘Freedom Convoy’ protest is consistent with existing literature on protests and the media. For example, according to Geremew Teresa, “mass media are tremendously important for social movements and protest groups” and have had an important role “in mobilizing protest movements [...]” (2022, p. 1, also see Kenix 2011). Further, Linda Kenix states that favorable coverage can lend legitimacy to the movement and attract new members, while unfavorable media coverage⁴ can discourage movement participation (2011, p. 43). Due to its extensive media coverage, the ‘Freedom Convoy’ generated competing interpretations of the event itself – both within mainstream media and between mainstream and alternative outlets – and raised questions about the credibility of the media reporting on it (see Kohm, 2025; Roy et al., 2024; Allsop, 2022; Pinheiro, 2021). However, it is

³ While a more comprehensive definition will follow in the literature review, it is helpful at this stage to understand alternative media as “a proclaimed and/or (self-) perceived corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system” (Holt et al., 2019, p. 862)

⁴ This unfavourable media coverage can also be known as the protest paradigm, defined as a “wide range of devices aimed at the marginalization and demonization of protesters and their grievances” (Susanszky et al., 2022, p.313, also see McLeod and Hertog 1999)

unclear whether these differences were as pronounced as suggested and how they manifested across different types of media.

Therefore, this thesis examines how the 2022 ‘Freedom Convoy’ was framed by different types of Canadian media, namely mainstream and alternative media. Specifically, this thesis asks the following questions: How did Canadian mainstream and right-wing alternative media represent the so-called ‘Freedom Convoy’? How do their representations differ? It addresses these questions through a comparative qualitative analysis of coverage from two mainstream outlets, the Globe and Mail and the National Post, and one far-right alternative media platform, Rebel News. Using two mainstream outlets with differing political leanings alongside a far-right alternative platform makes it possible to examine differences within mainstream coverage as well as contrasts with alternative media platforms.

This thesis makes four key contributions. First, this project contributes to research on media framing and protest coverage by offering a comparative analysis of alternative and mainstream media, an approach that remains relatively underexplored in existing research. By examining differences in their coverage, the study aims to clarify how institutional positioning (mainstream/alternative) and ideological orientation (center/right) may shape representations of a protest. In addition, this analysis seeks to challenge the tendency to treat mainstream media as one category by exploring how centrist and right-leaning outlets differ in their agenda-setting and framing practices.

Second, it helps to better understand the growing influence of far-right⁵ alternative media in Canada. While mainstream media in Canada (see Vessey, 2016; Stoddart et al., 2016; Arroyo,

⁵ This thesis classifies Rebel News as a far-right alternative media outlet rather than as a right-wing or right-leaning media outlet because of its frequent alignment with far-right political actors, movements, and narratives. According to the media bias rating organization AllSides, Rebel News is positioned at the far-right end of their bias spectrum (AllSides, n.d.). The outlet is not labeled as extremist, as this term implies a level of radicalization that is not

2024; Lawlor and Tolley, 2017; Patel et al., 2021; Ahchong and Dodds, 2021) and social media in Canada (see Roy et al., 2024; Boucher et al., 2024; McKelvey et al., 2022; Amarasingam et al., 2024; Vivion et al., 2024) have been well studied, research on alternative media in general, and on far-right alternative media in Canada and its framing practices in particular, remains quite limited. The importance and impact of alternative media continue to grow (Holt, 2019, p. 3). For example, Rebel News has become increasingly influential by securing a presence at the 2025 federal leaders' debate. Traditionally, federal leaders' debates in Canada are moderated by mainstream journalists from established media organizations, and this one was hosted by CBC/Radio-Canada and overseen by the independent debate-planning body, the Leaders' Debate Commission (The Canadian Press, 2025, para.4-4). Registered as a third-party media outlet, Rebel News and other far-right alternative media outlets like Juno News played a prominent role during the question period⁶, shaping much of the discussion (The Canadian Press, 2025, para.1). This development marks a significant shift in the Canadian media landscape, as alternative news organizations enter spaces traditionally reserved for established mainstream journalists. This influence is still emerging and requires further study, which this thesis contributes to.

Third, it deepens our understanding of the role of the media in the spread of populist sentiment, a dynamic that was particularly visible during the 'Freedom Convoy', where anti-establishment and pro-people narratives were frequently evoked (Roy and Gandsman, 2023, p. 799). While a growing body of literature is beginning to address the growing presence of populist discourse in Canada (see Budd, 2021; LeDuc et al., 2023; Friesen, 2021; also see Gagnon and

consistently applied to all of the content it produces. It could also be considered populist, as some of its content includes populist sentiment and anti-establishment messaging; however, this characterization does not apply uniformly to all journalists or articles published by the platform.

⁶ Question period refers to the segment following an official leaders' debate during which accredited journalists are given the opportunity to ask questions directly to each participating leader (The Canadian Press, 2025).

Peker 2025), continued research is necessary to understand where this discourse comes from, and how and why it spreads. This thesis contributes to this effort by identifying potential sources of populist framing and offering insight into why it may be disseminated.

Fourth, it helps to better understand the media's contribution to ongoing political polarization. While the goal of this thesis was not to explain the sources of political polarization in Canada or elsewhere, the analysis reveals some potential contributing factors. In comparing alternative and mainstream media, the thesis identifies clear differences in biases, framing strategies, and sources, which may shape how readers interpret political events and understand the world around them. Such differences in strategies, sources and framing revealed certain biases with different media outlets, which can lead to political polarization because when people consume an outlet with a certain bias that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, this can reinforce ideological identities and create echo chambers – dynamics that have been shown to exacerbate polarization (Rabb et al., 2023, p. 2, also see Zeib and Shahzad, 2025; Steppat et al., 2022).

This thesis begins with a literature review that provides an overview of six key areas: definitions and distinctions between mainstream and alternative media; research exploring the relationship between media and populism; literature examining far-right alternative media and its defining characteristics, including the use of conspiracy theories; alternative media in Canada; literature on framing and agenda-setting in the media; and literature on the 'Freedom Convoy', all of which establish the theoretical framework for the study. It then introduces an overview of the case study, the 'Freedom Convoy' protests, outlining the key events across four timeframes identified. The methodology section follows, detailing the processes used to select the journals, identify themes, and collect and analyze the data. The subsequent section then presents the analysis, which produced four main findings: differences in sourcing practices, tone, in the use of

populist framing, and in the presence of treatment recommendations (or solutions) between the mainstream and alternative media outlets.

Overall, this thesis not only finds major differences in how Canadian mainstream and far-right alternative media represented the ‘Freedom Convoy’ but also identifies differences between the two mainstream media outlets examined. First, regarding the diversity of sources used in their media coverage, it finds that Rebel News uses a different mix of sources than The National Post and The Globe and Mail, but did not necessarily mean they broadened the range of voices represented, as they mainly focus on certain types of voices. This was evident in the fact that Rebel News predominantly relied on ideologically aligned and self-referential sources, while the mainstream outlets mostly drew on official institutions and political leaders.

Second, when it came to the use of populist framing techniques, Rebel News clearly used populist framing, more particularly populism by the media, while the mainstream outlets do not. Instead, the Globe and Mail leaned toward an elitist style of framing, and the National Post did not fit neatly into either framing category.

Third, this analysis shows that Rebel News, National Post, and The Globe and Mail each applied very different tones, highlighting distinct interpretations of the ‘Freedom Convoy’ and related themes. It further demonstrates that these tone patterns reveal how each outlet used affective agenda setting to shape which actors and issues appeared either sympathetic or problematic, reinforcing each outlet’s broader narratives about the events that took place.

Lastly, the analysis of the use of Entman’s framing strategies employed by both alternative and mainstream media outlets found that, while the outlets clearly defined problems and identified causes, not all of them suggested treatment recommendations. The alternative media outlet, Rebel News, did not provide treatment recommendations, while the mainstream media outlets did. The

Globe and Mail and the National Post regularly moved beyond framing problem definitions, causal interpretation and moral evaluation to propose solutions, which reflects their institutional position and adherence to professional journalistic norms. Rebel News, in contrast, avoided treatment recommendations, instead blaming and delegitimizing institutions, like the Canadian government and the police.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This thesis draws upon the literature on framing and alternative media, focusing on six key areas: definitions and distinctions between mainstream and alternative media; research exploring the relationship between media and populism; literature examining far-right alternative media and its defining characteristics, including the use of conspiracy theories; alternative media in Canada; and literature on framing and agenda-setting in the media. Lastly, it provides an overview of the literature on the Freedom Convoy, with a focus on works that analyze the media's coverage of this event.

2.1 Mainstream Media

To fully grasp the concept of alternative media, it is necessary to understand its antecedent, mainstream media. Since mainstream media is often considered the norm, there is little literature that explicitly defines it. A notable exception is Kristoffer Holt et al., who defines mainstream media as a social system formed by certain legacy news media organizations, which enables public discourse through the coverage of issues of public interest (2019, p. 860; also see Kenix 2011). Although this definition is quite broad, it reflects the general ambiguity surrounding the term.

Moreover, these organizations are also characterized by hierarchical organizational structures and traditional publishing routines (Holt et al., 2019, p. 860). For example, mainstream news outlets like CBC, Global News, The New York Times, and The Globe and Mail are expected to follow certain professional journalistic standards, including accuracy, fairness, balance, impartiality, and integrity (see CBC/Radio-Canada, n.d.; The New York Times, n.d.; The Globe and Mail, n.d.; Global News, n.d.). These principles shape not only the content but also the process through which it is produced. In mainstream media, publishing a story involves more than just writing it; journalists follow a clear hierarchy in which their work is reviewed by a series of editors

before it goes public. At the top of this structure is often the editor-in-chief, who has the final say on what gets published and how the news organization presents its content (Yellowbrick, 2023, para. 9).

Lastly, for Linda Kenix, mainstream media “generally aim to maximize audiences through pack journalism that is conventional and formulaic” (2011, p. 19). She affirms that most individuals still get their information from mainstream media, despite the growing presence of alternative media platforms (Kenix, 2011, p. 26).

2.2. Alternative Media

While some authors actively criticize mainstream media, others use them to define alternative media, emphasizing their distance from the latter. For instance, Kenix asserts that “distance from the mainstream has been fundamental to most working definitions of the alternative press” (2011, p. 19). Similarly, Dennis Leung and Francis Lee emphasize this distinction by arguing that alternative media are defined in contrast to mainstream media when it comes to ownership structures, operation models, content and production norms (2014, p. 341). Holt reinforces this notion by portraying alternative media as “purer” than the “corrupt” and “exclusive” mainstream (2019, p. 860), while Cushion claims that alternative media are free from the biases attributed to mainstream outlets (2023, p. 73). Overall, there is a recurring tendency to both criticize and use mainstream media as a point of comparison and definition of alternative media.

2.2.1 Definition

Another recurring theme in the literature is the absence of a single, universally accepted definition of alternative media. In fact, many scholars emphasize the lack of a fixed definition for alternative media. For example, Tina Askanius and Nils Gustaffson argue that alternative media “has no fixed meaning” (2010, p. 26), while Kenix describes its definition as fluid and subjectively

flexible within contemporary culture (2011, p. 17). Similarly, John Downing notes that defining the term is challenging due to the diversity of formats and technologies involved (2003, p. 625), and Christian Schwarzenegger reinforces this ambiguity, stating that alternative media has always been a loosely defined concept (2023, p. 853).

Despite this consensus on the fact that there is no single definition, certain commonalities can still be identified. First, many authors describe alternative media as a means of challenging dominant narratives, positioning themselves as a corrective (see Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2018; Chen, 2024; Kenix, 2011; Cushion, 2024; Lee, 2015). In most cases, these dominant narratives originate from mainstream media. For example, Lee states that alternative media encompass an array of media outlets that challenge dominant power in society at large and the concentration of symbolic power in the mainstream media (2015, p. 310). Similarly, other authors, such as Holt et al., who are widely cited in discussions on this topic (see Schulze, 2020; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2021; Cushion, 2023), offers a non-ideological definition of alternative media (Cazzamatta, 2025), claiming that “alternative news media represent a proclaimed and/or (self-) perceived corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system” (Holt et al., 2019, p. 862). An important emphasis here is on the self-perceived nature of this corrective role and the groups each media outlet considers marginalized. While left-wing media may view marginalized communities as including people of color, women, and other historically oppressed groups, right-wing alternative media often present the white man or other traditionally dominant identities as those now facing marginalization (Kozolanka et al., 2012, p. 250). Thus, as Cazzamatta states “Both progressive and regressive forms of ‘alternative’ media claim to counter specific mainstream perspectives and adopt a more engaged, less detached journalistic approach.” (2025, p. 207).

Second, many authors present (progressive)⁷ alternative media as a form of “direct democracy” and a powerful tool for social change (Kidd, 2007, p. 115). In response to the concerns of the un-democratic nature of mainstream media, authors like Stephen Cushion present alternative media as a better option, claiming that they are “viewed as being more democratic and accountable to the public than mainstream media, more independent of commercial and political influences” (2023, p. 13). Further, Coyer et al. argue that alternative media aims to provide the independent, reliable, and accurate information necessary for a functioning democracy (2007, p. 70). Others support this view, stating that alternative media strengthens democracy by offering grassroots communication channels that are free from corporate control (Holt, 2018 in Chen, 2024, p. 1543), and that it promotes democratic participation and cultural disruption (Kenix, 2011, p. 23). However, most of that scholarship focuses on progressive alternative media. Yet, more recent research highlights the growing presence of right-wing, far-right or reactionary alternative media, which complicates these assumptions that alternative media are inherently progressive, more democratic, and more accountable than mainstream outlets (see Haller et al., 2019; Mayerhöffer, 2021; Schulze, 2020; Holt, 2020; Cazzamatta, 2025).

This emphasis on democratic engagement has also led scholars to explore the connection between alternative media and social movements. Kenix claims that “social movements serve as an excellent framework to examine mainstream and alternative media frames because they have been created specifically to oppose the status quo and are typically in direct opposition to hegemonic social and political structures” (2011, p. 42). Earlier scholarship similarly emphasizes this role, with Coyer et al., arguing that alternative media provide a powerful counterweight to the

⁷ Although this study focuses on a far-right alternative media outlet, definitions and characteristics commonly associated with progressive or left-leaning outlets are included because they remain central to the alternative media literature. Reviewing these conceptualizations is necessary to map how alternative media have historically been understood and to situate recent scholarship that questions their applicability to far-right alternative media.

enduring frames of social movement coverage in the mainstream media (2007, p. 74). In fact, she references a study on the framing of the women's movement by the US print media, which showed that mainstream media used various techniques to delegitimize feminists and minimize their ideological threat by portraying them as deviants on the margins of society (2007, p. 74). More recent research reaches comparable conclusions, with Claudia Pedraza's study of feminist protests in Mexico showing that coverage in Mexican mainstream media frequently relied on framing strategies that delegitimized, minimized, and de-historicized feminist protest actions (2023, p. 3). These points are particularly informative because they highlight how alternative media can act as a counterforce to such dominant narratives, as per their definition, providing a platform for what they perceive are marginalized voices and challenging mainstream discourses. However, in the case of far-right movements, this dynamic looks different. Paxton's analysis of mainstream coverage of the German AfD and the UK Independence Party shows that far-right protest activity is rarely highlighted in mainstream news, and when it is covered, it is frequently framed through delegitimizing lenses such as the protest paradigm, often by associating these movements with extremism or anti-democratic tendencies (2025, p. 92). In contrast, studies on far-right alternative media suggest that these outlets reverse mainstream frames rather than simply counterbalancing them. For example, in his analysis of coverage of the Charlottesville, Virginia protests, Wasilewski found that while the New York Times framed the demonstrations negatively, Breitbart News portrayed both the protest and its underlying cause, the defense of the Confederacy, not only as a legitimate and positive element of U.S. collective memory, but as one that required active protection (2019, p. 87).

Furthermore, while alternative media are perceived as providing more "accurate" representations, Leung and Lee's survey study found that the use of alternative media on the

internet is a significant positive predictor of protest participation and a significant predictor of support for civil disobedience (2014, p. 351). More recent studies also support this connection. For instance, a study of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement found that the use of alternative media can intensify attitudes toward protest participation, suggesting a link between alternative media exposure and individuals' willingness to engage in activist behavior (Shen et al., 2020, p. 9). Kenix, Coyer et al., Leung, and Lee's assertions emphasize that alternative media are not merely supplementary sources of information, but essential tools for resistance and social change. However, Atkinson and Kenix clarify that, while alternative media resist dominant power structures, they are not synonymous with activism (2019, p. 1). Alternative media provide a space for social change and for activist networks to develop, but they remain distinct.

Overall, while scholars agree on certain core characteristics of alternative media, such as its role in challenging dominant narratives and promoting democratic participation, its diversity of formats, objectives and techniques makes it difficult to provide a single definition. Moreover, it is important to highlight that most of these discussions refer to progressive media outlets. As such, some authors, like Scott Uzelman, caution against broadly categorizing alternative media as a means of enhancing democracy, as these platforms can also be exploited to create anti-democratic communities or promote racial hatred (2012, p. 71).

2.3. Populism and Far-Right Alternative Media

2.3.1 Far-right alternative media

Although alternative media might have often been "widely presumed to have a liberal or progressive disposition toward issues such as civil rights, women's equality, pacifism, and environmental protection" (Rauch, 2021, in Cushion, 2024, p. 13), a growing body of literature highlights the rise of far-right and 'regressive' alternative media (see Cushion, 2024; Atkinson,

2019; Brems, 2024; Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2018; Pytlarz, 2024; Holt, 2019). This trend has grown significantly since the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (see Atkinson, 2019; Wegenschimmel and McLaughlin, 2023; Cushion, 2024; Cazzamatta, 2025), who has positioned himself in open conflict with mainstream media throughout both his campaigns and presidencies (Holt, 2019).

According to André Haller et al., “The strategic goal of alt-right (right-wing) media is to create their own version of collective memory for counter-hegemonic reasons” (2019, p. 5). Right-wing alternative media often operate under the belief that dominant political and cultural institutions are heavily influenced by progressive agendas that silence dissent (Holt, 2019, p. 6). This is said to be evident in tactics such as labeling critics with stigmatizing terms (e.g., “racist”, “homophobic” or “misogynist”), restricting controversial speakers, and threatening individuals’ livelihoods in the name of “political correctness” (Holt, 2019, p. 6). However, these labels are not merely rhetorical tools used to suppress opposing views; they often reflect the actual content and values promoted in these media spaces. These outlets tend to position themselves in opposition to immigration, multiculturalism, and gender equality, and are often highly critical of the government and mainstream media, which they perceive as biased (see Heft et al., 2024; Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2019). These topics are typically discussed with a strong emphasis on freedom of speech – understood not merely as a legal right, but as a cultural value under threat. These platforms thus provide a space where such views can be expressed without fear of judgment or stigmatization.

2.3.2 Populism

Another part of the literature on alternative media examines its connection to populist discourse, noting that both right-wing and left-wing outlets can employ populist strategies. Many studies reference Mudde’s (2004) definition of populism: “[...] an ideology that considers society

to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (see Brems, 2024, p. 4; Hameleers et al., 2017, p. 483; Pytlarz, 2024, p. 2; Gagnon, 2022, p. 121; Hawley, 2021, p. 151). This framing is often used to describe alternative media as representing “the people” while portraying mainstream media as part of “the elite.”.

Research indicates that right-wing audiences are particularly likely to consume alternative media aligned with populist messaging (Brems, 2024, p. 10), though alternative outlets can attract both left- and right-leaning audiences (Newman et al., 2019; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2021; Schulze, 2020; Wegenschimmel and McLaughlin, 2023; Holt, 2019a; Schwarzenegger, 2023). Populist discourse in alternative media is highly flexible, adapting to different constructions of who constitutes “the people” and what constitutes a threat to them (Hameleers et al., 2018, p. 522). According to Miriam Brems, left-wing populism understands the identity of “the people” in more economic terms (e.g. the working class) and creates a sense of belonging by promoting the inclusion of historically marginalized groups who are seen as rightful members of the political community (2024, p. 4). In contrast, right-wing populism understands the identity of “the people” in cultural or ethnic terms, emphasizing a shared national or religious identity while excluding certain groups based on perceived differences in culture, religion, or ethnicity (Brems, 2024, p. 4). These differences can be seen in the type of content produced by alternative media on either side of the political spectrum.

Further, to give some insight into its users, Atkinson found in a survey of right-wing users of alternative media that 93 percent viewed mainstream media as having a liberal bias, while only 36 percent perceived a conservative bias in the alternative media they consumed (2019, p. 28).

This reflects a wider pattern identified in the literature, where audiences and producers of alternative media tend to express strong distrust of mainstream media, while expressing significantly less distrust of the content they create or use.

2.3.3 Conspiracy theories

Research shows that alternative media in general (Schatto-Eckrodt et al., 2024; Demata et al., 2022; Zeng et al., 2022), but especially right-wing alternative outlets (Romer and Jamieson, 2021; Adam et al., 2025) often rely on conspiracy narratives. Some scholars even describe these outlets as key sources of problematic conspiracy content (Mahl et al., 2023, in Adam et al., 2025, p. 3). The rise of digital media has made these narratives even more visible and easier to spread (Zeng et al., 2022).

But why do they spread these theories? In general, conspiracy theories offer simple explanations for events or situations that feel uncertain or overwhelming. They tend to gain traction during moments of crisis because people experience fear, uncertainty, and a sense of losing control (Zeng et al., 2022, p. 929; Schatto-Eckrodt et al., 2024, p. 1161). There is also a strategic reason. Conspiracy theories help challenge official accounts, which places “ordinary people” who adhere to these theories on one side and government institutions that supposedly hide the truth on the other (Schatto-Eckrodt et al., 2024, p. 1161). In fact, Schatto-Eckrodt et al. define conspiracy theories as “a heterodox explanatory pattern that attributes events and phenomena essentially to a group of people acting in secret (conspirators) who want to mislead the public and whose goal [...] is a state that is undesirable for society” (2024, p. 1162). During the COVID-19 pandemic, conservative mainstream media (e.g., Fox News) and far-right alternative media (e.g., Breitbart News) actively disseminated conspiracy theories, which was associated with lower acceptance of protective public health measures, including mask-wearing and vaccination (Romer and Jamieson,

2021, p. 1). For example, a study of German alternative media identified narratives such as the 2012 Robert Koch Institute risk analysis being framed as a secret government simulation preempting COVID-19, and the claim that the pandemic was man-made or deliberately engineered in a laboratory being actively spread (Boberg et al., 2020, p. 16). Furthermore, Romer and Jamieson (2021, p. 1) found that individuals who consume right-wing media are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories over time. In the Canadian context, research shows that some pandemic-era protest movements who initially included individuals concerned about business closures and economic hardship (e.g., No More Lockdowns Canada, Hugs Over Masks, Nurses Against Lockdown) were increasingly influenced by far-right and alt-right actors such as anti-M103, Yellow Vest protestors, the Canadian Soldiers of Odin, and others drawing on extremist and conspiratorial narratives (Amarasingam and Carvin, 2023, p. 346). In this study, Amarasingam and Carvin further show that these ideas and conspiratorial narratives were particularly amplified through far-right alternative media platforms (2023, p. 346).

This reliance on conspiratorial content can also be connected to populism. Both populism and conspiracy theories rely on a fundamental dichotomy between a “pure” or “ordinary” group and a corrupt or secretive elite. Conspiracy narratives allow alternative media to portray government institutions, mainstream media, or other authorities as deliberately misleading the public, reinforcing the same us-versus-them framing central to populist discourse.

2.3.4 Media criticism

Another part of the literature highlights that opposition to, and criticism of the media is a core feature of alternative media (Mayerhöffer and Heft, 2021, p. 1412; see also Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2019). One of the central components of alternative media, discussed in the definitions section, is its oppositional stance toward mainstream media and its view of itself as a corrective to

it (Holt et al., 2019; Schulze, 2020; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2021; Cushion, 2023). In the case of right-wing alternative media, a common trait is their mistrust of mainstream outlets, often attributed to perceptions of a left-wing bias (Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2019, p. 1223).

The literature identifies several ways in which right-wing alternative media criticize the mainstream. First, mainstream journalists are frequently described as biased, partisan, or deceitful (Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2019, p. 1228, also see Cushion et al., 2021). Second, access to mainstream media is portrayed as conditional and limited, with journalists allegedly favoring certain groups while excluding or demonizing those “on the outside” (Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2019, p. 1228). Third, mainstream journalists are seen as too distant from ordinary people (Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2019, p. 1228). Cushion et al. (2021, p. 637) adds a fourth dimension: alternative media often portray themselves as victims, highlighting perceived mistreatment by mainstream journalists. In constantly criticizing the mainstream and associating it with bias or corruption, these outlets reinforce a populist logic that frames a divide between ordinary people and a corrupt elite.

Another important component in the literature is the distinction between media criticism and media cynicism. Media criticism is understood as a necessary dimension of democratic dialogue and is considered a constructive, rational effort to improve the status quo. In contrast, media cynicism is framed as an emotional judgment aimed at generating hostility or mistrust, rather than contributing to constructive debate (Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2019, p. 1224). Media cynicism can erode public trust in journalism more broadly, whereas media criticism can encourage audiences to engage critically with news content and distinguish between legitimate reporting and bias.

2.4 Media in Canada

An important consideration for this thesis is the media context in Canada, which has a well-established mainstream media landscape dominated by a handful of major outlets. According to Colette Brin and Sébastien Charlton's report on digital news, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) is the most accessed online news source among English-speaking Canadians, while TVA Nouvelles holds that position for French-speaking citizens (2023, p. 115). Other major outlets, such as CTV and Global News, also have a significant presence on digital platforms (Brin and Charlton, 2023, p. 115). However, Brin and Charlton note a decline in public trust, particularly among English-speaking Canadians, stating that: "Attitudes towards publicly funded news services are [...] more negative than in past studies, especially in the West" (Brin and Charlton, 2023, p. 115). For example, in a comparison of the 2020 and 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer publications, Justin Steinburg found that trust in mainstream media has dropped from 65 percent to 60 percent (2024, p. 8). While this is still a majority, it shows a certain decline in trust. This trend is echoed in other reports, such as Pollara's annual Trust in Media study, which states that: "Canada's media landscape is becoming increasingly polarized, with Conservative voters less trusting of most mainstream media outlets" (Pollara Strategic Insights, 2024, para. 2). Overall, while these mainstream media institutions remain influential, their audiences have gradually declined, in some ways due to the emergence of the internet and alternative media outlets.

2.4.1 Alternative Media in Canada

The origins of alternative media in Canada can be traced back to well before the arrival of the internet. David Skinner identifies examples in the 19th century, such as Joseph Howe and William Lyon Mackenzie, who used their newspapers to "[...] oppose the establishment and encourage political reform" (2006/2017, para 6). Also, Canada is shown to be an early leader in

the creation of community access cable channels in the 1970s, with Québec mentioned as having a particularly rich history of such community radio (Skinner, 2006/2017, para 11).

While Canadian media policy might have allowed for the presence of alternative media, some tensions remained. Skinner argues that Canadian regulatory forums are mainly responsive to the needs of large, privately owned corporations (2012, p. 43). Skinner also expresses concern about the concentration of corporate media ownership, stating that “with the increasing concentration of ownership in the corporate media, the need for the development of new media is evident” (2006/2017, para18). As previously discussed within the literature on alternative media outside Canada, this concentration of corporate ownership is a common issue raised by alternative media proponents (see Atkinson, 2019; Kozolanka et al., 2012; Chen, 2024; Kidd, 2007)

Moreover, the internet has permitted the rise of new alternative media outlets in Canada (see Skinner, 2006/2017; Taylor and DeCillia, 2021; Wegenschimmel and McLaughlin, 2023; Kozolanka et al., 2012). Skinner notes that left-wing or progressive outlets such as Rabble.ca and The Tyee have provided alternative news and commentary (2006/2017, para 14). Some more progressive media news outlets in Canada include The National Observer, The Breach and New Canadian Media. According to Pytlarz, the most prominent far-right alternative media outlets in Canada include Rebel News, the True North (now Juno News), The Counter Signal, Blacklock and The Bureau. These platforms have contributed to expanding the alternative media landscape on the right side of the political spectrum (2023, p. 2). Taken together, these outlets demonstrate the wide range of political perspectives represented in Canada’s alternative media landscape. While their positions vary, they share a common goal of offering content they believe is overlooked or misrepresented by mainstream outlets.

2.4.2 The Far Right, Social Movements and Populism

Although still limited, there is a growing body of literature examining the role of alternative media in relation to the far right, social movements, and populism in Canada. While there are no well-established far-right political parties in the country, many authors have documented the presence and activities of far-right organizations (Mazepa, 2012; Gagnon, 2022; Neville and Langlois, 2021; Momani and Deschamps, 2021). Mazepa argues that far-right and religious-right organizations in Canada have long used alternative media platforms to mobilize regressive social relations, often under the guise of populist sentiment or moral activism (2012, pp. 248-258). For example, these groups employ strategic framing, in which blame is either directed upward at “elites” or downward at racialized or marginalized groups (Mazepa, 2012, p. 248). Their media strategies further this narrative by appropriating the language of rights and free speech, while simultaneously targeting human rights policies and institutions as oppressive, particularly toward the white, usually male, individual (Mazepa et al., 2012, p. 250).

A case that illustrates the continued relevance of these dynamics is the 2022 ‘Freedom Convoy’, which has become a recent example in the emerging literature on the relationship between the far right, populism, and alternative media in Canada (see Gillies et al., 2023; Boucher et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2022; Roy et al., 2024). In fact, Lex Pytlarz states that “Canadian far-right media has grown alongside the increasing participation of Canadians in right-wing activities, highlighted by the 2022 Freedom Convoy” (2024, p. 2). Kristoffer Holt similarly highlights the importance of alternative media in covering and disseminating the truckers’ perspectives during the protests (2023, p. 444), emphasizing that “the story of the Canadian truckers highlights the new role that alternative media can play, and the political relevance it has in our digital age” (2023, p. 446). Holt also argues that the tools for producing and disseminating alternative media content are now more influential than ever and play an increasingly significant role in shaping politics,

particularly shown through the reach and influence of movements such as the ‘Freedom Convoy’ (Holt, 2023, p. 451). Taken together, these studies have shown once again how alternative media can produce and spread populist discourse, reinforce distrust of mainstream institutions, and inspire social movements, including in the Canadian context.

2.5 Framing and Agenda-Setting

The general literature on media consistently refers to two foundational concepts to explain media strategy and impact: agenda-setting and framing. Agenda-setting refers to the process by which the media influences which issues people consider most important (Jasperson et al., 1998, in Linström and Marais, 2012, p. 22). The general concept of media agenda-setting was introduced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972 (Buturoiu et al., 2023, p. 11). The most basic role of agenda-setting, or first-level agenda setting, is to direct public attention toward a specific set of issues and topics (McCombs and Guo, 2014, p. 252). Because so many issues compete for visibility, news organizations can only highlight and consider some of them as newsworthy (McCombs and Guo, 2014, p. 252).

In agenda-setting research, however, the focus goes beyond deciding which issues receive coverage. The second level of agenda-setting examines how particular attributes of certain issues are emphasized, noting that just as objects differ in salience, so do their attributes (McCombs and Guo, 2014, p. 254). As Sheaffer explains, “the affective attributes attached to objects (candidates, issues, events), plays an important role in the agenda-setting and priming processes, and consequently affects the political judgment of voters” (2007, p. 21). In this sense, traditional agenda-setting focuses on how much attention an issue receives, whereas attribute agenda-setting examines the evaluative qualities attached to that attention, including tone (Ali and Gill, 2022, p. 638). In general, tone may be “positive (e.g., local government is praised for its action in relief

activities), negative (e.g., a corporation is criticized for environmental contamination), or neutral (e.g., no evaluative modifier appears in the reporting)” (Ali and Gill, 2022, p. 638, also see Nijkraake et al., 2014; Sheafer, 2007; Brunken, 2006). In the context of social movements or protests, second-level agenda-setting is particularly important, because the affective attributes emphasized by media coverage (e.g., tone, emotions) have been shown to influence public interpretation of those issues, shaping perceptions of their importance and legitimacy (Oo and Dai, 2025, p. 15, also see McCombs, 2014; Gause et al., 2023). For example, Brown and Mourão’s study of mainstream media coverage of Black civil rights protests shows that a positive tone was associated with increased public support for protesters, whereas a negative tone increased criticism and hostility toward the movement (2021, p. 591, also see Rasoulkolamaki et al., 2026; Gevers, 2019; Eshbaugh-Soha, 2010). This example shows that agenda-setting in the media coverage of protests operates not only by increasing or decreasing attention, but also by attaching attributes through tone, which can shape public judgments about the legitimacy of social movements and protests.

Conversely, framing⁸ in general, does not have a single definition that is agreed upon (Lecheler and De Vreese, 2018, p. 2, also see Lemarier-Saulnier, 2016). D’Angelo defined framing in the media as “a written, spoken, graphical, or visual message modality that a communicator uses to contextualize a topic, such as a person, event, episode, or issue, within a text transmitted to receivers by means of mediation” (2017, p. 1). Another author states that framing is “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the

⁸ Here, the concept of framing is used rather than frame. Catherine Lemarier-Saulnier (2016, p. 71) suggests that the former is the process of constructing and interpreting events, while the latter refers to the text’s actual content, such as titles, words, and expressions

issue” (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987, p. 143, in Lecheler and De Vreese, 2018, p. 3). Many other definitions exist (see Chong and Druckman, 2007; Scheufele, 1999; Tewksbury, and Scheufele, 2019), but in essence, framing is the process in which media outlets select and emphasize certain aspects of reality to promote specific interpretations of an event or topic (Linström and Marais, 2012, p. 22). For example, a study on the framing of the COVID-19 pandemic in eight media outlets (New York Times, CNN, The Punch, People’s Daily, BBC, Daily Mail, Vatican News and le Monde), using nine frames (economic consequences, conflict, morality/religion, fearmongering, hope, etc.), found an almost identical framing pattern of COVID-19 among the outlets (Ogbodo, 2020, p. 266). More specifically, all of them employed the human-interest and fear/scaremongering frames, which shaped how audiences understood the crisis and responded to it. By emphasizing fear, blame, and economic consequences, media coverage contributed to heightened public anxiety, politicization of the pandemic (Ogbodo, 2020, pp. 265-266). This is just one example of how framing choices in news media can have tangible consequences on public perception.

Furthermore, within the general literature on framing, scholars have developed more specific frame typologies to analyze news media content, including the social movement frames identified by Benford and Snow (1988) (diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames), Entman’s (1993) conceptualization of framing through the salience of four key components (problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation), and the generic news frame typologies proposed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and further developed by de Vreese (2005) (conflict frames, economic consequences frames, responsibility frames, human-interest frames, morality frames, and strategy/power frames). The framework used in this thesis is Entman’s conceptualization of framing, which has been employed by many

researchers to study how news media frame events (see Farid, 2024; Zhang, 2023; Spyridou, 2015; Kustiawan et al., 2025; Sitanggang et al., 2025; Adegbola et al., 2022). An example of the application of this framework can be found in Farid's study, which examined the framing of the 2024 Mandailing Natal Regional Election and how framing shaped the image of the election and the candidates in the eyes of the public in MohgaNews.co.id, StartNews.co.id, and MadinaPos.com (2024, p. 46). The author found differences in how issues were framed as the problem, the cause of the problem, the moral evaluation, and the proposed solutions. MohgaNews.co.id tended to support the incumbent, StartNews.co.id emphasized security as the main issue, while MadinaPos.com prioritized a clean and fair legal process (Farid, 2024, p. 44). Using Entman's framing theory, Farid concluded that "framing strategies collectively shape how voters perceive candidates and the election process, demonstrating the power of the media to build political narratives" (Farid, 2024, p. 56).

Within the broader literature on framing, scholars have also come to conceptualize populist framing as a specific strategy used by certain media outlets to construct political reality. This strategy involves presenting political conflict in explicitly dichotomous and moral terms, pitting "the pure people" against "the corrupt elite" (see Mudde, 2017; Esser et al., 2016; Toth et al., 2024; Moffitt, 2018). In this literature, there is a distinction made between three subcategories of populist framing, namely populism by the media, populism through the media, and populist citizen journalism (Toth et al., 2024, p. 5, also see Esser et al., 2016; Moffitt, 2018). Populism by the media is when media outlets themselves act as populist actors, actively producing populist discourse (Toth et al., 2024, p. 5, also see Esser et al., 2016). For example, Toth et al., in their analysis of BBC, CNN, Fox News, The New York Times and The Guardian in their general coverage of protests and demonstrations, show that news coverage of demonstrations frequently

incorporated populist cues by emphasizing anti-elitism and invoking the general will of the people, framing protests as expressions of popular grievance against political elites (Toth et al., 2024, p. 15). Populism through the media refers to when media outlets contribute to the dissemination of politician's populist messages, serving as mobilization tools for populist causes (Esser et al., 2016, p. 4). Populist citizen journalism is the case when a media outlet includes populist messages by readers, such as reader comments from their websites, in their coverage (Esser et al., 2016, p. 6).

It is also important to note that Mudde, who defined the concept of populism that is widely used, also discusses two other conceptualizations of moral divides that are created, namely elitism and pluralism. On the one hand, he defines elitism as something that “shares populism’s basic monist and Manichean distinction of society, between a homogeneous ‘good’ and a homogeneous ‘evil’, but it holds an opposite view on the virtues of the groups” (2017, p. 7). As he explains, elitists believe that “the people” are dangerous, dishonest, and vulgar, and that “the elite” are superior not only in moral, but also in cultural and intellectual terms (2017, p. 7). On the other hand, he defines pluralism as a rejection of the moral dualism found in both populism and elitism, instead of emphasizing a society composed of multiple, overlapping groups with differing interests and values (Mudde, 2017, pp. 7-8). Within this view, diversity is treated as a strength rather than a weakness, and political conflict is managed through compromise and consensus (Mudde, 2017, pp. 7-8). Power is therefore understood as something that should be distributed, rather than concentrated in the hands of any single group (Mudde, 2017, pp. 7-8). This thesis focuses on populism and elitism, as the material analyzed reflected dualistic constructions of “us” and “them”.

Taken together, agenda-setting and framing offer complementary theoretical approaches to analyzing media coverage. In the context of this thesis, this refers more specifically to the coverage of protests.

2.6 ‘Freedom Convoy’

Lastly, it is important to explore the current state of literature on the Canadian ‘Freedom Convoy’ to determine what has already been studied and what remains to be explored. Many articles have been published on the ‘Freedom Convoy’, and they vary in their focus. Some focus on identity and citizenship (see Bauman, 2022; Walton, 2022; and Stelkia, 2022), some on its relation to extremism or radicalization (see Wegenschimmel and McLachlan, 2023; Höchsmann et al., 2024; Askanius et al., 2024; and Shaikh, 2023), some on the role of the media (see Roy et al., 2023; Huang, 2022; Farokhi, 2022; and Pytlarz, 2024), and some on law, such as the Emergencies Act (see Eaton and Gaspard, 2024; Sabin, 2022; and Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2024). For this thesis, the most pertinent strands of this literature are those that focus on the media.

When it comes to media and social media coverage of the ‘Freedom Convoy’, there are far fewer studies. One study that offers an analysis similar to this thesis is Roy et al.’s comparative examination of five Canadian mainstream media outlets and the ‘Freedom Convoy’s’ Facebook page. Using theoretical and framing analyses, they found that mainstream media and the Facebook page presented the convoy in very different ways, with variations between the mainstream media outlets themselves as well (Roy et al., 2023, pp. 788). Coverage on both sides relied on a binary, Manichaeian logic surrounding questions of identity, constructing narratives of heroes and villains depending on the source (Roy et al., 2023, pp. 798-799). The authors also argue that these divergent framings contributed to the broader and ongoing problem of political polarization (Roy et al., 2023, p. 799).

A similar approach is taken by Pytlarz in her analysis of far-right alternative media coverage of the ‘Freedom Convoy’. Focusing on articles published by Rebel News and True North

during the protests, she examines how media criticism was used to challenge the legitimacy of mainstream journalism. She identifies four recurring strategies, the Media Party, Disinformation, Citizen/Taxpayer, and Expert positions, which overall put into question the legitimacy of the mainstream media (Pylartz, 2024, p. 178). She concludes that the rapidly growing presence of far-right media poses a significant challenge to the authority of mainstream journalism (Pytlarz, 2024, p. 186).

Kohm also analyzes the framing practices of the mainstream media (the National Post and the Globe and Mail) with regard to the 'Freedom Convoy'. He focused on the social construction of the 'Freedom Convoy', examining "how social problems are created through rhetorical strategies of claims-making in the media" (p. 551). Kohm found that the National Post framed the protest more positively and sympathetically in the beginning, focusing on the media's lack of attention to the convoy. The National Post also criticized Prime Minister Trudeau and the government for their actions against protesters and Canadian citizens with mandates (Kohm, 2025, pp. 557-558). The Globe and Mail, on the other hand, defended citizens' right to protest in the beginning but was more cautious and acknowledged the potential for violence in the protest (Kohm, 2025, p. 558). An interesting finding by Kohm is that, as the protest became a more serious issue, the two news outlets diverged in their coverage. The Globe and Mail highlighted the dangers and harms caused by the protesters, while the National Post continued to defend them, claiming that the issues were caused by a few reprehensible outliers or constituted peaceful civil disobedience (2025, p. 559). Kohm found differences in the ideological positions of these two outlets regarding the meaning of the convoy protests (2025, p. 561) and highlights that this should be seen as a warning about the rise of U.S.-style populist politics in Canada (2025, p. 562).

Lastly, two studies focus specifically on Twitter content during the ‘Freedom Convoy’. Huang et al. (2022) analyze Twitter discourse surrounding the convoy using topic modelling and sentiment analysis of tweets posted during the protests. They identify five dominant topics, including support for the convoy, political arguments targeting the prime minister, vaccine mandates, police activities, and fundraising (Huang et al., 2022, pp. 3-4). Their findings suggest that overall sentiment toward the convoy tended to be positive and gradually shifted toward neutrality over time, while polarization persisted across topics, particularly in relation to political leadership and public health measures (Huang et al., 2022, p. 6). Farokhi (2022) examines the ‘Freedom Convoy’ through a discourse analysis of tweets associated with the hashtags #IStandWithTruckers and #TruckersForFreedom2022. She shows that convoy-related discourse was shaped by affective and conspiratorial rhetoric, including narratives of a lost “golden age” of freedom, vaccines framed as weapons of mass genocide, fears surrounding “The Great Reset,” and the restoration of patriarchal masculinity (2022, pp. 71-84). Farokhi concludes that the circulation of conspiratorial thinking through digital media enables transnational affective alignment, creating spaces in which extremist actors can connect and support one another across borders, while encouraging the spread of populism, fascism, and everyday racism and misogyny, thereby exacerbating political polarization (2022, p. 87).

Although the literature on the media and the ‘Freedom Convoy’ has studied far-right alternative media, mainstream media, and social media individually, there are no studies that compare the framing, tone and sourcing practices of alternative and mainstream media.

2.7 Conclusion

This literature review has examined scholarly debates on mainstream and alternative media and has further explored agenda-setting and framing as central frameworks for understanding these

two main types of media. While their definition remains contested, a consistent thread across the literature is the positioning of alternative media as a self-perceived corrective to dominant narratives, particularly those produced by traditional, hierarchical, and commercially driven news organizations. Authors have emphasized that alternative media challenge mainstream production models, ownership and structures, while also supporting political participation and providing a space for what they consider to be marginalized voices (see Holt et al., 2019; Kenix, 2011; Coyer et al., 2007; Leung and Lee, 2014). The exploration of agenda-setting and framing further provides a conceptual lens through which these claims can be empirically examined, highlighting how both mainstream and alternative media can shape public attention and interpretation of events.

Despite this growing body of literature, the review reveals a significant gap in the literature concerning the Canadian context. Many studies, particularly those incorporating case studies or surveys focus on the United States (see Tumber and Waisbord, 2021; Atkinson and Kenix, 2019; Downing, 2003) or European countries (see Askanius et al., 2010; Brems, 2024). Others remained largely theoretical, seeking to define alternative media without referring to specific national cases (see Holt et al., 2019; Coyer et al., 2007; Harcup, 2005; Kidd, 2007; Sharma, 2022). As a result, there is a lack of research focused specifically on alternative media in Canada. While some research, as explored above, has examined alternative media in Canada (see Skinner, 2006/2017; Taylor and DeCillia, 2021; Wegenschimmel and McLaughlin, 2023; Kozolanka et al., 2012; Pytlarz, 2024) and far-right social media use in the Canadian context (see Gagnon, 2022; McKelvey et al., 2022; Amarasingam et al., 2024), there remains a rare presence of studies that analyze how alternative media represent social movements, and how their framing strategies and content may diverge from the mainstream media. Even fewer studies have examined the media's representation of the 'Freedom Convoy'. Existing studies have compared Facebook posts with

mainstream media coverage (Roy, 2023); analyzed far-right alternative media coverage (Pytlarz, 2024); compared coverage from two mainstream media outlets (Kohm, 2025); and examined tweet content (Huang and Farokhi, 2022). This thesis fills a gap in the literature by directly comparing the right-wing alternative and two mainstream media outlets in their representations of the ‘Freedom Convoy’.

Chapter 3: Context on the Case Study

This section provides contextual background for the ‘Freedom Convoy’ protest, which serves as the central case study for this thesis. It presents a chronological overview of the protest’s development, focusing on its key events between January and March 2022. This time frame is divided into four phases: (1) January 14–31: Emergence and beginnings of the protest; (2) February 1–13: Occupation of Ottawa and legal actions; (3) February 14–21: Invocation of the Emergencies Act; and (4) February 22–March 11⁹: Post-protest reactions and reflections. The dates delimiting each timeframe were determined by major developments in the protest. For example, the second phase ends on February 13 and the next begins on February 14, when the federal government invoked the Emergencies Act, which marked a clear shift in the protest.

3.1. Timeframe 1 - Emergence and Beginnings of the Protest

This initial timeframe highlights the emergence and early development of the protest as it transitioned into an organized movement, spanning from January 14 to January 31, 2022. On January 14, Tamara Lich, secretary of the right-wing populist Maverick Party¹⁰ (The Globe and Mail, 26 January 2022) and one of the key ‘Freedom Convoy’ organizers, launched a GoFundMe campaign to support the convoy, with the page stating that “Our current government is implementing rules and mandates that are destroying the foundation of our business, industries and livelihoods”, (The Globe and Mail, 25 January 2022). The following day, January 15, Canada’s new cross-border vaccine mandate came into effect (Public Order Emergency

⁹ Unlike earlier phases defined by specific events, the final timeframe (February 22–March 11) captures a period of reflection and debate following the protest. March 11 was chosen as the endpoint because, by this date, media coverage of the ‘Freedom Convoy’ had largely shifted away from daily reporting on the protest and its immediate aftermath toward longer-term institutional and legal processes (e.g., debate over the Emergencies Act)

¹⁰ An Alberta-Based political party that stood for “true western representation”. Their mission statement was to: “achieve autonomy for western Canadians through (a) eliminating federal overreach and (b) Total focus on Western priorities” (The West’s Federal Party Maverick, 2023). Since February 28th, 2025, the Maverick Party has been deregistered by Elections Canada (The West’s Federal Party Maverick, 2023).

Commission, 2023, p. 4). This policy required that groups of travelers who were previously exempt from vaccination requirements, including truckers, now be fully vaccinated to enter the country (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2022).

The convoy's mobilization began shortly after. On January 22, the first groups departed from British Columbia for Ottawa, followed by convoys leaving Nova Scotia on January 27. By January 28, participants had begun to arrive in the National Capital Region (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 5).

January 29 marked the second official day of protests in Ottawa, during which several controversial incidents occurred. These included the draping of anti-vaccine mandate signs and an upside-down Canadian flag on the Terry Fox statue, people parking their vehicles on the National War Memorial, and people dancing on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (The Globe and Mail, 30 January 2022). There were also reports of harassment at the Shepherds of Good Hope shelter (National Post, 31 January 2022) and the temporary closure of the Rideau Centre mall due to protesters overwhelming the site and refusing to wear masks (The Globe and Mail, 29 January 2022) (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 5). At this time, attention was drawn back to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that was originally issued in December 2021 by Canada Unity¹¹ (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 4). The MoU called on the Senate of Canada and the Governor General (i.e., the Federal Government), to either uphold all Canadian and international human rights laws outlined in the document or “Resign their lawful positions of authority immediately” (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2022, p. 1).

¹¹ This is a Calgary-based group whose goal was to campaign against mask mandates and vaccine passports implemented by the Canadian government. The group was represented by James and Sandra Bauder, as well as Martin Brodmann (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 4).

On January 31, a second fundraising campaign was launched, this time on the platform GiveSendGo (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 5). Both the GoFundMe and the GiveSendGo were created to help with food, lodgings and fuel for the truckers, and organizers claimed that “any left over donations will be donated to a credible Veterans organization which will be chosen by the donors” (Rebel News, 26 January 2022, also see The Globe and Mail, 26 January 2022). The GoFundMe fundraiser raised over 8 million dollars in the first timeframe, which the platform froze due to the number being so large, until the organizers of the convoy could provide a plan on how the funds would be disbursed (The Globe and Mail, 29 January 2022, also see National Post, 26 January 2022).

3.2. Timeframe 2 - “Occupation” of Ottawa and legal actions

The second timeframe covers the escalation of the ‘Freedom Convoy’ protest and the growing responses from local and provincial authorities between the 1st and 13th of February 2022. During this period, tensions intensified between protesters, law enforcement and government officials, as the demonstration became increasingly established in Ottawa.

On February 2nd, Ottawa Police Chief Peter Sloly stated that “there may not be a policing solution to this demonstration”, acknowledging the scale and complexity of the situation (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 6). On the same day, GoFundMe announced that it had paused the ‘Freedom Convoy’ fundraiser, pending a review of its compliance with platform’s policies (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 6), and on February 4th GoFundMe announced it had terminated the fundraiser and would refund all donors (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 7). On February 3rd, organizers held a press conference in which Tamara Lich affirmed that protesters would remain in the capital until all Coronavirus mandates were lifted (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 6).

Amid growing public disruption and safety concerns, both Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson (6 February) (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 7) and Ontario Premier Doug Ford (11 February) declared states of emergency (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 10). Chief Sloly thereafter informed Mayor Watson and the Police Services Board that the Ottawa Police Service required an additional 1,800 officers and further resources to manage the occupation.

Lastly, as the goals and leadership of the protest came under scrutiny, Canada Unity formally withdrew its Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on 8 February, citing concerns about ‘unintended interpretations’ by the public (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 8).

3.3. Timeframe 3 - Invocation of the Emergencies Act

The third timeframe covers the period between February 14 and 21, 2022, when the federal government invoked the Emergencies Act and police operations were launched to end the protest in Ottawa. This week was the final stage of the ‘Freedom Convoy’ demonstration and the government’s most direct intervention in response to the crisis.

On February 14, after consultations with provinces and territories, the federal government declared a public order emergency under the Emergencies Act (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 11). The next day, the Governor in Council adopted the Emergency Measures Regulations and the Emergency Economic Measures Order under the Act (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 12). The Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland announced new financial measures targeting crowdfunding platforms and protest-related transactions. On February 17, police began clearing demonstrators from downtown Ottawa, and organizers Pat King and Tamara Lich were arrested separately (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 12).

Between February 19 and 21, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau chaired meetings of the Incident Response Group as operations continued. The House of Commons debated whether to

confirm the declaration of a public order emergency, and the motion was adopted on February 21 (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 13).

3.4. Timeframe 4 - Post-protest reactions and reflections

This final timeframe covers the aftermath of the ‘Freedom Convoy’ protest, with a focus on official responses, the lifting of emergency measures and the long-term political and legal repercussions that extended well beyond the protest itself. Although the protest had primarily been cleared by the 21st of February 2022, there is no official date marking its conclusion.

Some identify the 23rd of February 2022 as a symbolic endpoint, coinciding with the federal government’s revoking of the Emergencies Act (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 13). On this date, the Emergencies Act was formally withdrawn and the motion to confirm the declaration, which had already been passed in the House of Commons, was retracted in the Senate before a vote could take place (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 13). At the provincial level, Ontario also terminated its own state of emergency on the same day (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, p. 13).

In the following weeks, government officials, law enforcement agencies and parliamentary committees began reviewing the events leading to the invocation of the Emergencies Act and the decision-making processes of federal and municipal authorities.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This thesis takes a qualitative, case-study approach to examining how the ‘Freedom Convoy’ was represented in the Canadian media. Specifically, media content analysis was used to investigate how the protest was portrayed over four timeframes and across mainstream and alternative media sources. Consequently, this study employs a within- and across-units comparison, synchronically¹² and diachronically¹³. (Gerring, 2004, p. 343).

4.1 Media Selection

The media outlets selected for comparison are The Globe and Mail, the National Post, and Rebel News. The Globe and Mail and the National Post are mainstream media outlets with differing political leanings, while Rebel News is an alternative media platform with far-right leanings.

Founded in 1844, The Globe and Mail was selected as one of the sources for analysis because it is a prominent mainstream media outlet in Canada and is widely regarded as politically centrist (The Globe and Mail, n.d.). According to multiple media bias rating organizations, including AllSides and Ad Fontes Media, The Globe and Mail is considered one of the most ideologically central Canadian news outlets, exhibiting neither a strong left- nor right-leaning bias (AllSides, n.d-a.; Ad Fontes Media, n.d.). The outlet has received more national newspaper awards than any other news organizations in Canada and reports reaching over six million readers weekly through its digital platforms (The Globe and Mail, n.d.). Although The Globe and Mail is not ranked as the most trusted mainstream news organization in Canada according to *Pollara’s Annual*

¹² The synchronic (specific, singular moment) within-unit analysis assessed how multiple frames and strategies coexist within a single outlet at specific moments in time. Across-unit synchronic comparison compared the coverage of different media outlets within the same time period.

¹³ The diachronic (over time) within-unit comparison examines how each individual media outlet’s framing of the ‘Freedom Convoy’ evolved across the four distinct timeframes, while across-unit diachronic comparison evaluates how similarities and differences between the three outlets developed over time.

Measure of How Canadians Feel About News Organizations (2025), it is generally viewed as trustworthy, with 65% of respondents (out of 3,400) rating it as trustworthy and 16% as untrustworthy¹⁴ (Pollara, 2025, p. 12). While outlets such as The Weather Network and CBC News ranked higher in overall trust, they were not selected for this study due to differences in subject matter and, in the case of CBC News, concerns regarding a left-leaning bias identified by media bias indicators (AllSides, n.d.-d; Ad Fontes Media, n.d.). As this thesis aimed to include a prominent centrist mainstream media outlet, the Globe and Mail was deemed the appropriate choice.

Next, founded in 1998, the National Post was selected as the right-leaning mainstream media outlet for analysis. According to AllSides, National Post has a “right-leaning” bias (AllSides, n.d.-b). Similarly, the Canadian Encyclopedia, states that it competes directly with The Globe and Mail and is known for its conservative editorial stance (Potter, 2014). In terms of public trust, the National Post is rated lower than The Globe and Mail but is still regarded as moderately trustworthy, with 49% of respondents (out of 3,400) identifying it as trustworthy and 19% as untrustworthy (Pollara, 2025, p. 12).

Finally, the far-right news outlet Rebel News was selected as the alternative media source because it is a prominent digital outlet known for its oppositional stance toward government and mainstream narratives (see “About Us,” RebelNews.com). In addition to its more recent presence and disturbance at the 2025 federal leaders’ debate, Rebel News has maintained and expanded its visibility over time, including its controversial support and positive coverage of the Charlottesville protests¹⁵ (Canadian Association of Journalists, 2017). According to AllSides and Ad Fontes,

¹⁴ The last 19% of respondents responded “not familiar” with the Globe and Mail.

¹⁵ The Charlottesville, Virginia, protests involved hundreds of white nationalists gathering for a rally over plans to remove a Confederate statue, which was met by counterprotesters and resulted in one death and dozens of injuries (Katz, n.d.). Rebel News was present at the event to provide coverage of the protests (CBC, 2017).

Rebel News has a strong right bias (AllSides, n.d.-c, Ad Fontes, n.d.-b). This highlights Rebel News' position as an increasingly visible platform, making it a relevant case for examining alternative media framing of the convoy protest.

The inclusion of two mainstream media outlets with differing political leanings allows this analysis to examine variations in framing strategies within prominent Canadian mainstream media, rather than limiting the comparison to a centrist mainstream outlet and a far-right alternative media platform. The inclusion of the National Post serves as an analytical bridge between the centrist mainstream and far-right alternative media outlets, as it operates within the mainstream media sphere like The Globe and Mail while exhibiting a right-leaning ideological orientation closer to that of Rebel News. Moreover, the selection of far-right alternative media is particularly relevant given the ideological alignment of the protest and of key protest leaders like Tamara Lich and Patrick King (Pytlarz, 2024, p. 5). Left-wing alternative media sources were not included because initial searches¹⁶ indicated that there was limited coverage of the convoy protest on their websites.

Data was collected using the Factiva and Rebel News search engines¹⁷, and the following keywords were used: “Freedom Convoy” OR “Convoy Protest” OR “Trucker Convoy” OR “Anti-mandate protest” OR “Convoi de la liberté” AND “Ottawa.” These keywords reflect the different names used to describe the protest, helping to ensure that as many articles as possible referring to the event were included in the search. Given the large volume of articles on the topic and the fact that the main protest occurred in Ottawa, the analysis focused on articles that specifically address the protest in Ottawa or discuss the protest and related issues more broadly. In addition, French-

¹⁶ For example, in a search for the keyword ‘Freedom Convoy’ of New Canadian Media, a left-wing, pro-immigration alternative media outlet, 12 results were provided.

¹⁷ Rebel News content cannot be accessed through a research database, so articles and videos were found using manual keyword searches on the Rebel News website.

language articles were included when they appeared in the search results in order to ensure linguistic representation.

An initial Factiva search for the Globe and Mail articles using the specified keywords and the overall timeframe of January 14 to March 11 generated 272 results, and for the National Post during the same timeframe generated 228 results. A separate search conducted on the Rebel News website using the same keywords, but without a date range due to website limitations, generated 758 results. However, many of these results were from 2024/2025 and therefore fell outside the intended period. Based on the availability of articles, the size for analysis is 15 articles per timeframe and media type. This results in a total of 180 articles that were analyzed.

To acquire the articles, for the Globe and Mail and National Post articles, a systematic sampling strategy was employed, selecting every fourth article¹⁸ retrieved from Factiva search results until a total of 15 articles were reached. If a timeline had insufficient articles to do every fourth article, every second article was selected. In contrast, for Rebel News, due to the platforms' more limited volume and lack of searchability, the first 15 relevant¹⁹ articles identified through keyword searches were selected for analysis.

4.3 Initial Analysis

The analysis focuses on content published between January 14 and March 11, 2022, a period that captures the lead-up to, the unfolding of, and the immediate aftermath of the 'Freedom Convoy.' This time frame is divided into four phases: **(1)** January 14–31: Emergence and beginnings of the protest; **(2)** February 1–13: Occupation of Ottawa and legal actions; **(3)** February 14–21: Invocation of the Emergency Act; and **(4)** February 22–March 11: Post-protest reactions

¹⁸ If an article in the search results was a duplicate or an opinion piece, it was skipped and the next article in the list was selected, while continuing to choose every fourth article thereafter.

¹⁹ By relevant, it means articles that fit the 1-13 February 2022 timeframe, as well as articles that deal with either the Ottawa protest or more general convoy issues.

and reflections. Analyzing the coverage of the protest by the Globe and Mail, the National Post, and Rebel News over these different time periods made it possible to examine how media strategies and narratives might have evolved in line with the protest's changing dynamics.

The initial analysis followed a hybrid coding method (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 52), integrating both deductive and inductive strategies. Deductive codes were developed using the literature on mainstream and alternative media, and with a brief overview of all selected articles. At the same time, inductive coding allowed for new themes to emerge during the analysis, such as “(mention of their own) journalists”, and “truckers against the protest”. This hybrid approach reflects the dynamic nature of media representation and allowed for openness to the emergence of new themes.

Once all articles were collected, an initial overview was conducted to identify the main themes present within each timeframe. All articles were then imported into NVivo 15 to begin the coding process for each timeline. Several timelines shared common themes, such as “leaders”²⁰, “description of the protest”, “description of the protesters” and “mainstream media”. However, because this thesis employed both deductive and inductive coding approaches, additional themes emerged during the analysis, often in response to specific events occurring within particular timelines. For instance, the theme “emergencies act” was relevant in the third timeline but not in the first or second, as the Act had not yet been enacted. When new themes emerged, previously coded articles were revisited and re-coded as necessary to ensure consistency across the dataset.

Once coding was completed, summaries of the results were created for each news outlet and timeline. These summaries served as the basis for identifying similarities and differences between mainstream and alternative media outlets.

²⁰ Each recurrent theme had a subcategory “negative” or “positive” which helped with understanding the stance of the journals on certain topics.

Following this, in the second phase of analysis, Entman's framing theory was used as the theoretical framework to find differences in how mainstream and alternative news media outlets framed the protest. Entman (1993) framing theory, is one of the most frequently cited and widely trusted definitions in framing research. Entman defines framing as follows:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition (diagnosing problems), causal interpretation (diagnosing causes), moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendations for the item described. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

Using this framework and the results of the coding that was completed in the first analysis, a table was created to identify the main problems raised by each outlet, the causal interpretation or the cause attributed to the problems, and the moral evaluation or the treatment recommendations associated with the problem as well. From the initial coding analysis and the use of Entman's theoretical framework, four main findings emerged: (1) differences in sourcing; (2) variations in tone; (3) varying use of us-and-them framing; and (4) differences in the inclusion of treatment recommendations. The analytical process of these findings is explained in the subsequent sections.

4.4 Finding the Sources

After completing the initial analysis, it became clear that the three media outlets cited a range of different sources. Because of this variation, a third analysis was conducted in NVivo using all 180 original articles from each news outlet and timeframe in order to examine the types of sources being cited. Based on an initial review of the sources, seven categories were created to organize them: "official institutions", "political leaders", "mainstream media", "alternative media", "social media", "interviewed individuals", "their own journalists or news outlet", and "other"²¹.

²¹ These categories were loosely inspired by Horne et al., (2024) and Frischlich et al., (2020) categories in their studies.

Sources were coded as “official institutions” if they originated from law enforcement, universities, official government statements, or other expert sources with direct ties to government institutions. “Political leaders” were frequently quoted or referenced, and each mention was color coded according to political affiliation: blue for Conservatives, red for Liberals, orange for the NDP, green for the Green Party, and pink for the Bloc Québécois. This coding allowed for analysis of whether media outlets tended to reference particular political affiliations more frequently. Sources categorized as “mainstream media” or “alternative media” were generally easy to identify. In cases of uncertainty, the outlet was researched to determine its classification. Mentions of mainstream media were also coded based on tone, with negative references marked in red. “Interviewed individuals” were typically clearly identified in the articles, often described as members of the public or representatives of specific organizations. References to a media outlet’s “own journalists or media outlet” were also easily identifiable, either through direct mention of the journalist’s name, phrases such as “as stated in previous reporting,” or through internal hyperlinks. All sources identified in the articles fit into one of these categories. In rare cases where a source did not clearly align with an existing category, it was placed in the “other” category, with a note included to clarify the nature of the source.

Several methods were used to identify sources within the articles. First, the Globe and Mail and Rebel News frequently used hyperlinks to cite sources, which allowed direct access to the original material. Second, Rebel News often cited individuals through images, such as screenshots of social media posts. Third, any material attributed to an external source, such as statements made by political leaders, was coded as a cited source. References to other media outlets, including statements such as “the CBC reported that,” were also treated as sources. Finally, interviewed

individuals were coded as sources when they were named, quoted directly, or referenced anonymously.

4.5 Determining the Tone

The tone was determined by analyzing the connotation of the language surrounding each theme. The main themes were identified using Entman's concept of problem definition, by examining how each outlet framed what or who they presented as the central issues of the convoy. These themes included the protest, the protesters, the convoy leaders, the mandates, the Canadian government, the Liberal and Conservative parties, law enforcement, the mainstream media, and the Emergencies Act.

In understanding a text, tone is not always stated explicitly and often must be inferred from word choice and context. This analysis relied on the concept of connotation, which the Cambridge Dictionary defines as "a feeling or idea that is suggested by a particular word although it need not be a part of the word's meaning, or something suggested by an object or situation" (n.d.). As a result, some interpretation was required to determine whether the language surrounding a theme carried a positive, negative, or neutral implication.

Tone was thus categorized according to the connotation generally associated with each theme. For example, within the "Protest and Protesters" category, tone was considered positive when language suggested the theme was constructive, peaceful, or socially beneficial. A negative tone was assigned when the language framed the theme as harmful, disruptive, or threatening. Tone was considered neutral when the theme was presented descriptively without evaluative or emotionally charged language, such as simply stating events that occurred during the protest. A theme was categorized as mixed when both positive and negative connotations appeared within the same coverage during the same timeframe.

4.6 Finding the us-and-them

Following the initial analysis of problem definitions and causal interpretations, meaning how each outlet framed the causes of the issues related to the convoy, it was observed that news outlets consistently constructed certain actors as belonging to an in-group (“us”, pure people) or an out-group (“them”, corrupt elite). To capture this, a separate table was created to document these distinctions. Article summaries were used as the primary reference for analysis, and the original articles were consulted when additional context was required. A us-and-them analysis was conducted for each news media outlet and timeframe to see if the framing of the in-groups and out-groups changed throughout the evolution of the protest.

Actors were assigned to the “us” category when they were framed as credible or aligned with the values and assumptions of the news outlet. These actors were presented as reasonable, legitimate, or acting in the public interest. For example, in Rebel News’ coverage during the first timeframe, the protesters were portrayed in a highly positive manner. Rebel News positioned itself as aligned with the protesters, frequently emphasizing its presence on the ground and framing its reporting and presence as part of a shared struggle for freedom²². Actors were assigned to the “them” category when they were portrayed as oppositional, disruptive, or responsible for a perceived problem, often through critical language that positioned them outside the implied audience. For example, in The Globe and Mail coverage during the first timeframe, protesters were framed as disruptive and unwelcome. They maintained a clear distance from the protest and from the actions of the protesters in its reporting²³. In the case of the National Post, identifying a clearly defined “us” proved difficult. The coverage did not consistently construct an explicit “us” and

²² Rebel News, 27 January 2022, also see 28 January 2022, 31 January 2022, 31 January 2022, 26 January 2022, 21 January 2022, 24 January 2022

²³ The Globe and Mail, 30 January 2022, also see 29 January 2022, 27 January 2022, 31 January 2022, 28 January 2022, 30 January 2022, 29 January 2022, 29 January 2022, 29 January 2022

instead relied primarily on defining a “them” through critique and opposition. As a result, only the “them” category was coded for this outlet.

4.7 Determining the treatment recommendations

Finally, when using Entman’s framework, it was observed that Rebel News offered few treatment recommendations. The other three framing categories were clear, but the treatment recommendations were not.

To further explore this observation, a fourth analysis was conducted using NVivo. All 180 articles were re-analyzed to determine which articles included treatment recommendations. An item was coded as a treatment recommendation only if it explicitly proposed an action or solution intended to improve the situation, such as recommendations for managing the protests or even providing support to protesters (e.g. providing legal assistance). Mentions of solutions were required to be direct and explicit. For example, the statement, “They [the police] could have narrowed Wellington Street in front of the Parliament buildings and allowed truckers to drive by in single file, but not park. This would have prevented the occupation of the downtown [...]”²⁴, constitutes a clear recommendation directed at law enforcement and was therefore coded as a treatment recommendation.

4.8 Ethical considerations

While this study relies exclusively on publicly available media content, it still involves important ethical considerations. First, because the focus of this research is on media content and its representations of the ‘Freedom convoy’, rather than individual journalistic work, the names of journalists were not cited in the analysis. This is also important to ensure that journalists do not feel that they are being judged or targeted for their work. Second, both mainstream and alternative

²⁴ National Post, 8 February 2022

media sources were treated with the same analytical scrutiny. The aim was not to validate or invalidate particular ideological perspectives, but rather to understand how different types of media outlets have represented the protest. A final consideration was the nature of the content itself. Some articles contained conspiratorial or discriminatory content. While such content was relevant to understanding the framing of the 'Freedom Convoy', its inclusion in the analysis required careful handling. When such content was analyzed, it was contextualized rather than amplified or legitimized (Brown and Mondon, 2021, p. 290).

Chapter 5: Analysis and Results

5.1. Who they cite

Understanding the sourcing practices of each media outlet helps clarify the broader differences between alternative and mainstream media. One of the key objectives of alternative media is to challenge dominant narratives, so it is expected that their sourcing strategies would diverge from those of mainstream outlets (see Ihlebæk et al., 2022; Buyens and Aelst, 2021; Heft et al., 2024; Frischlich et al., 2020, Rauch, 2016). The findings from this analysis show that although Rebel News uses a different mix of sources than The National Post and The Globe and Mail, this does not necessarily broaden the range of voices represented, as they mainly focus on certain types of voices. This is evident in the fact that Rebel News predominantly relies on ideologically aligned and self-referential sources, while the mainstream outlets draw mostly on official institutions, political leaders, and sometimes their own journalists.

As shown in diagram 1 and further specified in table 1, Rebel News relied most heavily on social media (23.38%) and on its own journalists or media outlet (25.90%)²⁵ for information. Much of their social media sourcing consisted of direct references to posts on Twitter (now named X), often including screenshots shown within the articles, mainly of posts made by individuals they were ideologically aligned with. Alternative media sources appeared less frequently (9.71%), with references to outlets such as The Blacklock's Reporter and The Counter Signal. Interviewed individuals made up a similar proportion of their sourcing (9.71%), mainly consisting of protest participants. Mainstream media sources were used somewhat more often (13.67%). These were sometimes treated as legitimate information sources, but many citations were also used to critique

²⁵ The category "their own journalists or media outlet" refers to cases where a media outlet cites its own reporters as sources of information or relies on its previously published reporting.

mainstream reporting as biased or inaccurate. It also rarely referred to official institutions (7.55%) or political leaders (6.47%). When they did mention them, it was mainly to criticize them, but they did sometimes use them as a source of information. Finally, the “other” category represented a small portion of their sourcing (3.60%). All the “other” citations were from right-leaning or far-right websites, such as Canada Unity’s website.

The Globe and Mail primarily relied on official institutions (26.26%), political leaders (17.51%), and their own journalists or articles (19.19%). Social media sources (11.11%) and “other”²⁶ sources (14.14%) were less used, with Twitter and Facebook being the most frequently cited social media platforms. The “other” category included a variety of sources providing additional context, such as the GoFundMe website, the Canadian Trucking Alliance site, and GiveSendGo’s website. Interviewed individuals were cited relatively infrequently (6.73%), and references to other mainstream outlets, such as CTV or CBC, were minimal (5.05%), as Globe and Mail often referred to its own reporting. Alternative media sources were not cited (0.00%).

The National Post, while also a mainstream outlet, showed some differences in sourcing compared to Globe and Mail. It relied most heavily on different political leaders (21.14%), official institutions (18.29%), such as university professors, government entities and police officers, as well as “other” sources (22.36%). The “other” sources (14.14%) included GoFundMe, convoy organizers, public polls, American public figures such as Elon Musk and Joe Rogan, as well as Canada Unity. Social media was also used (14.23%), though less extensively than by Rebel News, and references to its own journalists or articles were moderate (10.16%). Interviewed individuals

²⁶ The “other” category refers to any source that does not fit into one of the seven main categories. This includes topic-specific sources, such as GoFundMe and GiveSendGo, the Canadian Trucking Alliance, and sometimes right-wing sources like Canada Unity.

were minimally cited (4.88%); other mainstream media outlets were sometimes cited (8.13%), and alternative media sources appeared rarely (0.81%).

These patterns set the foundation for the next section, which explains the motivations behind these sourcing choices across four themes: the inversion of established source hierarchies, source diversity, the role of mainstream media as both enemy and information source, and the use of social media. The following section focuses primarily on Rebel News' sourcing choices, since their practices differ most clearly from conventional sourcing expectations.

Diagram 1: Types of Sources Across Media Outlets

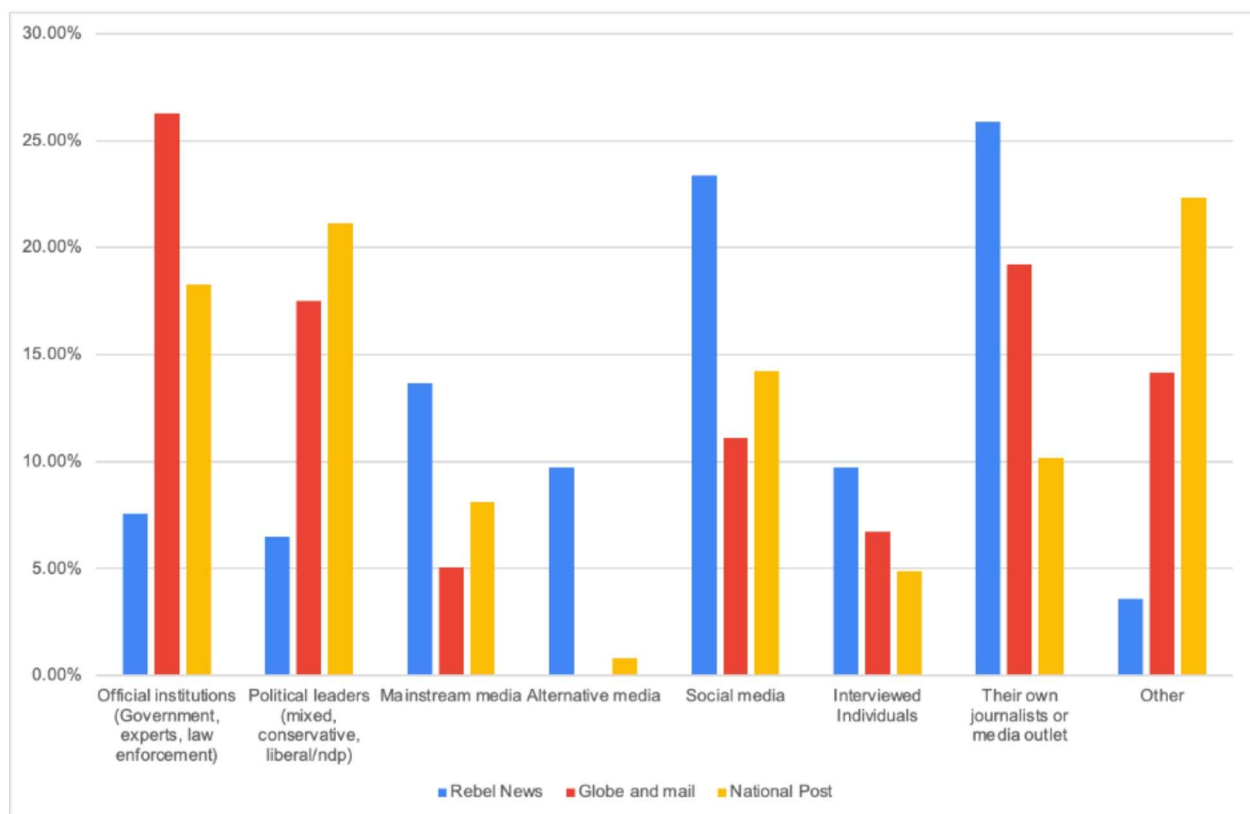


Table 1: Percentage of Sources Across Media Outlets

	Source Type							
	Official institutions	Political leaders	Mainstream media	Alternative media	Social media	Interviewed Individuals	Their own journalists or journal	Other
Rebel News	7.55%	6.47%	13.67%	9.71%	23.38%	9.71%	25.90%	3.60%
The Globe and Mail	26.26%	17.51%	5.05%	0.00%	11.11%	6.73%	19.19%	14.14%
National Post	18.29%	21.14%	8.13%	0.81%	14.23%	4.88%	10.16%	22.36%

5.1.1. *Inverting established source hierarchies*

Mainstream media, as documented in the literature, mainly privilege elite or institutional sources such as political authorities, government institutions, and other established actors, while giving limited attention to voices outside these circles (Ihlebaek et al., 2022, p. 1276; also see Heft et al., 2023; Freudenthaler and Wessle, 2022; Buyens and Aelst, 2021; Atton, 2002). This reliance on elite or institutional actors narrows the range of perspectives represented in mainstream coverage and thus contributes to a more homogenous news output. This is evident in the current analysis, where both the Globe and Mail and National Post largely cite official institutions and political leaders. In contrast, alternative media are described in literature as challengers to these mainstream source hierarchies (see Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2018; Chen, 2024; Kenix, 2011; Cushion, 2024; Lee, 2015). Their role, as highlighted by Ihlebaek et al. (also see Freudenthaler and Wessle, 2022; Frischlich et al., 2020; Raunch, 2016), is to amplify actors who are traditionally marginalized in mainstream journalistic routines, such as grassroots participants, “ordinary people,” controversial or deviant groups, activists, and social movement leaders who question the authority of institutional experts (2022, pp. 1275–1276). The findings from the present analysis reinforce this dynamic. Rebel News consistently elevated non-elite and non-institutional sources.

They rarely relied on official or expert-based sources, and they prioritized far-right websites, interviews with individuals, alternative news platforms, their own journalists and prior reporting, as well as social media content from “ordinary” users. This pattern presents both positive and problematic implications. On the one hand, Rebel News’ reliance on non-elite and non-institutional sources can be seen as a widening of the space for actors who receive little attention in mainstream reporting. On the other hand, the specific voices being elevated and those being excluded raise concerns. Rather than truly broadening the spectrum of perspectives, Rebel News mainly amplifies a narrow set of ideologically aligned actors, including “ordinary” citizens who support the protest, conservative politicians, right-leaning websites, and its own journalists or affiliated alternative platforms. As a result, the sourcing practices strengthen one specific narrative and leave out other viewpoints. Thus, their approach can be seen as producing a form of bias that reflects the same limits found in the mainstream media’s sourcing practices, but in the opposite direction. So, they invert the mainstream hierarchy of sources, but the value of this inversion remains uncertain.

5.1.2. Source Diversity

Some scholars have also explored whether alternative media genuinely broadens the diversity of voices in the wider news environment (see Buyens and Aelst, 2021; Heft et al., 2024; Heft et al., 2023). Source diversity is generally understood as the presence of different types of sources and viewpoints in news content (Heft et al., 2023, p. 238). Buyens and Aelst (2021) further distinguish between internal actor diversity, which refers to the range of actors that appear within a given outlet, and external actor diversity, which describes how many different kinds of actors are represented across the media system (p. 339). An outlet can therefore appear diverse internally while still contributing very little to the overall diversity of voices in the wider information

environment. Buyens and Aelst (2021) show that right-wing alternative outlets often include a wide range of actor types internally, but this does not necessarily lead to greater diversity at the external level (p. 345). Instead, as they explain, “While right-wing alternative news media do not exploit their alternativeness by providing a platform for other societal actors, they do pay more attention to radical political parties and politicians” (Buyens and Aelst, 2021, p. 351). Heft et al. provide further evidence of this pattern, showing that explicitly right-wing sources appeared almost twice as often as left-wing sources in right-wing alternative media, indicating a strong ideological selection pattern (2024, p. 24). They also highlight a frequent reliance on self-referential sourcing, where outlets cite their own previous reporting. This practice reinforces partisan framing and limits exposure to external viewpoints (Heft et al., 2024, p. 24). The present analysis also fits this pattern. Rebel News referenced far right or conservative actors in 37% of its sources in the “social media,” “alternative media,” and “other” categories. In the “political leaders” category, 64% of the citations referred to conservative politicians, which illustrates a strong partisan preference. In addition, 25% of all sources consisted of Rebel News citing its own prior reporting, which reflects the self-referential sourcing pattern described by Heft et al. (2024). Altogether, these results show that while Rebel News includes different types of sources (internally), the perspectives represented remain closely aligned with the outlet’s ideological orientation rather than contributing to better external source diversity.

5.1.3. Mainstream Media as Both the Enemy and Informative

As stated by Frischlich et al., “Although alternative news media present themselves as opposition to a hegemonically interpreted ‘mainstream’, research has shown that right-wing populist actors refer to both mainstream and alternative news media sources in their online communication” (p. 162). This pattern is also evident in Rebel News’ sourcing practices. While

some of their references to mainstream media aim to denounce it, others use it as a straightforward source of information, citing it without criticism. For example, regarding their criticisms, they accused the “mainstream media” or “media party” of misrepresenting the protest, including claims about risks to children, which they countered by insisting the protest was peaceful²⁷. They also disputed several allegations from mainstream outlets. For instance, they rejected the claim that a woman trampled by police horses had thrown a bicycle, arguing instead that it was a wheeled walker and stressing that she was a Mohawk elder who had been hospitalized²⁸. They also dismissed allegations of attempted arson in a residential building as an unverified rumor²⁹. At other times, Rebel News relied on mainstream outlets indirectly through hyperlinks rather than direct quotations, mainly when citing general information about the convoy. Direct quotations would imply a closer engagement with or recognition of mainstream credibility. Hyperlinking positions the mainstream media as something “external,” which the reader is invited to examine but not necessarily trust. Overall, these examples show that Rebel News has a selective relationship with mainstream media. They reject mainstream outlets when it supports their argument but still rely on their reporting when it is useful. This approach allows them to appear independent while still depending on mainstream coverage to shape their reporting.

5.1.4. Social Media

According to Rauch (2016, p. 756), in the early twenty-first century, many alternative media producers sought the same large scale, financial stability, professionalized operations and aesthetic norms of mainstream media, while mainstream producers increasingly adopted the practices and ideals traditionally associated with alternative media. This dynamic is particularly

²⁷ Rebel News, 20 February 2022; 13 February 2022; 14 February 2022

²⁸ Rebel News, 20 February 2022

²⁹ Rebel News, 13 February 2022

visible in the growing use of social media by mainstream news outlets, a practice long associated with alternative media due to its more informal and participatory nature (see Meraz, 2009; Boynton and Richardson Jr, 2016; Heft et al., 2023; Mayerhöffer and Heft, 2021). In this context, it is unsurprising that 23% of all Rebel News sources came from social media. What is more noteworthy is the significant presence of social media as a source for the Globe and Mail (11.11%) and the National Post (14.23%). Although these figures are lower than those for Rebel News, they suggest that mainstream outlets are increasingly adopting their sourcing practices as social media has become crucial to the production of news. A number of studies also support this shift (Moon and Hadley, 2014; Horne et al., 2024; Rony et al., 2018; Yamamoto et al., 2017). There are, however, clear differences in the kinds of social media posts each outlet cites. Rebel News draws on a wide range of posts, mainly tweets, from its own journalists, conservative politicians, independent media figures, convoy leaders, protesters and, at times, the Ottawa police. In contrast, when the National Post and the Globe and Mail reference social media content, usually from Facebook or Twitter, it is primarily to cite posts made by political leaders, experts and law enforcement, and only occasionally by convoy leaders or other protest actors. This reflects a more selective and institutionally oriented approach to integrating social media into their reporting. Overall, social media has been adopted across media outlets, but not in the same way. Each outlet uses it selectively to support the narratives and actors it already prioritizes.

In sum, the mainstream and alternative media outlets do not simply differ in how many types of sources they use, but in which voices they choose to highlight. Rebel News amplifies actors who share its ideological position, while the two mainstream outlets mainly highlight established and institutional sources. These sourcing choices limit the range of perspectives made visible to readers and help explain the different narratives each outlet ends up constructing.

5.2. Affective agenda setting

Across all media outlets, several recurring themes shaped the coverage, namely: the protest, the protesters, the convoy leaders, the COVID-19 mandates, the Canadian government, the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party, law enforcement, the mainstream media, and the Emergencies Act. While these themes appeared consistently across all sources, the tone applied to them (positive, negative, neutral or mixed) varied widely. This variation was not only evident between mainstream and alternative platforms, but also between the two mainstream news outlets themselves. As demonstrated in table 2, the analysis shows that Rebel News, National Post, and The Globe and Mail each applied different tones, highlighting distinct interpretations of the ‘Freedom Convoy’ and related themes. It further demonstrates that these tone patterns reveal how each outlet used affective agenda setting to shape which actors and issues appeared either sympathetic or problematic, reinforcing each outlet’s broader narratives about the events that took place.

In its coverage of these themes, Rebel News always adopted a particular tone. Indeed, their coverage was either negative or positive; there was no middle ground. A positive tone was associated with the protest, the protesters and the convoy leaders. For example, the protesters were repeatedly referred to as “peaceful Canadians”, “patriots”, and “hardworking”, and the protest was described as “party-like,” a “massive celebration,” a “working class rebellion” and “incredible”³⁰. The conservatives were sometimes portrayed positively, but this varied over time, with a positive tone being used in the first and third timeframes, but not in the second. This shift in the second timeframe is due to many conservative leaders distancing themselves from supporting the protest during this time – which was seen in a negative light by the outlet³¹. The tone was entirely negative

³⁰ See Rebel News, 13 February 2022, 6 February 2022, 1 February 2022, 6 February 2022, 12th February 2022, 5th February 2022, Rebel News, 18 February 2022, 18 February 2022, 18 February 2022, 14 February 2022

³¹ See Rebel News, 5 February 2022, 12 February 2022, 10 February 2022

when mentioning the COVID-19 mandates, the Canadian government, the Liberals and law enforcement. For example, the government and its mandates were described as “draconian”, “tyrannical”, and “absolutely insane”, with accusations of political overreach that was destroying businesses, industries, and livelihoods³². This clearly shows a preference for the protest and associated themes, and a sense of dissatisfaction with anyone or anything that negatively affected the protest or their ideologies, particularly institutional entities.

In contrast, National Post’s tone varied and often changed throughout the timeframes. Similarly to Rebel News, it adopted a positive tone towards the protesters and the protest in the first two timeframes, and towards conservatives in the first timeframe. However, this changed in the third timeframe, with the tone surrounding the protests becoming mixed and then negative. For example, the connotation surrounding the protest and protesters evolved from “law-abiding”, “peaceful”, “freedom fighters” to “unwelcome”, “occupation” “encampment” or more neutrally as “the freedom convoy protest”³³. The tone surrounding the protesters and conservatives remained neutral for the remaining timeframes. However, its tone regarding the Canadian government and the Liberals remained entirely negative throughout. Its coverage of mainstream media and the Emergencies Act was also entirely negative when mentioned. For example, words surrounding the government include “weak”, “overreach”, “intrusiveness”³⁴, and the emergencies act was surrounded by words like “dangerous”, “forced”, “destroy” and “farce”³⁵. The tone surrounding

³² See Rebel News, 27 January 2022, 26 January 2022, 21 January 2022, 22 February 2022, 16 February 2022, 19 February 2022, 17 February 2022, 20 February 2022, 14 February 2022

³³ See National post, 26 January 2022, 27 January 2022, 29 January 2022, 29 January 2022, 26 January 2022, 27 January 2022, 29 January 2022, 12 February 2022, 8 February 2022, 12 February 2022, 5 February 2022, 4 February 2022, 17 February 2022, 17 February 2022, 19 February 2022

³⁴ See National Post, 12 February 2022, 4 February 2022, 12 February 2022, 3 February 2022, 17 February 2022, 19 February 2022, 18 February 2022

³⁵ See National Post, 18 February 2022, 19 February 2022, 17 February 2022, 23 February 2022, 24 February 2022, 8 March 2022, 24 February 2022

the COVID-19 mandates started entirely negative and then became neutral as the protest went on. The tone regarding the convoy leaders and law enforcement remained largely neutral.

The Globe and Mail's tone in its coverage of the protest differed significantly. Unlike Rebel News and the National Post, it adopted an entirely negative tone regarding the protest, the protesters and the convoy leaders. For instance, the words surrounding the protest and protesters include "violent", "encampment", "disruption", "insurrection", and "illegal"³⁶. Other than in the first two timeframes regarding the COVID-19 mandates and in the first timeframe regarding the Canadian government, there was not a clear positive tone. The tone for these two themes then became neutral, except for the Canadian government, which had a negative tone in the third timeframe due to the enactment of the Emergencies Act. The most prominent tone in Globe and Mail coverage was neutral, applied to the Liberals, Conservatives and law enforcement (except in timeframe two, which was negative). Lastly, the Emergencies Act had a mixed tone, ranging from positive to negative to neutral depending on the article.

5.2.1. Selective negative tone

A recurring finding in the literature is that media outlets often prioritize negative news stories because people pay more attention to negative information (Andersen et al., 2024, p. 503, also see Soroka and McAdams, 2015; Soroka et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2024). For example, Trussler and Soroka show that when individuals are given a choice, they tend to select negative news stories even when more positive alternatives are available (2013, p. 2). Rosling highlights that this is because "by instinct we give more attention to 'the overdramatic worldview'" (Rosling et al., 2019, p. 13, in Andersen et al., 2024, p. 503). This aligns with the results of the present analysis. The most common tone used by all three media outlets was a negative tone, although the

³⁶ The Globe and Mail, 30 January 2022, 31 January 2022, 5 February 2022, 8 February 2022, 9 February 2022, 13 February 2022, 16 February 2022, 18 February 2022, 19 February 2022, 1 March 2022, 4 March 2022

themes associated with that negativity differed across outlets. Rebel News employed a negative tone most frequently, particularly when discussing institutional themes such as the Liberals, the federal government, and law enforcement. As Trussler and Soroka note, engagement is heightened when politics is framed as conflict or failure, since “Framing politics as a horserace, a conflict between politicians, or as a series of errors made by individuals in the system, are methods of accomplishing this [engagement]” (2013, p. 4). In the same way that Rebel News used positive tone to reinforce support for the themes it favored, it used negative tone to shape audience perceptions of the institutions it opposed.

The variation in negative tone used by the mainstream outlets is also noteworthy. National Post frequently employed a negative tone toward the COVID-19 mandates, the Liberal Party, and the Canadian government, which echoes some of Rebel News’ institutional critiques, even if the tone was less intense (45%), as shown in table 3. This likely reflects the National Post’s right-leaning stance, which often leads to more critical coverage of Liberal policy decisions.

The Globe and Mail, however, showed the least amount of negative tone across outlets (35%). When a negative tone was present, it was concentrated on the protest, the protesters, and the convoy leadership, meaning that criticism was directed primarily at behaviors perceived as disrupting public order rather than at the political institutions. This negative framing of the protest itself can be understood through the “protest paradigm,” a concept originally articulated by Chan and Lee (1984) and later developed by other scholars, which describes a recurring tendency in mainstream media coverage to portray protests as deviant, threatening, or ineffective, and in doing so end up marginalizing them (Lee, 2014, p. 2726, also see Susanszky et al., 2022, McLeod and Hertog, 1999).

Table 2: Tone of Main Themes Across Media Outlets

	Rebel News				National Post				The Globe and Mail			
Themes	TF1	TF2	TF3	TF4	TF1	TF2	TF3	TF4	TF1	TF2	TF3	TF4
Protest	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Mixed	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative
Protesters	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Neutral	Neutral	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative
Convoy Leaders	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Neutral	Neutral	N/A ³⁷	Neutral	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative
COVID-19 Mandates	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Neutral	Neutral	Positive	Positive	Neutral	Neutral
Canadian Government	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Neutral
Liberals	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Neutral	Neutral	N/A	Neutral
Conservatives	Positive	Negative	Positive	N/A	Positive	Neutral	Neutral	N/A	Neutral	Neutral	N/A	Neutral
Law Enforcement	N/A	Negative	Negative	Negative	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Negative	Neutral	Neutral
Mainstream Media	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	N/A	N/A	Negative	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Emergencies Act	N/A	N/A	Negative	Negative	N/A	N/A	Negative	Negative	N/A	N/A	Mixed	Mixed

³⁷ 'N/A' indicates that the theme did not appear in articles from that period.

Table 3: Percentage of Tone Categories Across Media Outlets

Media Outlet	Tone				
	Negative tone	Positive tone	Neutral tone	Mixed tone	N/A
Rebel News	55%	35%	0%	0%	10%
National Post	45%	12.5%	25%	2.5%	15%
The Globe and Mail	35%	7.5%	32.5%	5%	20%

By maintaining a consistently negative tone toward the protest, the protesters, and the convoy leadership, the Globe and Mail adopt a framing that emphasizes disruption over the protest's substantive claims, a pattern consistent with the protest paradigm. Further, although the Globe and Mail positions itself as a centrist outlet, its pattern of directing negativity toward the protesters while portraying government actors in a more favorable light suggests a subtle institutional bias, indicating a preference for established authority over disruptive political action. Altogether, this distinction shows that the use of a negative tone was not simply a general response to the events, but a choice that revealed each outlet's interpretation of what, or who, represented the core problem.

The finding that the National Post adopted a negative tone toward Prime Minister Trudeau and the federal government for their actions against protesters aligns with Kohm's analysis (2025, pp. 557–558), as well as with his observation that The Globe and Mail emphasized the disruption caused by the protest (Kohm, 2025, p. 559). However, this thesis reaches a different conclusion from Kohm regarding the National Post's portrayal of the protest over time. Kohm found that the National Post continued to defend the protesters throughout his study, framing problematic incidents as the actions of a few reprehensible outliers or characterizing the movement as peaceful civil disobedience (2025, p. 559). In contrast, this analysis identifies a shift in the National Post's tone during the third timeframe, as coverage became less supportive of the protesters and moved

toward a more neutral or even negative stance in the final period. This discrepancy may stem from differences in article selection, particularly because Kohm included editorial and opinion pieces in his analysis, whereas this thesis focused solely on news reporting.

5.2.2. Positive tone

As mentioned, most of the literature on the use of tone focuses on how negative tone attracts attention and boosts engagement. There is, however, a smaller group of studies that examine the effects of positive tone (see Gong et al., 2022; Jacobs and Van der Linden, 2017; Baden et al., 2019). Research suggests that positive information and emotions can generate corresponding positive responses among the public (Gong et al., 2022, p. 84, also see Baden et al., 2019; Jacobs and Van der Linden, 2017). For example, in their study of individuals' exposure to negative versus positive news stories related to North African immigrants, Jacobs and Van der Linden (2017, pp. 223-225) found that exposure to positive news decreased negative attitudes towards North African immigrants and even had a carry-over effect on more positive attitudes towards other immigrant groups. Similarly, Baden et al. conclude that exposure to positive news stories results in a more positive emotional response than exposure to negative news stories (2019, p. 1947). With this in mind, an interesting pattern appears in the current analysis. Rebel News, which predominately used a highly negative tone in its coverage (55%), shows the highest amount of positive tone overall. Their positive tone is 35%, compared to 12.5% and 7.5% with the National Post and the Globe and Mail. This suggests that their use of positive tone is selective and strategic. They apply it to themes such as the protest, the protesters, and the convoy leaders because they want readers to view these groups and events in a favorable light, as they explicitly supported the protest. Inversely, National Post and The Globe and Mail rarely use a directly positive tone. Since both outlets viewed the protest as disruptive and anti-establishment, using a positive tone would

not align with the way they interpreted the events or the message they wanted audiences to take away. A small nuance is worth highlighting. National Post did use a more positive tone in the first two timeframes when discussing the protest and the protesters. For example, they sometimes referred to the protest as “peaceful”³⁸, “festive”³⁹ or as a “demonstration”⁴⁰. However, this shifted once the protest turned into an occupation and the federal government invoked the Emergencies Act. After this point, their tone became consistently neutral or negative, reflecting their assessment of the protest as it escalated.

5.2.3. Binary vs nuanced coverage

Alternative media platforms have no obligation to maintain a neutral tone because they are not bound by formal journalistic standards. Inversely, mainstream media outlets, as mentioned in the literature review, are expected to follow professional norms such as accuracy, fairness, balance, impartiality, and integrity (see CBC/Radio-Canada, n.d.; The New York Times, n.d.; The Globe and Mail, n.d.; Global News, n.d.). This helps explain why much of their tone remained neutral in several themes, and why Rebel News, as an alternative media outlet, never used a neutral tone at all. Since Rebel News is not accountable to these standards, it is free to adopt consistently positive or consistently negative tones depending on the message it wanted to convey. The question then becomes why National Post and The Globe and Mail sometimes displayed strong positive or negative tones even though they are expected to remain impartial and balanced. Several scholars argue that the principle of impartial journalism itself is being challenged (Ojala, 2021; Bélair-Gagnon, 2013; Boudana, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017). Ojala (2021), in his study of the Finnish media system, explains that the viability of journalistic neutrality is closely tied to the

³⁸ National Post, 26 January 2022, also see 27 January 2022; 29 January 2022; 29 January 2022; 4 February 2022

³⁹ National Post, 4 February 2022, also see 1 February 2022

⁴⁰ National Post, 31 January 2022, also see 29 January 2022; 27 January 2022

broader political context in which journalism operates (p. 2055). He suggests that departures from neutrality across Western democracies may be linked to growing ideological divisions within the liberal order – and such divisions can push journalists and outlets to adopt clearer partisan positions in public debate (Ojala, 2021, p. 2055). In North America, this shift has been particularly visible since the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (see McLay and Ramos, 2021; Bernhard and O’Neill, 2019; Segal, 2025; Ladd and Podkul, 2018), alongside the broader rise of populism as a political strategy (Bértoa and Rama, 2021; Davis et al., 2025; Raeijmaekers and Maesele, 2017), among other reasons. These developments have intensified polarization and placed pressure on news outlets to take more explicit positions, especially when covering politically charged events. At the same time, according to Ojala (2021, p. 2055), scholars with Gramscian and ideology-critical perspectives have long been sceptical of claims to pure neutrality, arguing that journalism inevitably intervenes in political conflicts and shapes their outcomes (See Raeijmaekers and Maesele, 2017; Laws and Chojnicka, 2020). The very concept of a neutral tone has also been questioned. Neutrality is difficult to identify in practice because assessments of what is “neutral” are almost always shaped by personal political perspectives (Ojala, 2021, p. 2042; also see Boudana, 2016). Boudana similarly argues that neutrality, non-partisanship, and balance are not free of bias and cannot fully escape subjective interpretation (2016, p. 614). This suggests that mainstream outlets may believe they are acting neutrally while still adopting tones that reflect underlying values or assumptions. So, the mainstream media outlets’ distancing from a neutral tone do not necessarily indicate a rejection of journalistic standards but rather highlight the tension between the ideal of impartiality and the realities of reporting within an increasingly polarized political environment.

Overall, the tone patterns across the three outlets show that coverage was shaped not only by the themes emphasized, but also by how those themes were evaluated, with significant variation depending on the type of media outlet. The way in which each outlet applied positive, negative, neutral or mixed tones can contribute to shaping readers' understanding of the events and the individuals involved.

5.3. "Us" and "them" Framing

Us-versus-them framing, typically associated with populist framing, offers a useful lens for understanding how media outlets simplify complex political debates by assigning meaning to key actors. This analysis finds that the alternative outlet Rebel News clearly uses populist framing, more particularly populism *by* the media and populist citizen journalism, while the mainstream outlets do not. Instead, the Globe and Mail leans toward an elitist style of framing, and the National Post does not fit neatly into either framing category.

As can be seen in table 4, Rebel News consistently relies on a strong us-versus-them structure that fits classic populist framing. Across all timeframes, it presents the truckers, convoy supporters, Canadian citizens, and its own journalists as the "us", opposed to "them," that is the federal government, the Liberal Party, Prime Minister Trudeau, law enforcement and mainstream media. It is interesting to observe the evolution of us-versus-them over time for Rebel News. Initially, they included all Canadian citizens in their "us", but as the protest continued, the "us" started to refer to Canadian citizens and other international supporters that were protesting or showing support for the protest. However, the "them" for Rebel News did not change much. The only changes were the addition of Conservative MPs to the "them" category in the second timeframe due to their wavering support for the convoy, and the addition of the GoFundMe

platform in the second timeframe when they froze the protest funds. This opposition reflects a strong populist logic where “the people” are set against “powerful elites” (official institutions).

The National Post, in comparison, does not present a complete us-versus-them dynamic. The outlet’s coverage often refers to a “them”, typically the Canadian government, Liberals, and Trudeau, and in later timeframes the protesters also became part of “them”. However, it lacked a clear “us” perspective. There is no consistent group of ordinary people being defended or a clear “us” stance.

The Globe and Mail does establish both an “us” and a “them,” but the categories do not align with typical populist framing. In its coverage, the “us” consisted of Ottawa residents or institutional actors responding to the protest, while the “them” tended to be the protesters, their supporters or the convoy leaders, depending on the situation. The Canadian government only represented a clear “us” in the first timeframe, before they started to act against the protest, such as with its invoking of the emergencies act, or when the protest became a bigger issue.

The next sections explore the factors influencing these framing strategies, linking each outlet’s choices to broader findings in the literature.

5.3.1. Populism as a framing strategy

The use of populism as a framing strategy is evident in Rebel News’ coverage, which amplifies a moral contrast between “ordinary citizens” and “elites” by portraying supporters of the convoy as defenders of justice while framing governments, institutions, and mainstream media as oppressive. Rebel News also demonstrates populism’s chameleonic nature by shifting the definition of “the people” over time, for example expanding the “us” to include international supporters while narrowing it away from all Canadian citizens to only those that support the convoy, allowing the outlet to adapt its narrative to changing events and audience expectations.

Table 4: “Us” versus “Them” Framing Across Media Outlets

Timeframes	US			THEM		
	Rebel News	The National Post	The Globe and Mail	Rebel News	The National Post	The Globe and Mail
1	- Truckers - Canadian citizens (general) - Convoy leaders - Rebel News journalists - Conservative MPs	Unclear	- The Canadian government - Truckers and Canadians against the convoy - The Canadian Trucking Alliance - Businesses affected by the convoy	- The liberal government - Liberals - Trudeau - NDP - Singh - Mainstream media	- The Canadian government - Liberals - Trudeau	- Protesters - The protest leaders
2	- Truckers - Canadian citizens protesting - Convoy leaders - Rebel News journalists	Unclear	- Ottawa residents affected by the protest - Businesses affected by the protest	- Law enforcement - Trudeau - The liberal government - Conservative MPs - GoFundMe platform	- The Canadian government - Liberals - Trudeau	- Protesters - Protest leaders
3	- Truckers - Canadian citizens protesting - Conservative MPs - Rebel News journalists	Unclear	- Ottawa residents affected by the protest - Businesses affected by the protest	- The liberal government - Trudeau - Law enforcement - Mainstream media	- The Canadian government - Trudeau - Protesters	- Protesters - Protest leaders
4	- Truckers - Canadian citizens that are still protesting - Rebel News journalists	Unclear	- Ottawa residents affected by the protest - Businesses affected by the protest	- The liberal government - Trudeau - Law enforcement - Mainstream media	- Trudeau - Liberals - Conservatives - Protesters	- Protesters - Protest leaders

But why would Rebel News choose to use populist discourse? One explanation is that such binary framing helps citizens make sense of political issues by attributing external causes to internally experienced problems, making mediatized blame highly persuasive (Hameleers et al., 2019, p. 1147). Populist framing can also foster feelings of alienation and mistrust toward mainstream institutions, serving political and ideological motivations (Figenschou and Ihlebæk, 2019, p. 1224). Further, Rebel News thus engages in populism *by the media* by actively constructing and promoting a moralized “us versus them” framing itself (Tóth et al., 2024, p. 5). At the same time, it incorporates elements of populist citizen journalism through frequent citizen interviews, presented in both video and written formats, as well as the inclusion of supportive tweets, which directly allowed audience voices to spread populist messages within the coverage.

There are also two other ways Rebel News frames an “us” that fits a far-right alternative media pattern. In particular, the outlet positions itself in strong opposition to mainstream media and frequently uses conspiracy-oriented narratives, which further define who belongs to “the people” and who is part of the threatening “elite”.

5.3.1.1. Opposition to the media

Rebel News consistently positioned itself in opposition to mainstream media, reflecting a pattern common among right-wing/far-right alternative news outlets (see Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2019; Cushion et al., 2021; Mayerhöffer, 2021; Rauch, 2016). As discussed in the literature review, Figenschou and Ihlebaek (2019) distinguish between media criticism and media cynicism, Rebel News practice the latter. They do not offer any constructive feedback in their criticism of the mainstream media; rather they just make negative judgements, often false or reactive, creating hostility or mistrust towards it. Further, these oppositional stances are reinforced through multiple strategies: selectively highlighting media stories that appear biased, scrutinizing

mainstream coverage in further detail to expose perceived distortions, portraying itself as marginalized or excluded by mainstream institutions, and elevating ordinary people as bearers of “common sense” in contrast to the elites (Cushion et al., 2021, p. 637). These strategies are a core component of Rebel News’ broader populist “us versus them” framing. For example, Rebel News consistently attacked the “media party,” “legacy media,” or the “mainstream media,” highlighting outlets such as CBC, Global News, and CTV. It claimed that mainstream journalists were “bought off” by the government, lied, and promoted “fake news,” while praising Poilievre for criticizing the “liberal media”⁴¹. Rebel News also instructed readers to “Never trust the mainstream media” and “Don’t believe what the media is saying”⁴². It also highlighted perceived media biases, such as the CBC “turning cameras away from the large crowd” and failing to address systemic racism allegations made by its own employees, leaking information about GiveSendGo donors, resulting in individuals being harassed, and were noted for retracting false statements, including CBC claims that the Kremlin had funded the convoy⁴³. Later coverage included claims that mainstream outlets were complicit in mischaracterizing the protest, attempted to distort its meaning, “smeared” it, or labeled it as “far-right” or “terrorist”⁴⁴. These results align with Pytlarz’s (2024) findings on Rebel News, which found that the outlet employed multiple strategies to challenge the legitimacy of mainstream journalism.

Interestingly, the National Post also engaged in media criticism in its coverage, although not as frequently as Rebel News. Several articles criticized outlets like Global, CTV, and CBC for discussing the convoy without speaking directly to truckers and for overwhelming audiences with

⁴¹ Rebel News, 24 January 2022, 26 January 2022, 27 January 2022, 28 January 2022, 30 January 2022, 31 January 2022, 14 February 2022, 19 February 2022, 20 February 2022, 23 February 2022

⁴² Rebel News, 26 January 2022, 31 January 2022

⁴³ Rebel News, 26 January 2022, 27 January 2022, Rebel News, 23 February 2022, 11 March 2022

⁴⁴ Rebel News, 13 February 2022, 1 February 2022, 4 February 2022

case numbers and expert commentary⁴⁵. Others accused mainstream media, especially the CBC, of highlighting specific incidents such as the Confederate flag or drawing parallels with the January 6 U.S. capitol insurrection to shape a particular narrative⁴⁶. One article even criticized “mainstream media” for selectively framing the protest, even though the National Post itself is a mainstream outlet⁴⁷. While most of the literature focuses on alternative media criticism of mainstream media, this shows that it is also possible within the mainstream media itself. These oppositional stances on the mainstream media could be seen as Figenschou and Ihlebaek’s (2019) “media criticism”, which they describe as a necessary dimension of democratic dialogue, and is a more constructive and rational form of criticism. The criticisms above are not particularly creating “a subjective feeling of alienation and mistrust towards the mainstream news media” (Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2019, p. 1224) but rather critique its mainstream media counterparts for their reporting methods.

Altogether, these practices show how on the one hand, Rebel News practices media cynicism, positioning itself as a corrective voice while simultaneously creating mistrust of mainstream media. This cynicism reinforces a broader populist “us” and “them” framing in which ordinary citizens and independent outlets are presented as rational and truthful, and mainstream media and elites as biased. The National Post, on the other hand, engages in media criticism without constructing the same “us” and “them” narrative.

5.3.1.2. Spreading of conspiracy theories

Another way Rebel News creates a clear “them” is by spreading conspiracy theories in its coverage. As outlined in the literature review, right-wing alternative media outlets often rely on

⁴⁵ The National Post, January 27 2022, January 25 2022

⁴⁶ The National Post, 1 February 2022, 12 February 2022, 23 February 2022

⁴⁷ The National Post, 3 February 2022

conspiracy narratives for various reasons, such as to offer explanations for events that feel uncertain, to discredit certain institutional actors and “elites” as dishonest or secretive, and to promote their own ideological agendas (see Romer and Jamieson, 2021; Adam et al., 2025; Schatto-Eckrodt et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2022; Demata et al., 2022). Rebel News uses conspiracy theories in exactly this way. Every example works either to discredit the government and its institutions or to undermine mainstream media. Examples include claims that all “experts” were on Trudeau’s payroll, implying that the scientific and legal experts discussing the benefits of vaccines or speaking against the protest were in fact promoting governmental propaganda, references to Fidel Castro as Trudeau’s father, implying that Trudeau is a dictator for his policies and “weaponization” of police forces, and the idea that a CSIS agent was behind the “Heritage Front”, insinuating that the former Canadian neo-Nazi organization was in fact an artefact of government propaganda⁴⁸.

Mainstream media outlets, likely because of their journalistic quality standards, tend to report on conspiracy theories in a more critical way that often involves debunking the claims they mention (Bruns et al., 2022; Graves, 2016, in Adam et al., 2025, p. 32). This is reflected in the present analysis. When the National Post or the Globe and Mail brought up conspiracy theories, it was mainly to challenge them, fact check them, or to show the range of people who took part in the convoy. For example, one article described signs carried by protesters with claims like “mandatory injections are a global mass murder” and “No more Auschwitz”⁴⁹. While the article acknowledged that protesters were free to voice these opinions, it immediately followed with scientific evidence disproving the misinformation. In the Globe and Mail, references to conspiracy

⁴⁸ Rebel News, 26 January 2022, 28 January 2022, 27 January 2022, 5 February 2022, 1 February 2022, 10 February 2022, 14 February 2022

⁴⁹ The National Post, 28 January 2022, also see 16 February 2022

theories also appeared mainly to push back against them. Mentions of people claiming the pandemic was fake or that the federal election was rigged were used to present those views as extreme or not credible⁵⁰. However, across both outlets, the number of articles that even referenced conspiracy theories, whether to question or discredit them, remained quite limited in both time periods.

The findings here show that there is a clear difference in the way conspiracy theories are used. While Rebel News uses them to reinforce the divide between the public and institutional actors, mainstream outlets approach these conspiracies cautiously, often with the intention of providing corrections.

5.3.2. Elitism

Although The Globe and Mail does not promote the same populist “us” and “them” framing used by Rebel News, which highlights a division between “good ordinary people” and a “corrupt elite”, The Globe and Mail constructs an “us” and “them”, but in a different way. This distinction can be understood using Mudde’s discussion of elitism introduced earlier. Populism frames “the people” as morally superior to a corrupt elite. In contrast, elitism maintains a similar moral division, but reverses its stance, placing legitimacy and rationality with the elite rather than “the people” (Mudde, 2017, p. 7). To a certain extent, Globe and Mail fits this definition. In the first timeframe, the paper clearly framed the “us” as the Canadian government, truckers and Canadians who opposed the convoy, businesses affected by the convoy, and later, Ottawa residents and businesses affected by the protest. These groups were positioned as legitimate and responsible, and their concerns were presented sympathetically. By contrast, the protesters and especially their leaders were consistently in the “them” category, often being portrayed as dishonest or disruptive.

⁵⁰ The Globe and Mail, 30 January 2022; 31 January 2022; 29 January 2022; 22 February 2022

It is important however to nuance this argument. The Globe and Mail does not adopt a fully elitist framing in Mudde's sense, since it does not portray all "the people" as irrational or dangerous. Its framing is more selective, targeting only certain people, more specifically protesters. This selective exclusion still reflects certain elements of the elitist logic, as legitimacy and responsibility are mainly attributed to official institutions, authorities, and affected communities, while convoy supporters are portrayed as disruptive or dishonest. In this sense, The Globe and Mail does not reject "the people" as a whole but excludes certain groups within them. Overall, this creates a division that does not follow populist logic but instead aligns with the elitist framing that Mudde outlines, where "the people" are treated as the source of threat and disorder while established institutions and affected communities are elevated as the deserving and rational side.

Alternatively, the National Post does not engage in either elitist or populist framing. Rather, it avoids constructing a clear "us" and instead focuses on presenting a consistent "them," which includes the Canadian government, liberals, Trudeau, and later in the coverage, the protesters themselves. This presents a clear anti-establishment stance, but not a corresponding pro-ordinary-people stance. The key question here is why the National Post adopts this pattern when the other mainstream outlet gravitated toward elitism and the alternative outlet toward populism. First, in general, its stance against the Canadian government, the liberals, and Trudeau makes sense, as it positions itself as a right-leaning mainstream media outlet. Since the government responding to the protest was a Liberal government, it is unsurprising that the National Post would adopt more critical positions toward it. Second, it could be attempting to maintain a "neutral" or "impartial" facade, because mainstream media outlets are expected to follow certain journalistic standards. Third, avoiding the explicit elevation of a unified "us" also allows the outlet to critique government actions without appearing to champion a particular social group or align itself with a populist

narrative. From this perspective, the National Post could be seen as scrutinizing the government's decisions and actions in response to the protest, which naturally produces a clear "them," but does not show a unified "us" on the opposing side.

Overall, this section demonstrates how different media outlets frame the protest through varying forms of an us-versus-them strategy. Rebel News exhibits clear populism, aligning with the classic us-versus-them framing common in many far-right alternative media outlets. This is particularly evident in its opposition to mainstream media and its use of conspiracy theories as an oppositional strategy. The Globe and Mail also uses an us-versus-them framing, but in the opposite direction, reflecting what Mudde describes as an elitist strategy. Its coverage shows a preference for institutional or elite actors and expresses dissatisfaction with the "ordinary citizens" participating in the protest. In contrast, the National Post does not clearly adopt either strategy. Instead, it presents a distinct "them" in its reporting, which includes institutional or elite actors and, interestingly, the mainstream media itself in some instances, despite it being a mainstream media outlet.

5.4. Treatment Recommendations

As outlined in the methodology, Entman's⁵¹ framing theory identifies four ways in which news outlets make certain elements of a story salient: by defining a problem, identifying its causes, making moral evaluations, and suggesting treatment recommendations. Interestingly, this analysis of the framing strategies employed by both alternative and mainstream media outlets found that, while the outlets clearly defined problems, identified causes and made moral evaluations, not all

⁵¹ Although dated, Entman's framing theory remains widely used in news media research. According to ResearchGate, his original article on the matter "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm" has been cited more than 16 000 times and according to Google Scholar more than 32 000 times.

of them suggested treatment recommendations. However, what is not made salient is just as important as what is. The absence of treatment recommendations should not be understood solely as a limitation of the framework, but rather as a strategic framing choice. Entman defines treatment recommendations as frames that “suggest remedies, offer and justify treatments for the problems, and predict their likely effects” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). By emphasizing critique and moral judgment while avoiding proposed solutions, media outlets can construct frames that prioritize opposition and delegitimization over resolution. This pattern was particularly evident in the alternative media coverage in the current analysis.

Table 5 presents the distribution of treatment recommendations across media outlets, indicating the number of articles where a recommendation was made relative to the total number of articles analyzed during each time frame. It shows that treatment recommendations were unevenly distributed across media outlets. While not all articles proposed explicit solutions, the National Post and The Globe and Mail included treatment recommendations far more frequently than Rebel News. Approximately 25% of The Globe and Mail articles and 28% of National Post articles contained at least one proposed solution, compared to only 3% of Rebel News articles.

At a basic level, this difference can be explained by Entman’s foundational definition, which uses ‘and/or’, indicating that not all four functions are expected to appear in every news article. However, this is only part of the explanation, as it does not explain the near-complete absence of treatment recommendations in the alternative media’s coverage. Other factors also matter, such as their attitudes towards institutions and certain innate characteristics. These will be explored further below.

Table 5: Treatment Recommendations Proposed Across Media Outlets and Timeframes

Timeframes	Treatment Recommendations		
	Rebel News	National Post	The Globe and Mail
1	N/A	Public officials (Trudeau, police, and others) should address the underlying issues instead of exploiting protest unrest; engage directly with citizens who have legitimate concerns; promote open dialogue and recognize the public's right to peaceful protest (5/15 articles)	Maintain vaccination as the central public health strategy while allowing small policy adjustments; de-escalate protests through constructive dialogue; encourage stronger leadership from political figures (O'Toole, Trudeau) (5/15 articles)
2	Rebel News offered to help fund a lawyer to "help the truckers peacefully resolve this standoff" (2/15 articles)	Calls for calm and orderly withdrawal of truckers; improved police preparedness and earlier injunctions; need for genuine leadership and dialogue with protesters (4/15 articles)	Strengthen response planning by taking protest threats seriously; implement enforcement measures early (ticketing, towing, sanctions); ensure readiness to mobilize additional resources, including military support if necessary (5/15 articles)
3	N/A	Enforce control through strategic policing and safe de-escalation; uphold democratic values while clearing blockades; prioritize negotiation and early intervention over extreme measures (4/15 articles)	Extend certain Emergencies Act powers to regular police (e.g., freezing accounts, seizing vehicles) for future crises; safeguard transparent media coverage; enhance FINTRAC's authority and coordination with banks to prevent financial misuse (5/15 articles)
4	N/A	Rebuild unity through compassion and common sense; encourage moderate, principled political voices; strengthen legal safeguards to protect citizens' financial rights; clarify and limit the misuse of terms like "terrorism" to prevent overreach (4/15 articles)	N/A

5.4.1. Rebel News's (Lack of) Treatment recommendations

In Rebel News coverage, treatment recommendations only appeared twice, in the second timeframe, where Rebel News offered to help fund a lawyer to “help the truckers peacefully resolve this standoff”. No broader policy, policing, or institutional recommendations were stated.

To begin, alternative media are frequently characterized by an anti-system stance. As de León et al. note, alternative media outlets have “an anti-establishment positioning that directs their mission, infuses their content and describes their audience” (2024, p. 879). Holt (2018) distinguishes between ideological and relational forms of anti-systemness. Ideological anti-systemness refers to a deep level of antagonism and distrust toward mainstream media and the institutions that make up the established media system (Holt, 2018, p. 53), reflecting a belief system that does not share the values of the political order within which it operates (Capoccia, 2002 in Holt, 2018, p. 53). Relational anti-systemness refers to media that may, but do not necessarily meet the criteria of ideological anti-systemness but still have an effect on other media (Holt, 2018, p. 53).

Rebel News can be understood as displaying ideological anti-systemness. It repeatedly frames mainstream media and political institutions as corrupt, dishonest, ideologically driven, and overall disconnected from ordinary citizens (Holt, 2018, p. 50), a framing that is also common in populist discourse (Schwarzenegger, 2020; see also Toth et al., 2024; Hameleers et al., 2018; Mudde, 2017). Because this ideological position rejects the values and credibility of the existing political and media order, Rebel News' coverage of the ‘Freedom Convoy’ is oriented more toward delegitimization than problem-solving. Proposing solutions would require engaging with the same political actors and institutions that Rebel News portrays as untrustworthy and fundamentally

broken. As a result, this anti-establishment positioning helps explain why coverage is more focused on critique and resistance than on advancing concrete policy or institutional solutions.

Another reason for this lack of treatment recommendations could be the critical stance of alternative media outlets towards mainstream media, which is a central feature of this type of media (see Ihlebaek et al., 2022; Leung and Lee, 2014; Hot, 2019; Cushion, 2023; Kenix, 2011) and a key characteristic of Rebel News' coverage. This opposition is often treated as a defining element rather than a secondary characteristic. In fact, as noted in the literature review, some used the mainstream media as a reference point to explain what alternative media are not. As a result, many definitions of alternative media are built around contrast and distance from mainstream news practices. For example, Ihlebaek et al. state that "Inherent in this definition is a critique of the mainstream media, which can be expressed implicitly or explicitly, moderately or aggressively, randomly or systematically, and be directed towards individual journalists or the institution" (2022, p. 1268). So, because alternative media position themselves primarily through critique and opposition of mainstream media, their coverage tends to prioritize criticism of mainstream news outlets (or the mainstream in general) and political actors rather than the development of concrete solutions.

5.4.2. Mainstream media's treatment recommendations

In contrast to Rebel News, both the National Post and The Globe and Mail offered explicit treatment recommendations throughout their coverage of the protest. The National Post consistently proposed solutions across all four timeframes, emphasizing political leadership, dialogue, and de-escalation, while still supporting enforcement when necessary. In the early stages of the protest, its proposed solutions focused on engaging with protesters and addressing underlying grievances, as illustrated by articles that argued: "Instead of talking about the truckers,

how about talking to them? It also wouldn't be such a bad idea to go among the supporters who greet them as they pass through communities and ask why they are in such visible support"⁵². As the situation evolved, the National Post increasingly advocated for more concrete and enforcement-oriented solutions, particularly in relation to policing and spatial control. For example, one article suggested that, "If they had given any credibility to the truckers' threat to stay long term, they'd have blocked access to downtown and directed the truckers to park on LeBreton Flats, to the west of Parliament Hill"⁵³.

Moreover, the Globe and Mail offered the most detailed and institutionalized solutions, particularly in the first, second and third timeframes. Its recommendations focused on public health policy, law enforcement preparedness, and having political leaders step up in their leadership, including proposing early enforcement measures, expanding policing powers, and enhancing financial oversight through institutions such as FINTRAC⁵⁴. For example, one article recommended that "Ottawa should also ensure that banks are given a permanent 'safe harbour' – a provision that shields them from legal liability if they participate in data-sharing partnerships to catch criminals"⁵⁵. This is a specific treatment recommendation to an institutional problem. Unlike the National Post, The Globe and Mail mainly framed solutions through the lens of institutional effectiveness and managing the crisis, with less emphasis on reconciliation with protesters or political moderation.

⁵² National Post, 27 January 2022

⁵³ National Post, 8 February 2022

⁵⁴ FINTRAC or the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre of Canada, is Canada's "financial intelligence unit and anti-money laundering and anti-terrorist financing supervisor" (Government of Canada, 2025d)

⁵⁵ The Globe and Mail, 18 February 2022

These framing strategies are well aligned with Entman's framing theory, which itself is largely derived from the practices of mainstream media. Mainstream media outlets, as outlined by Holt et al., are understood as:

as a societal system that is formed by specific legacy news media organizations which themselves are characterized by certain, often hierarchical, organizational structures and traditional publishing routines. They fulfill a societal function by enabling public discourse through the provision of topics of general interest that are oriented on facts, selected by professional actors, and published following professional rules. (2019, p. 861)

Accordingly, since they must follow certain organizational structures, professional rules and traditional publishing routines, it makes sense that they would follow similar framing structures, including treatment recommendations. In line with this, the Political Science Institute (2025), in its *Best Practices for Responsible Journalism in Conflict Reporting*, emphasizes that journalists should prioritize solution-oriented reporting so that coverage moves beyond merely depicting violence or social problems and instead reflects a professional responsibility to contribute to public understanding of how such issues might be addressed.

More importantly however, as mainstream media outlets, they are generally less anti-institutional than alternative media platforms. This could be in part related to the fact that their continued operation is often supported through government subsidies such as the Canada Periodical Fund (Government of Canada, 2025a), Canadian Media Fund (Government of Canada, 2024a) and Canadian journalism labor tax credit (Government of Canada, 2025b). Alternative media outlets do not get such subsidies in Canada, as they do not fit as a qualified Canadian journalism organization (QCJO)⁵⁶. It is important to note that these programs are intended to support the viability of journalism and do not give the government control over editorial content.

⁵⁶ A QCJO is a news media organization that meets the criteria set out in the Income Tax Act (Government of Canada, 2024b). Some of the criteria include: The entity must be organized either as a corporation, partnership or trust; it must operate in Canada; Regularly employs two or more journalists and creates original news content regularly (Government of Canada, 2025c).

The argument here is not that mainstream media outlets are influenced by these subsidies in a way that makes them pro-institutional or government-controlled, but rather that, because they operate with public subsidies and within an institutional framework⁵⁷, it would be inconsistent for them to adopt an anti-institutional stance like that often seen in alternative media. While they depend on these institutions to operate, they remain able to criticize them and to offer solutions. In this way, they are positioning journalism as a corrective mechanism within the system rather than as a force seeking to dismantle it (Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2019, p. 1124)⁵⁸. For example, this can be seen in some of the recommendations given by the National Post, such as its criticism of federal and municipal authorities for failing to anticipate the protest's duration, and with calls for clearer leadership and earlier intervention. So, mainstream media outlets often do offer criticism, but they are also more willing to provide policy recommendations, as they are not entirely opposed to the government itself.

Ultimately, the analysis of treatment recommendations reveals a divide between alternative and mainstream media framing. Mainstream outlets such as The Globe and Mail and the National Post regularly moved beyond critique to propose solutions, which reflects their institutional position and adherence to professional journalistic norms. Rebel News, in contrast, avoided treatment recommendations, instead focusing on blame and delegitimization. This pattern also highlights a certain limitation of Entman's framework itself. While effective for analyzing

⁵⁷ Many studies conceptualize the mainstream media as part of a broader institutional system, one that includes government funding and plays a role in shaping public discourse while offering critique and potential solutions from within that system (see Benson, 2010; Reese, 2022; Scott et al., 2019; Sjøvaag, 2013; Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2019)

⁵⁸ This comes back to Figenschou and Ihlebaek (2019) distinction between criticism and cynicism, where mainstream media outlets are mainly practicing criticism, a constructive and rational act that seeks to improve the status quo, rather than cynicism which is understood as an emotional judgement that seeks to create mistrust (p.1124).

mainstream journalism, the treatment recommendation function is less applicable to media outlets, such as right-wing alternative media outlets, that reject institutional problem solving altogether.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of how the ‘Freedom Convoy’ was covered by mainstream and alternative media in Canada, this thesis demonstrates clear differences in how the protest was represented. By examining a centrist and a right-leaning mainstream media alongside a far-right alternative media, the analysis shows that variations existed not only between mainstream and alternative outlets, but also within mainstream media itself. These differences appeared across four key areas: sourcing practices, tone employed, framings of us-versus-them, and the inclusion of treatment recommendations when framing the protest.

First, one of the clearest differences found was in their sourcing practices. Although Rebel News relied on a different set of sources than the two mainstream outlets, this did not lead to more diverse representation. While the literature often describes alternative media as giving a platform to actors who are marginalized in mainstream journalism (Ihlebak et al., 2022; Freudenthaler and Wessle, 2022; Frischlich et al., 2020; Rauch, 2016), Rebel News mainly featured voices that supported its far-right perspective. As a result, it included different actors than the mainstream media outlets, but the range of viewpoints remained limited. In contrast, The Globe and Mail and the National Post relied largely on political figures and institutional sources. This reflects established mainstream journalistic practices and aligns with research showing that mainstream outlets tend to prioritize elite sources such as government officials and political authorities, while giving less attention to voices outside these groups (Ihlebak et al., 2022, p. 1276; also see Heft et al., 2023; Freudenthaler and Wessle, 2022; Buyens and Aelst, 2021; Atton, 2002). This finding challenges the assumption that alternative media inherently broaden voices included in public debate, showing instead that they may reproduce narrow viewpoints through ideologically aligned sourcing, and confirms the mainstream tendency to prioritize “official” or institutional sources.

Second, the outlets differed in their us-versus-them framings, specifically their use of populist framing. Rebel News consistently employed populist framing, positioning itself against political and institutional elites. While the main “us” and “them” categories remained largely consistent with protesters, convoy leaders, and truckers framed as “the people,” and liberals, the government, Trudeau, and mainstream media framed as “the corrupt elite,” these groupings were not fixed. Actors shifted between the “us” and “them” categories over time depending on their level of support for the protest. For example, conservative leaders were initially included in the “us” category when they actively supported the convoy, but were later framed as part of the “them” once some withdrew that support, showing a clear preference for in-group actors who fully aligned with the outlet’s positions. By contrast, the Globe and Mail leaned toward an elitist framing style, which also relies on an “us” and “them” distinction, but in the opposite direction, with elites positioned as the “us” and a sub-category of “the people” as the “them” (Mudde, 2007, p. 7). More specifically, its coverage generally placed protesters and related actors in the “them” category. However, this out-group framing did not extend to all ordinary Canadians, suggesting that the outlet does not fully conform to the elitist model, but still aligns with it to a degree that reflects aspects of this framing style. The National Post did not align clearly with either populist or elitist framing. Its coverage did not construct a clear “us” category, but it did consistently position the Canadian government, Liberals, and Trudeau as a “them”, suggesting an anti-elite stance. More broadly, this shows that the mainstream media outlets did not participate in traditional populist framing (Toth et al., 2024, p. 5; also see Esser et al., 2016; Moffitt, 2018), while the alternative media did, suggesting that populist framing is more central to the communicative style and identity of alternative outlets, which confirms the literature’s stance that both right-wing and left-wing alternative media are often associated with populism or populist discourses (see Schulze, 2020;

Wegenschimmel and McLaughlin, 2023; Holt, 2019a; Brems, 2024; Schwarzenegger, 2023; Hameleers et al., 2017).

Third, clear differences also emerged in the tone used by each outlet. Each media outlet adopted different tones that reflected how it interpreted the protest. Rebel News showed the most dichotomous use of tone, framing themes as either negative or positive with no neutral or mixed tone used. The Globe and Mail relied more heavily on neutral and mixed tones, with less themes framed in a negative or positive tone. The National Post fell between the two, framing themes more as negative or as positive, but also sometimes using a neutral tone. Although The Globe and Mail and the National Post were closer in their overall distribution of tone, they differed in how tone was applied across themes. For example, the National Post, like Rebel News, framed COVID-19 mandates, the Canadian government, and Liberals negatively, while The Globe and Mail framed these themes more positively or neutrally. A more positive tone has been shown to generate more positive responses toward the event being covered (see Gong et al., 2022; Jacobs and Van der Linden, 2017; Baden et al., 2019), while a more negative tone has been associated with higher levels of user engagement as well as more negative perceptions of the events presented (Andersen et al., 2024, p. 503; see also Soroka and McAdams, 2015; Soroka et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2024). This shows that tone was not simply a reaction to events, but a framing choice that reflected how each outlet defined the core problem and the actors involved, which guide how audiences interpret the significance and legitimacy of an event and its actors, influencing the conclusions they are likely to draw from the coverage.

Fourth, applying Entman's (1993) framing theory highlighted differences in how outlets used treatment recommendations. All three outlets defined problems, identified causes, and made moral judgments, but only the mainstream media regularly moved toward proposing solutions.

The Globe and Mail and the National Post, although not consistently across all articles, suggested how the protest could be addressed or managed. This reflects their position as mainstream outlets and their adherence to established journalistic practices, whose professional norms emphasize not only problem identification but also the inclusion of context and potential avenues for resolution (Political Science Institute, 2025). Rebel News, in contrast, did not include treatment recommendations. This aligns with its anti-system orientation, which is commonly associated with alternative media (de León et al., 2024). Rather than engaging in problem-solving, its coverage focused on criticizing and delegitimizing political institutions and authorities. The presence or absence of treatment recommendations shapes how readers understand possible responses to political conflict, influencing whether such events are interpreted as solvable within existing institutions or as evidence that those institutions are fundamentally illegitimate and incapable of addressing such problems.

Overall, these findings show that media coverage of the ‘Freedom Convoy’ differed not only between mainstream and alternative outlets, but also within mainstream media itself. Differences in sourcing, framing, tone, and the use of treatment recommendations reveal how ideological orientation (center/right/far-right) and institutional position (alternative/mainstream) shaped how the protest was presented and interpreted. This suggests that media portrayals of political protest are not neutral reflections of events, even in the mainstream media, but are actively constructed in ways that can influence public understanding.

These findings have broader implications, particularly for understanding the role of source diversity, populism, framing, and agenda-setting by media outlets in exacerbating political polarization, which is generally understood as “the growing ideological divide between political groups, where individuals increasingly align with extreme positions rather than moderate

viewpoints” (ESBCO, 2025). The clear differences observed in media coverage of the same political event suggest that polarization may not only be shaped by political elites or social media dynamics, but also by the narratives constructed by news outlets themselves. Polarization has wide-ranging consequences. These include reduced trust in political institutions, as seen in declining confidence in elections and public officials (Brady and Kent, 2022; Lawlor and Stephenson, 2025; Hetherington and Rudolph, 2018); democratic instability, which for example increases conflictual and less cooperative political competition (Arbatli and Rosenberg, 2021; McCoy et al., 2018); declining social cohesion and tolerance, associated with heightened out-group hostility and reduced willingness to engage across differences (Lee, 2022; Mahmood and Yousef, 2023); and strain on interpersonal and family relationships across political lines, which influences the connections people are willing to form (Merkley, 2021; Iyengar et al., 2018; Gagnon, 2023).

Although political polarization has been widely studied, the role of media in shaping and intensifying polarization in the Canadian context has received comparatively little attention⁵⁹. Existing research tends to focus on polarization driven by elections (see Gruzd and Roy, 2014; Johnston, 2023; Merkley, 2022), polarization surrounding specific issues such as climate change and immigration (see Mohamadian et al., 2024; Williams and Wyse, 2017; Boulianne et al., 2021; Hollinger, 2024), or the influence of social media (see Kubin and Von Sikorski, 2021; McLay and Ramos, 2021; Kreindler and O’Dwyer, 2024). This gap is important to address because media, particularly online news media, have become primary sources through which citizens encounter,

⁵⁹ In a review of 31 Canadian studies, articles, and book chapters, only eight identified the media as a cause or contributing factor to political polarization in the Canadian context (Hollinger, 2023; Kreindler and O’Dwyer, 2024; McLay and Ramos, 2021; Di Matteo, 2024; Gruzd and Roy, 2014; Landry, 2021; Langlois et al., 2021; Bellamy, 2020). Of these, only four engage substantively with media content, drawing on sources such as digital newspaper articles (e.g., CBC, The Sun) or social media platforms (e.g., X, formerly Twitter) to examine this issue (McLay and Ramos, 2021; Kreindler and O’Dwyer, 2024; Gruzd and Roy, 2014; Langlois et al., 2021).

interpret, and make sense of political events, and the framing choices embedded in media coverage play a central role in shaping political understanding and exacerbating polarization.

These findings thus raise important questions for future research on political polarization, populism and media discourse. Protest movements that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside more recent demonstrations in Canada and internationally related to the Israel-Palestine conflict, the war in Ukraine, and polarized debates connected to U.S. domestic politics, highlight the continued relevance of examining how media framing contribute to political polarization and shape broader public understandings of such conflicts. In particular, further research could examine how mainstream and alternative media differ in their contributions to political polarization, and how repeated exposure to their different media framing and agenda-setting strategies shapes trust in political institutions, affect democratic processes or even its impacts on interpersonal relationships. In addition, now that the roles and framing strategies of mainstream and alternative media are better understood at the content level, further research could explore their direct effects on individuals through interview-based studies, for example in relation to the ‘Freedom Convoy’ or other moments of political conflict. Such an approach would allow for a deeper understanding of how repeated exposure to these different media types might shape political identities, trust in institutions, and contribute to political polarization.

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The original journal articles cited in this analysis are available upon request. As stated in the methodology, this thesis does not mention journalists' names or include citations to protect their identities.