

# ***Dead Today, Gone Tomorrow: The Framing of Workplace Injury in Canadian Newspapers, 2009–2014***

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Background** How the media frames and presents a subject influences how society sees and responds to that issue.

**Analysis** This study uses frame analysis to examine how Canadian English language newspapers portrayed workplace injuries between 2009 and 2014. Three frames emerge: Under Investigation, Human Tragedy, and Before the Courts. There is also a meta-frame casting injuries and fatalities as isolated events happening to “others” with no cause, thus the public ought not be concerned about workplace safety.

**Conclusion and implications** The article concludes that media frames obscure issues of cause and fault, thereby denying workers a full understanding of why injuries happen in the workplace. These frames serve the interests of employers by obfuscating the employer's role in creating workplace injury and death.

**Keywords** Workplace injury; Canada; Newspapers; Framing analysis; Narrative analysis

## **RÉSUMÉ**

**Contexte** Les cadres imposés par les médias influencent comment la société perçoit les accidents de travail et comment elle les traite.

**Analyse** Cette étude a recours à l'analyse des cadres pour examiner comment les journaux canadiens de langue anglaise ont dépeint les accidents de travail entre 2009 et 2014. Trois cadres particuliers se distinguent : « Sous enquête », « Tragédie humaine », et « Devant le tribunal ». Il existe en outre un méta-cadre où l'on décrit les blessures et fatalités comme étant des incidents isolés qui arrivent à « autrui » sans cause apparente. Le public ainsi n'a pas à se préoccuper des accidents de travail.

**Conclusion and implications** L'article conclut que les cadres utilisés par les médias brouillent les questions de cause et de faute, ce qui empêche les travailleurs de bien comprendre pourquoi les accidents surviennent au travail. Ces cadres servent les intérêts des employeurs en occultant leur responsabilité pour les accidents et les fatalités au travail.

**Mots clés** Accident de travail; Canada; Journaux; Analyse de cadre; Analyse narrative

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## **Introduction**

Injury is endemic in Canadian workplaces. In 2012, there were 245,365 accepted workers' compensation claims for injuries that required time away from work as well as 977 claims for workplace fatalities (AWCBC, 2014). These statistics significantly underreport the true level of workplace injury by excluding injuries that did not require time away from work, injuries to those outside the workers' compensation system, and unreported injuries—which some studies put at 40 percent of all injuries (Arthurs, 2012; Cox & Lippel, 2008; Shannon & Lowe, 2002). These systematic exclusions of some injuries from official injury counts reveal that workplace injuries have a dual nature: they are specific harms experienced by workers, but are also socially constructed via choices about what “counts” as an injury.

Social constructivism asserts that individuals “create” reality by what stimuli they pay attention to and how they interpret those stimuli—choices that are driven by individuals' values, beliefs, and experiences (Lindlof, 1988). Personal experience (i.e., our “experienced reality”) is a powerful but limited source of knowledge (Maxson, Hennigan, & Sloane, 2003). Our experienced reality is combined with knowledge gleaned from interacting with other people in our social groups, institutions, and the media (our “symbolic reality”) to create a shared reality (Adoni & Mane, 1984; Spector, 1987). The media plays an important role in the social construction processes because it is a major source of symbolic reality and also a channel used by claims makers to shape our perceptions of issues (Best, 1999).

The idea that injuries are social constructions also helps us understand the differing views of employers and workers about the risk of workplace injury. Employers view the risk of workplace injury as minimal, unavoidable, and acceptable—a perspective that dominates popular discussion and public policy (Hilgartner, 1985; Iverson & Barling, 2005). By contrast, workers—those most often injured and killed—note that the frequency and type of workplace injuries they experience are largely determined by decisions employers make about what, when, where, and how goods and services are produced. In this way, injury is a cost imposed upon workers by employers in the pursuit of profit (Barnetson, 2010).

The state's choice to regulate corporate misbehaviour (typically through persuasion and education) rather than punish it can also be understood through the lens of social construction (Gray, 2006; Tombs & Whyte, 2007). Regulation assumes that individuals are “reasonable, of good faith, and motivated to heed advice” (Braithwaite, 1989, p. 131) and that regulatory offenses are not inherently immoral, only illegal (Simpson, 2002). Constructing corporate behaviour that results in injury or death as a regulatory violation rather than as a crime may, in part, reflect that corporate activities are generally perceived as desirable and that corporations are subjected to significant structural pressures (e.g., the profit motive) that may result in undesirable outcomes, such as injuries and fatalities (Bittle, 2012; McMullan, 1992; Slapper & Tombs, 1999). Discourse of health and safety as a cost-benefit analysis restricts the scope of public debate about workplace injury to purely economic matters, squeezing out discussion about human rights and democracy (Shapiro, 2014).

Frames—clusters of factual and interpretative claims—that help us organize our understandings of events and prescribe actions and policies are an important feature of social constructivism (Best, 2001). For example, if we adopt the frame that workplace injuries are caused by worker carelessness, we will probably identify a different public policy response to a spate of workplace fatalities than would someone who adopts the frame that workplace injuries are the result of employer choices under the profit imperative of capitalism (Graebner, 1984). The existing cultural stock of frames provide storylines that assist the media in making events understandable to readers, efforts that also reinforce these cultural stocks.

### **Media, frames, and capitalism**

It is widely accepted that media does more than passively report the news. “News is not simply gathered; it is constructed or produced” (Lorimer & Gasher, 2004, p. 242). News reports about events shape the public’s understanding of that event. Media creates a “story” that simplifies, organizes, and explains. Due to its status in society as teller-of-truth (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001), the media plays a persuasive role in the creation of the story. “While news is not fiction, it is a story about reality, not reality itself. Yet because of its privileged status as reality and truth, the seductive powers of its narratives are particularly significant” (Bird & Dardenne, 1997, p. 346–347). Media is uniquely placed to construct public understanding of an issue or event. As Robert McChesney (2003) has observed: “the media do not necessarily tell you what to think, but they tell you what to think about, and how to think about it. ... It is not just about whether a story will be covered at all, but, rather, how much attention a story will get and the tone of the coverage” (p. 303).

To this end, media participates in the act of selecting the frames that become part of public discourse. In fact, its function is a particularly central one. More specifically, what the media chooses to report as “news” and how it chooses to frame the news story helps create and then reproduce societal views about what issues are newsworthy (i.e., important) and how people should respond to these issues (i.e., what is the problem, who is to blame) (Chermack, 1995; Croteau & Hoynes, 1997; Kellner, 1995). In the social constructivist view, newspaper content does not reflect any objective reality but rather is the result of reporters and editors interacting with the broader social structure, which includes resource and editorial constraints as well as the ideological predispositions of reporters, sources, and society (Demers, 1996; Dunwoody & Griffin, 1999; Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Sigal, 1973, 1986).

One outcome of these dynamics is media frames—particular ways of telling a story to optimize reader accessibility. The process of framing the news means that certain understandings of reality are conveyed at the expense of other understandings (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Entman, 1991; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). For example, Robert Entman (1993) asserts:

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient ... in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (p. 52)

Framing (which can occur with varying degrees of intentionality) can operate by the selection of words and story templates, the sources used (and not used), the amount of coverage, and whether or not a specific incident is linked to a larger pattern or issue (Entman, 1991, 1993; Lowney & Best, 1995; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). For example, emphasizing events as specific happenings (episodic frames) instead of placing them in a broader context (thematic frames) reduces an audience's likelihood of holding someone accountable for the existence and remedying of an issue (Iyengar, 1991). More broadly, the act of framing allows the media to engage in agenda setting (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002)—shaping what is considered important and what is not.

Frames and the media's role in their construction are particularly salient when addressing issues of political and economic significance. Matters related to the functioning of the capitalist economy are a point of active framing by media. The nature of media framing regarding the structures of capitalism and their consequences is problematic as media organizations are embedded within those very structures (Lorimer & Gasher, 2004). Put succinctly, “the corporate news media have a vested interest in the corporate system” (McChesney, 2003, p. 315). The interests of media corporations broadly align with the interests of capitalism in general, which has a direct and profound impact on the nature of how media reports on issues touching on those interests. Specifically, “the media system has been set up to serve the interests of those who make the policies behind closed doors – large profit-driven media corporations – while the broad and vital interests of the population have been largely neglected” (McChesney, 2004, p. 18).

The structures of capitalism are rendered invisible in media reporting and the desirability/inevitability of capitalist political economy is assumed (Newman & Scott, 2005). The negative aspects of capitalism, including inequality, are downplayed, while its merits are lauded. It is important to point out this bias is rooted in how media is structured in North America and not in the actions of individual actors. As McChesney (2004) points out, journalists approach their work with a high degree of professionalism and desire to report news as accurately as possible. It is that capitalism resides in a sphere of consensus (Hallin, 1986), wherein its tenets are assumed to have widespread agreement and there is no need to point out shortcomings or alternative points of view. Thus critiques of capitalism are silenced. The singular view of political economy is cloaked by the veneer of “objectivity,” which marks the liberal tradition of media found in North America (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

The entrenched framing regarding capitalism shapes decisions of what to cover as well as how to cover it. It even extends to the tendency to give greater voice to establishment elites who reflect the consensus (Hart, 2005) and to silence others, including racial, class, and gender minorities who may challenge the consensus (Renaud Gonzalez, 2005). Through these means, media organizations in North America bolster the interests of capital in society at the expense of other interests, including those of workers, by shaping public understanding of issues and events.

### **Media portrayals of workplace injury**

The above discussion is pertinent to the present study because the processes of work are intimately tied to structures of capitalism. Work-related issues cannot be disentangled

gled from the inherent, underlying power relations that exist in the employment relationship (Hyman, 1989). Consequently decisions regarding media coverage of work issues will activate the same interest dynamics that shape other political and economic matters central to capitalism. Indeed, coverage of labour issues reflects a structural inclination to privilege the interests of capital (employers). Research has shown a consistent managerial bias in North American media. Coverage of labour disputes and union activity constructs an anti-labour frame, highlighting violence and discord while downplaying the substance of workers' concerns (Harrison, 1985; Parenti, 1986; Schmidt, 1993). Similar representations of unions are also evident in popular culture (McCutcheon & Barnetson, 2016; Puette, 1992). Christopher Martin (2004) finds that striking workers are portrayed in the media as interfering with consumer rights and workers' concerns do not align with the broader public interest.

Workplace injuries and fatalities are a subset of labour issues. While newspapers frequently report on workplace injuries and fatalities, there is limited analysis of the nature of media coverage of workplace injuries (Denenberg & Denenberg, 2012). Tim Gawley and Shane Dixon (2015) conducted a quantitative analysis of Ontario newspaper reports of workplace injury and found the coverage skews the picture by over-reporting fatalities, injuries to men, and injuries in the construction sector. Bob Barnetson and Jason Foster (2015) replicated the study using a national dataset and found similar results. Both studies show media reporting creates a picture of injuries as acute physical events that happen mostly to men in blue-collar jobs. Injuries to female workers, occupational disease, and musculoskeletal injuries are almost entirely absent from media reports. There is, however, no analysis available of how media reports frame workplace injuries and fatalities or what effect those frames might have on public perception.

There is significant analysis of media frames of injuries and fatalities that result from intimate partner violence (IPV, sometimes called domestic violence) (Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Gillespie, Richards, Givens, & Smith, 2013; McManus & Dorfman, 2003; Richards, Gillespie, & Smith, 2011; Taylor, 2009). This analysis suggests that media reporting creates a distorted picture (Berns, 1999; Consalvo, 1998a, 1998b; Meyers, 1994, 1997). Marian Meyers (1994, 1997) asserts that news coverage of domestic violence is designed to uphold a patriarchal status quo by emphasizing individualized explanations and downplaying the explanatory value and contribution of gender-based structural and social norms. In this way, media coverage blames the victim and thereby vitiates societal responsibility for taking action (Belknap, 2007).

No similar analysis has been performed on media reports of workplace incidents. While some is known about who and what gets reported, very little is understood about how media reports frame workplace injuries and fatalities. A framing analysis similar to studies into IPV is overdue. The dearth of studies about media frames of workplace injuries and fatalities suggests an inductive approach to the issue, anchored by the theoretical understanding of the structure of media organizations. The following research question guides this study:

How are workplace injuries and fatalities framed in news reporting?

## Method

The dataset for this study comprises 245 newspaper articles that appeared in 31 Canadian English-language daily newspapers between July 1, 2009, and June 30, 2014, which reported workplace injuries or fatalities. Articles were retrieved from the FPIInfoMart database using search terms that included “workplace fatality,” “injured worker,” “workplace accident,” and “workplace death.” A total of 856 articles were initially identified. A review of the dataset saw 611 articles eliminated because they were duplicate reports (i.e., wire stories that appeared in multiple newspapers) or did not report on workplace injuries or fatalities. This data was entered into qualitative data management software and subjected to qualitative content analysis to identify overarching themes and patterns, thereby identifying the focus of social attention (Berg, 2004; Webber, 1990).

Following Philipp Mayring’s (2000) inductive approach, researchers independently reviewed an initial sample of 40 articles, noting key manifest and latent concepts and themes. Subsequently, a unified coding scheme for the dataset was developed and applied by each researcher independently. A very small number of coding discrepancies were resolved via discussion. A three-frame typology and meta-frame (set out below) emerged from analysis and was presented to a convenience sample of five current and former journalists. The purpose of this was to validate the frames and identify work practices and structural pressures that may help explain the typology. Individual semistructured interviews of the journalists were approved by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board and were conducted, transcribed, and coded by the researchers.

## Results

Analysis revealed three media frames in stories written about workplace incidents: incidents were Under Investigation, a Human Tragedy, or Before the Courts. These individual frames together give rise to a meta-frame that casts injuries and fatalities as isolated events that happen to “others” for which no one is responsible (except maybe the worker) and that we ought not be concerned about workplace safety.

### *Under investigation*

The first media frame appears primarily in articles reporting the occurrence of workplace incidents. These articles entail a brief sketch of the facts and invariably conclude by indicating that the incident is under investigation by provincial occupational health and safety (OHS) officers and/or police. Consider this (typical) example:

A BC Hydro employee has been killed at a Hydro substation east of Cranbrook. The BC Ambulance Service was called on Monday afternoon to treat an injured worker, but when paramedics arrived they couldn’t revive the man. The victim has been identified as 33-year-old Brandon Beday of Lumby. The BC Coroner Service is investigating. (*Globe & Mail*, 2010, p. S2)

These stories tend to be short in length (often a single paragraph) and contain five noteworthy aspects.

First, the article uses the passive voice to describe the event, thereby focusing attention on the recipient of the action (an “employee has been killed”) rather than the (unnamed) actor or agent that caused the event. The story does not probe root causes

of the incident, or other background information that may bring context of why the injury occurred. The absence of context and causality creates a sense that nothing could have been done to prevent the incident. The only group with agency (i.e., the capacity to take action) in these articles are the responders and their agency is limited to mitigating the effect and investigating the cause(s) of the incident.

Second, these reports rely heavily on government officials (e.g., police officers, OHS officers) as their primary source. This contributes to the sparseness of the descriptions, because officials tend to be careful with what they share. It also conveys to the reader the sense that someone “in charge” has the incident under control. In the few cases when witnesses are quoted, they add descriptive detail to what happened rather than explaining why an incident occurred.

Third, by invariably ending with a line indicating officials are investigating, these articles assure the reader that the government will justly resolve the issue. The episodic nature of this frame (where incidents are treated in isolation) obscures that past investigations have not precluded the occurrence of future injuries.

Fourth, the articles often quote an employer representative, creating space for the employer to mitigate reputation risk caused by a workplace injury. In the example below, the employer announces a trust fund for a dead worker’s family, thereby changing the story from “who is at fault” to “what a good company”:

The 37-year-old from Lacombe fell five metres from a wall. He was the father of five children and had been working as a carpenter foreman for Chandros Construction Ltd. for about three months. ...“To support Darryl’s family, Chandros has established a trust fund in his name,” company president Tom Redl said. (*Edmonton Journal*, 2009, p. B2)

The employer’s charitable act draws attention away from the fact of the situation: the employer had not conducted a hazard assessment or mitigated the risk of impalement posed by exposed vertical rebar beneath the work area (Alberta, 2009).

Finally, these articles portray the worker involved akin to a car accident victim. Their name is only rarely given and often the worker is genericized as, for example, “a 55-year-old man from Marystown” (*Telegram*, 2011, p. A8) or as a “man, an employee of Regina-based PowerMaxx Construction Ltd. ...” (*Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 2009, p. A5), or simply by their occupation. Such descriptions dehumanize the victim by framing the victim as a (often nameless) jobholder rather than in a more relatable manner (e.g., person with a family).

### *Human tragedy*

The second media frame primarily occurs in articles that recount the life story of a killed or (less commonly) injured worker. Articles adopting this Human Tragedy frame are typically longer than reports adopting the Under Investigation frame and include an abbreviated summary of the incident followed by reminiscences about the interests, character, life history, or social roles as told by a family member, friend, or co-worker. Although the details of such reports are highly idiosyncratic, the broad message is that the worker’s injury or death was a tragedy. A typical example of the Human Tragedy frame is a story about a worker who is remembered for his kind nature:

“The 59-year-old electrician, who had worked at the mine site for about 10 years, was well liked and sought after by apprentices looking to learn the skill (Edward) Artic had mastered,” said Kelly Reynolds, a United Steelworkers (USW) surface safety liaison at the mine. ... “He was always in a good mood when he came to work to work and really loved his family. (On) all his days off he spent quite a lot of time with his grandchildren—a really nice guy.” (Kyle, 2010, p. A3)

Such reports are common around the National Day of Mourning (April 28) for injured and killed workers (called the Workers’ Memorial Day in most countries other than Canada). There are two key aspects of the Human Tragedy frame. First, the “tragedy” is often accompanied by the word “accident” and implies the incident was unforeseeable and unavoidable. In this way, the Human Tragedy narrative elides any discussion of wrongdoing, cause, or culpability. Second, the tragedy in these articles is the personal loss and emotional suffering of the families. Focus is taken away from the workplace and put on the workers’ loved ones.

In this regard, and in contrast to the Under Investigation frame, the Human Tragedy frame encourages readers to think of the worker, not as a worker, but as a father/mother/son/daughter with interests and families. The articles draw out sympathy but in doing so remove the workplace context. The frame distances the reader from the nature of the incident and discourages linking the human elements of the incident to economic, political, and structural factors giving rise to whatever caused the “tragedy” in the first place.

### **Before the courts**

The third media frame primarily appears in articles reporting charges filed or resolved under provincial OHS laws. The articles typically recount the facts of the case (similar to other court reporting) and the penalty (or penalties) imposed. These reports use technical and passive language (e.g., the employer was convicted of failing to ensure a safe workplace) in lieu of a description of the actual injury and its circumstances (e.g., the employer removed safety equipment and thereby caused a worker to be crushed to death). For example:

C.B. Metal Works Inc. of Avondale has been charged under the Occupational Health and Safety Act and Regulations in connection with a March 2011 incident in which a steelworker fell about 15 feet from a steel joist. The worker suffered head and wrist injuries. The company has been charged with two violations—failure to ensure that it provided and maintained a safe workplace and that it failed to ensure a fall-arrest system provided to an employee was adequately secured to an anchorage point or a lifeline. The first court appearance is set for Monday, Feb. 11 at provincial court in St. John’s. (*Telegram*, 2013, p. A2)

This report elides how the worker fell from the joist and why the safety equipment was not properly anchored. Most likely, these circumstances reflect the employer’s decision about how to perform work. Discussing the safety violations in legal terms also distracts from the workplace reality: the employer failed to provide a safe worksite and thereby placed a worker’s life in danger.

In many cases, the report implies court proceedings mean the matter is concluded, ignoring the ongoing impact of the incident on the worker or the continuing presence of the hazard. Before the Courts reports are also among the few instances where an incident is reported more than once and where a company's injury history is mentioned:

Five charges were laid under the OHS Act and IOC pleaded guilty to three. It resulted in the largest fine in the province's labour history for a workplace death, at \$350,000 ... Together, Wabash Mines and IOC have been found guilty of OHS Act violations in six cases in the past 10 years. In each case, the charges resulted from activities at the mine that had the potential to, or more often did, cause injury and death. (Fitzpatrick, 2013a, p. A2)

In Before the Courts articles, the issue of cause and blame cannot be avoided, however, these reports narrow the focus of blame to legal culpability.

Some 30 charges were brought under the Occupational Health and Safety Act against Metron Construction Corp., which employed the workers. Another 16 were levelled against a director of that company and eight more against a Metron supervisor. ... Platform supplier Swing 'N' Scaffold faces four charges, while three were laid against a director. Each of the corporate charges carries a potential \$500,000 fine. (Hall, 2010, p. A1)

In the above example, the reporter makes clear the employers were legally culpable for four migrant workers falling to their death when a platform provided and operated by the companies collapsed. The case justified 61 charges, yet there is no commentary in the story about the seriousness of the employers' actions or that the companies' failures may have a moral dimension. Rather, the matter is simply a regulatory violation addressed via a fine—a violation little different than being fined for speeding or jaywalking.

Also missing in the court-related stories is an analysis of the penalty imposed. The stories outline the punishment factually (e.g., X company was fined \$25,000), but do not provide the reader with comparisons or context from which to judge the appropriateness of the penalty. Fines for similar convictions are not cited, nor are overall trends for OHS prosecutions (although these are publicly available). The penalty is painted as a stand-alone punishment, and its imposition is articulated as resolving the matter.

### **Meta-frame**

While each of the three media frames construct a different understanding of workplace injuries, taken together these frames comprise a meta-frame that guides readers' understanding of workplace injuries. The four elements to the meta-frame are that injuries and fatalities are 1) isolated events that 2) happen to "others" for which 3) no one is responsible (except maybe the worker), and that 4) we ought not be concerned about them.

First, few articles linked an injury to previous events or broader patterns of injury. In this way, injuries are reported as one-off events—curiosities of little significance other than to the victim and the victim's family. Even avid newspaper readers are unlikely to ever learn the result of the investigation or the fate of the worker. A second and related aspect of the meta-framing is the creation of distance between the reader

and the victim. Victims are never portrayed as a whole person: either they are a faceless (and usually nameless) worker injured or killed at work or they are a loving spouse/parent/child whom their family mourns, with the work-related particulars of the injury pushed into the background. Presenting only a partial view of the victim diminishes the significance of the event and the factors that led to it.

Third, the tone of the coverage suggests to readers there is no reason to be concerned about the incident. Workplace injuries are routine happenings that are Under Investigation or Before the Courts. Some articles even go as far as to assert that the “problem” has been fixed:

“After the A-1 thing happened, WCB came down and talked to us about it,” said Balbir Randhawa, manager of Central Composting. “We had to do the exposure plan and we complied to all that.” (McKnight & Hoekstra, 2012, p. A1)

[T]here have been changes made in the way that he would do his job if he were alive now. So it’s possibly saved many more people from the same fate. (Stricker, 2011, p. A3)

“Workplace safety made their report,” Embryk said in an interview late last week. “The plant is ready to function.” (Paul, 2014, n.p.)

There is virtually no meaningful engagement with the issue of what caused the workplace injury. While a small number of articles report on the proximate cause of incident (e.g., worker crushed when vehicle rolled forward), there is rarely any discussion of the root cause of the incident (e.g., mechanical failure, faulty job design, pressure to speed up production, staffing reductions) or the broader context in which the incident occurred. The absence of this context may reflect that reporting may occur before such information is available and follow-up reporting is rare.

When there is discussion of cause, it often implies worker error. In the example below, an employer representative asserts that, while the cause of a worker’s death is unknown, neither equipment nor training was at fault. The implication being that the worker made a mistake.

Moffatt said it’s unclear what happened, but the worker, who had been with the company for about six months, was familiar with and trained in the procedures of running the crusher, which is commonly used at sand gravel pits. She also said the equipment didn’t fail. (Tweed, 2014, p. A13)

Implications of worker error also come from government spokespeople.

Schichlone said the accident happened after Atlantic Roofers Ltd, had placed a pallet of roofing material on the roof. He said the structure gave way, causing the worker and the pallet of materials to fall approximately three metres into the building. At this time, there’s no word on whether the injured worker was wearing a safety harness to prevent his fall, he said. (Stewart, 2012, p. A2)

Whether the worker was wearing a harness is irrelevant. The roof (to which the worker would have been tied) collapsed because the employer failed to identify structural

weakness as a hazard, a matter not identified for scrutiny.

Such articles leave the reader with the impression that workplace incidents occur as a result of worker decisions and actions. Attention is drawn away from how employer decisions (often made months previously) about what, when, where, and how work is performed may have created an uncontrolled workplace hazard that is the root cause of the injury. An interesting exception is the small number of articles (5.2%) that quote a union representative. Trade unionists often draw attention to structural factors influencing the occurrence of injuries.

“We have daily air quality sampling being done all across the site. When we get the results back we have exceedances in the allowable silica levels,” said Ron Thomas, president of the united Steelworkers Local 5795 in Labrador City. “The company is supplying the personal protective equipment, but they are not upgrading the dust collectors or the machinery to prevent the dust levels. (Fitzpatrick, 2013b, p. A2)

Trade unionists are also the only sources likely to link individual injuries to a broader pattern:

Rick Clarke, president of the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour, said in a recent news release that 546 workers in the province have died at, or because of, work since the Westray Mine exploded in Plymouth, Pictou County, on May 9, 1992. (Lightstone, 2013, p. A5)

“We’ve been saying it for years,” said Ryan, president of the Ontario Federation of Labour. “You know, police line the streets of Toronto, people show up, and cops fly in from all over North America (when an officer dies in the line of duty). Of course, no one thinks it’s wrong that there is a big ceremony for police. But there’s workers killed on the job every week and there’s not a word about them.” (Coyle, 2014, p. A9)

Together, the pattern of casting workplace injuries and fatalities as 1) isolated events that 2) happen to “others” for which 3) no one is responsible (except maybe the worker) suggest that 4) readers should not be concerned about them. In this formulation, injuries and fatalities are not moments for outrage or probing deeply into underlying causes. Instead, readers should feel sympathy for the victims and trust in government and employers to fix any problems.

### **Journalist interviews**

The authors showed the draft frames to five current and former journalists for comment and response. All five current and former journalists interviewed indicated that the three media frames and the meta-frame were accurate and reflected the kinds of stories created by newspaper journalists.

Some participants suggested the typology did not capture stories reporting annual injury statistics or stories about injured workers’ interactions with the WCB. The authors returned to the dataset to explore the suggestions and found that stories about statistics were very rare, usually incorporated into a broader topic such as the Day of Mourning, and most often simply repeated official government statistics, offering no additional in-

sight or context. WCB stories were either captured in the Human Tragedy frame or only addressed post-injury issues (such as claim denial) and thus fell out of the scope of the study. Neither type substantially affects the frames identified in the analysis.

Participants indicated time pressure caused by reductions in staff and other resources meant there were limited opportunities to investigate stories. This, in turn, causes reporters to use the Under Investigation and Before the Courts frames.

Time pressure. ... When I get a press release sent to me about a car chase, or whatever, it is just “let’s get this up on the web” so I just basically rewrite the press release. It is the same with these stories. OHS is giving me a press release and I am just rewriting the press release. So it is a learned format. (Participant 2)

Newsrooms have a lot fewer people working in them then they once did and that is always a pressure. (Participant 5)

Some participants also identified space constraints and competing stories as auguring in favour of using the (typically brief) Under Investigation frame.

When there is a big story happening, sometimes you [file a] story that was 400 words, [and it] might get cut to 200 words. So you did want to do something bigger but it got chopped because of a physical reality that we needed the space for something bigger. (Participant 3)

Participants also reported possessing limited knowledge and receiving limited information about job tasks and injury mechanisms, a factor compounded by high turnover in reporting staff.

Often it is “they were on a bucket loader on a skid steer and the lever arm hit the cylinder” and you have no idea what job they were doing or what happened. I’m always googling skid steer and bucket loader to figure out what happened. (Participant 3)

High turnover in newsrooms leads to inexperienced reporters. “Our reporters don’t have enough expertise to ask [the right] questions. ... You are relying a lot on OHS to give you the information. (Participant 5)

These factors result in reporters applying “templates” used for other kinds of stories in workplace incident stories. Under Investigation stories follow the structure for crime stories: “that is the police blotter paragraph” (Participant 2). Meanwhile Before the Courts articles reflect the traditions of court reporting: “that’s just the way we cover courts, our default setting for covering courts” (Participant 5).

All participants also indicated difficulty in accessing information and witnesses to flesh out the story.

I always contact the workplace to see if they want to comment. Most often they don’t because they know there is going to be an OHS investigation and there is probably going to be a lawsuit arise. ... And sometimes ... the family ... has been told not to talk about it or thinks they shouldn’t talk about it because of litigation or people don’t want to interfere with those processes. Or they don’t really understand it. (Participant 5)

As a consequence, the journalist relies heavily on information from government spokespeople.

Finally, participants asserted that workplace incident stories are not usually viewed as priority items.

It is a prioritization. If police are involved it becomes a bigger deal. If a guy falls off a roof then, okay a guy fell off a roof, the employer is under investigation and then we will await the results. They are not going to chase it down. ... There may or may not be a villain, whereas if there is a crime committed there is always a villain. (Participant 4)

[O]nce you write the police blotter, it is not like anyone says “okay, can you follow up on that tomorrow?” Whereas with the fire at [a historic movie theatre], that was every single day “can you follow up on that?” RCMP shooting, “can you follow up on that?” So there is just not that same demand the next day. (Participant 2)

The participants noted that Human Tragedy stories are often driven by particular commemorations, events, or celebrations.

If there is a date you can hang it on, you can plan that. Day of Mourning is coming up in four weeks, we gotta find a widow. ... And in some cases, frankly, it is advertising driven. We are doing a special section on the Day of Mourning, we need copy. (Participant 4)

Overall, work practices and pressures appear to be important factors shaping the use of the media frames identified in this study. The participants interpret the frames as a byproduct of how newsrooms work and the relatively low priority of workplace-related issues in general.

## Discussion

A frame is a particular way of telling a story to optimize reader accessibility. The three frames evident in Canadian newspaper coverage of workplace injuries and fatalities have significant implications for how readers are likely to view such injuries. For example, the act of reporting injuries suggests they are notable (i.e., newsworthy) in some way. Reports adopting the Human Tragedy frame imply workplace injuries are notable because of their negative effect on the workers and the workers' families. Yet stories adopting a Human Tragedy frame are in the minority. By contrast, the majority of stories adopt the Under Investigation frame, which cast injuries as unusual and mildly interesting events (much like car accidents) that society has well in hand (investigators are looking into it, after all). Reports adopting the Before the Courts frame also imply that any problem is being (or has been) resolved. In this way, newspaper reports reinforce the view that workplace injuries are regrettable, but uncommon, unavoidable, and acceptable features of modern life that the public need not be concerned about. Privileging this perspective—the perspective of employers—via newspaper frames obscures the widespread nature of workplace injury and fatalities, thereby concealing information that might spark resistance among workers to dangerous working conditions and/or the state's regulatory approach to OHS.

The tendency of newspapers to report workplace injuries as isolated incidents contributes to an act-of-God sensibility to workplace injuries. Both the Under Investigation and Human Tragedy frames almost never discuss the cause of or responsibility for the injury: the injury simply happened. In the few instances where cause is discussed, worker error is often mooted. While the Before the Courts frame indicates an employer is responsible for an injury, such reports tend to be written in highly legalistic and passive ways that obscure the fact that injuries are not natural phenomena that no one can control. Rather, most injuries are caused by physical, chemical, or biological hazards introduced into the workplace by employers when they designed the production process. In this way, injuries result from choices made by employers. The cost of injuries and fatalities are mostly externalized onto workers and society, which represents a choice by the state. The only recognition that there is a political economy of workplace injury in the articles occurs in the handful of instances when union representatives are interviewed.

The meta-frame creates distance between the reader and the nature of workplace injury. Readers are encouraged, occasionally, to feel sympathy for victims and their families, but are discouraged from linking human tragedy to conscious decisions made by employers and governments. Reading a story about a workplace fatality that is written in the manner of a car accident report or a burglary trial downplays the systematic nature of workplace hazards and implies a degree of “unfortunate accident” to the incident. This distancing serves the interests of employers and the state. For employers, the framing prevents a public eye being cast upon their internal safety practices and maintains a disinterested public opinion, thus preserving the employers’ high degree of autonomy around workplace safety issues and protecting their corporate reputation as well. For the state, the framing facilitates its legitimation function on behalf of capital. If the public is unconcerned about the degree of danger found in workplaces, there can be no outcry for government regulation and enforcement. The state is spared having to further interfere with employers’ internal operations in the name of protecting worker safety.

Both employers and the state have an interest in minimizing the degree of regulation in workplace safety. Media framing of workplace injury provides them latitude to manage workplace safety as they “see fit” by averting the public eye. Interviews with journalists indicate that resource constraints, pre-existing notions of what is “newsworthy” and how to report it, and a lack of knowledge and information contribute to the selection of the three media frames identified. Interpreting a workplace fatality through the lens of a crime scene, a family tragedy, or a court case distorts the picture of what occurred and its causes and consequences. Journalists do not actively seek to distort the picture, but the structural pressures that exist in the newspaper industry construct a logic that leads to the narratives found in this study.

McChesney (2003) and others have found that the North American media industry is deeply embedded in capitalist structures, and thus its common interest with capital manifests itself in how it creates news. In that context, the results of this study are unsurprising. The framing of workplace injury and fatality serves the interests of employers in the same way the reporting of other topics, such as business or politics, serves the interests of broader capital. However, the study is useful in its efforts to iso-

late the nature of the frames for a specific topic and to surface the processes that give rise to them.

It is logical to suggest the results found in this study are applicable to a variety of jurisdictions. The pressures and tendencies in newsrooms reported by the journalists are likely to be found across the North American newspaper industry. Employer interests around health and safety matters are similarly consistent across countries. While the specifics of health and safety regulation regimes may vary, the tension felt by government between facilitating capital control of the means of production and maintaining state legitimacy among the public is common to all developed nations. The cost-benefit discourse of health and safety (Shapiro, 2014) is internationally present.

Finally, this study cannot state with certainty what effect these frames have on readers. Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to assume that readers will likely adopt the broad-strokes message of the meta-frame—injuries are isolated events that happen to “others” for which no one is responsible (except maybe the worker)—which suggests that readers should not be concerned. Based on the content of the dataset, it is unlikely that readers would be able to articulate an alternative framing of workplace injuries as, for example, employers trading worker health for profit, something enabled by ineffective government regulation. Future studies might usefully assess the effect of these frames on readers.

## Conclusion

This study has found that newspapers present workplace injury and fatality within specific and identifiable frames. These frames, in turn, feed into a meta-frame that informs readers’ perceptions of workplace injury. The constructed framing is the result of pressures and tendencies within newsrooms that under-acknowledge the nature of workplace injury. The framings lead to a partial, distanced understanding by the public of workplace incidents.

As found in other areas, the framings also serve the interests of employers and governments around workplace health and safety. The structure of North American media leads to constructions of media frames that further the interests of capital at the expense of public interest. This study has found that those tendencies extend to the coverage of workplace injury and fatality.

This study is the first to apply frame analysis to media representations of workplace injury and fatality. As such, its insights are incomplete. Further research could more directly examine the effects on readers of such frames. Similarly, future research could explore if other factors shape media representations on the topic, including urban versus rural newspapers or electronic media versus newspapers.

The frames revealed here can be seen as contributing to the growing insight around the political economy of health and safety. In tandem with the consequences of “cost-benefit,” “blame the worker,” and other discourses, media frames of health and safety contribute to unpacking the processes of minimizing the attention paid to workplace injury and death.

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