



Examining the effects of anti-space weaponization arguments in the media: Some experimental findings from Canada

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how political activists are framing the space weaponization debate in Canada and whether their arguments can influence public attitudes and perceptions about the issue. Eighty university students from two undergraduate courses were recruited as participants in a quasi-experiment. One class ($n = 38$) was exposed to the documentary *Masters of Space*, an episode of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's program *The Nature of Things*, and another class ($n = 42$) served as the control group. Pre-test and post-test questionnaires were used to measure the effects of viewing anti-weaponization arguments in the media, while also controlling for the influence of prior beliefs and background characteristics of participants. Results suggest that visually depicting the use of satellite technology in society can convince viewers that satellites are important to their way of life, but not necessarily to the defense of North America. Framing missile defense as a 'space weapon in disguise' also seemed to raise opposition to Canada's participation in continental missile defense. The findings, meanwhile, indicate that viewers respond strongly to the issue of space debris and that mobilizing support for joint military space projects may best be achieved by emphasizing the usefulness of these projects for locating and tracking such debris. In the end, media exposure seemed to help legitimize anti-weaponization arguments based more on rational self-interests than on idealistic beliefs. These findings can have implications for the way space policies are communicated to the public.

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No one can predict what event may suddenly elevate space into the ranks of an operational threat to national security. However, it is highly likely that such an event will occur. (Dr. James Fergusson, Professor and Director, Center for Defense and Security Studies, University of Manitoba).

1. Introduction

In Canadian politics the weaponization of space has historically served as a premise for opposing Canada's participation in continental missile defense. In 1985 Brian Mulroney declined government-to-government participation with the USA in Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) amid fierce opposition from politicians, academics, and activists in the media. Two decades later Paul Martin turned down an offer from George W. Bush to have Canada actively participate in Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) [1,2].¹

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¹ Paul Martin did not attribute his decision on BMD participation to public criticism in his memoirs, claiming instead that he declined the offer mainly because he could not obtain re-assurances that Canadian cities would be defended during a large scale nuclear attack (See Paul Martin, *Hell or High Water*, (McLelland & Stewart: 2008). However, many anti-missile defense activists believe their efforts to mobilize public opposition (especially through the media) contributed to Martin's decision (see Steven Staples, *Missile Defense: Round One*, (Lorimer & Co.: 2006)).

In both cases, opponents framed support for SDI and BMD as violating Canada's official position on outer space security at the United Nations. These critics pointed out that both programs would eventually rely on interceptors in space to neutralize incoming ballistic missiles. This, they charged, would violate the principles set forth by the Outer Space Treaty of 1967.

Proponents, meanwhile, argued that the treaty only prohibits the deployment of nuclear weapons in orbit and neither prohibits conventional weapons in space nor the lawful use of force in space [3].² Canada, they pointed out, had once developed its own military space program and had also participated in joint research projects with the USA in the 1960s to explore the feasibility of space surveillance, early warning, communication networks and satellite navigation technologies. Godefroy even claimed that "there was no reluctance on the part of Canada to militarize or weaponize space; in fact, the record suggests that if further resources had been available a higher profile effort may have resulted" [4]. The dismantling of Canada's military space programs began only under the Trudeau government in 1968, which saw no distinction

² For a legal interpretation of the Outer Space Treaty, see Patrick Gleeson, "Perspectives on Space Operations", 5 (2) *Astropolitics* (2007).

between placing military ‘assets’ in space and placing ‘weapons’ in space [5].

The debate over Canada’s involvement in missile defense is far from over. As James Fergusson notes, Canadian policy makers could once again be faced with a new offer from the USA to participate in BMD, prompting yet another national debate over the issue [6]. Future presidential administrations could decide to test and deploy a final layer of space-based kinetic-kill interceptors to defend the continent and protect essential military, civilian and commercial satellites in orbit. This decision could be driven by the existential threat of nuclear proliferation to hostile countries such as Iran and North Korea. Participating in ground-based missile defense is also still an option for Canada and many have argued in recent years that the new government should reconsider participation to help solidify NORAD relations [7,8].³

Moreover, Canada’s participation in joint military space projects could also become a contentious issue depending on the USA’s future actions in space. Under NORAD, Canada depends on the USA’s ballistic missile early warning systems (BMEWS) for notification of a nuclear attack. Canada is also contributing the Sapphire satellite to the US Space Surveillance Network (SSN) to help relay tracking information of Earth orbiting objects to the Joint Space Operations Center (JSpOC). Along with Sapphire, the Department of National Defense has funded a joint project involving the development of micro-satellites to help track foreign satellites and asteroids in high orbits. Both platforms will feed information into the SSN. Given Canada’s involvement in these space projects, a decision by the United States to deploy space-based missile interceptors could ignite a new national debate over Canada–US military space relations.

If history is any indication, Canadian public opinion about these issues will likely be shaped by numerous actors, including politicians, academics, activists and the mass media. Although numerous polls have examined what Canadians think about SDI and BMD over the years, no study to date has examined what the public thinks about the weaponization of space. This is not surprising, given what little attention this issue has received in the media. But if security experts are correct, and some major incident is to suddenly raise the status of this issue in society, how might Canadians react? More importantly, given the Canadian media’s tendency to give anti-space weaponization activists a voice in the matter, could we expect these activists to shape public opinion about the issue? Could they convince the public that satellite technology matters to their way of life? Could they persuade the public to oppose participation in joint military space programs with the USA? And could exposure to media coverage about the issue cause viewers to identify more strongly with the arguments advanced by these activists?

In this paper, I address these questions by testing the strength and effectiveness of anti-weaponization arguments in the media in a controlled quasi-experiment.⁴

³ See, among others: Senator Colin Kenny, “Ballistic Missile Defense: Our Fear of Americans Trumps Any Rational Canadian Approach to Survival” (2006), available online at: <http://colinkenny.ca/en/Ballistic-Missile-Defence-Our-Fear-of-Americans-Trumps-Any-Rational-Canadian-Approach-to-Survival/>; Fraser A.F. MacKenzie, “Should Canada Re-examine Its Position on Missile Defense?” 9 (2) Can Mil J (2008).

⁴ It is termed a quasi-experiment because participants could not be randomly assigned to the treatment groups from the same pool of individuals before the experiment. Time constraints and lack of funding prevented me from conducting a classical experiment, so I had to examine alternatives, such as using pre-existing groups (classrooms), which is commonly done under these circumstances. It is still generally considered a legitimate research design and the findings are strengthened by the fact that the two groups did not differ significantly in their prior beliefs or background characteristics, as shown in the methodology section.

The documentary *Masters of Space*, an episode from the CBC television program *The Nature of Things*, is used as the treatment (stimulus) because it is the first and only film of its kind to provide viewers with a comprehensive overview of the space-weaponization debate, while highlighting the opinions of activists in the process. In the end, the findings suggest that anti-weaponization activists can significantly raise awareness about the issue and even influence public attitudes and perceptions.

2. Case study: examining CBC’s *Masters of Space*

2.1. Production and dissemination

Masters of Space is a made-for-television version of the full length documentary *Pax Americana and the Weaponization of Space*. The film was written and directed by Canadian film-maker Denis Delestrac. It was produced in collaboration with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and was later re-edited for use by the CBC. The CBC version was narrated by host David Suzuki and first aired on *The Nature of Things* in April 2010. Although the CBC version is significantly shorter than the full length documentary, it presents the same material and maintains a similar tone and structure. The CBC version is currently sold as an educational video on the *CBC Learning* website under the heading ‘Politics and Government’, where it is advertised as a teaching aid for secondary and post-secondary students. *Masters of Space* has also been publicly accessible on [YouTube.com](http://www.youtube.com) since 28 August 2010, where it was accessed and used for this experiment.⁵

2.2. Main arguments

Since *Masters of Space* is the first mainstream (i.e. widely disseminated) documentary to present the opinions and beliefs of anti-space weaponization activists, it provides a unique opportunity to measure how future generations might eventually respond to these arguments in the mass media. To measure their impact on viewers, it was necessary to begin by identifying the main arguments conveyed in the film based on comments made by the filmmaker during promotional interviews.

2.2.1. The importance of satellite technology in society

The first of these arguments concerns the importance of satellite technology to sustaining our current way of life. When asked by one critic to mention the most surprising thing he had learned from his research, Delestrac answered:

Every step I took in this research opened another door that confirmed this subject was really urgent and really important. For example, I had no idea when I started that so many of the orbiting satellites are owned by the U.S. I did not realize at all that we use them every day. Things like that. On the military side, I was very surprised to learn how the military depends on space [9].

Accordingly, *Masters of Space* opens with a segment emphasizing the importance of satellites to civilians. Theresa Hitchens, director of the Center for Defense Information (CDI), tells viewers that “our entire life depends on satellites. They are essential. But we are not conscious of that until we lose it.” [10] Satellites, she notes, are used whenever a person opens a cell phone, withdraws money from the bank with an ATM card, watches television programming from around the world, relies on a GPS system to get directions, and follows the weather forecast in the news. Suzuki, the narrator, then

⁵ See Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *Masters of Space* (28 Aug 2010). Online: [YouTube http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtYQMqJ1NIs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtYQMqJ1NIs).

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