Article

Newspaper Coverage of Government Contracting in the United States: Fueling a Narrative of Distrust and Incompetence

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Abstract: The individual interpretations of purchasing policies weaken fair government purchasing practices. However, this does not fully account for the nature of the media's coverage of government contracting, taken as a whole. The authors seek to understand better framing in newspaper stories on government procurement, with the government as a force that creates opportunity and fraud. The paper focuses on an area of cognitive uncertainty in understanding portrayals of public procurement in newspaper articles as positive or negative, and, assuming a lack of balance, what interest or group do articles favor in their portrayal of this public function? Sentiment analysis of a corpus of newspaper articles focusing on government contracting was conducted. This analysis suggests that the negative perception of government contracting is reinforced and exacerbated by sensationalized media coverage, a negative impact on the policymaking process and public discourse, and public trust in government results.

Keywords: public procurement; newspaper coverage of government; negative reinforcement

1. Introduction

The Washington Post (Bump 2014) reported that a Gallup poll indicated, "Most Americans believe the federal government wastes 51 percent of every tax dollar it collects." In other words, the taxpayers pay 51 cents for every dollar or USD 510 for every USD 1000 on April 15. Because there are examples of excess and certain people seize on those as examples of bad government, there is an assumption that all government purchasing is unethical. People are swindling the government all the time. This perception is exacerbated by incorrect or incomplete media reporting on the true nature and extent of purchasing processes, as well as violations.

The U.S. Department of Justice (2020) defines public corruption as "a breach of the public's trust by government officials who use their public office to obtain personal gain. It is a violation of federal law for any federal, state, or local government official to ask for or receive anything of value in exchange for, or because of, any official act". Roberts (2018) viewed corruption in procurement as an erosion of public trust. The inherent nature of public procurement allows the public to assume the government wastes public funds and pays for overpriced items purchased by the government. There are ethical considerations for this and implications for lack of trust between the public and government, as has clearly been seen in recent years. There are misunderstandings about what the government does in purchasing and why; this has not been helped by a New Public Management-led discourse that relies on the notion that business is superior to government in practically every respect. The decision-making dilemma is related to the notion of implied corruption, but perhaps the perceived level of corruption. Individual interpretations of purchasing policies weaken the essence of fair government procurement, but this does not fully explain the nature of the media's coverage of government contracting, taken as a whole. Even though the government procurement function is a constant in the provision of public services, in many

instances, it can be suggested that sensationalized excesses of public buying receive the most coverage in popular media. Such coverage catches the public's imagination and reinforces a belief that government is out of control. While government procurement may regularly work to provide the goods and services needed by the government at fair prices, as a stated goal and a matter of law, it is when such outcomes do not occur that the public imagination is stoked. Because the public does not commonly understand government procurement processes and rules well, if at all, the newspaper narrative is far-reaching and insidious, undermining public work and increasing doubt in public institutions at a time when the public sector legitimacy is under dire threat. By narrative, we mean telling stories as cultural production, with decisions made by the storytellers about values and truths, and where to focus attention. Put simply, newspapers are interested in selling news as a commodity through the construction of good vs. bad narratives and the production of normalities that are to be accepted by the public, perhaps without much thought (Fulton et al. 2005).

This paper seeks to understand better framing in newspaper stories on government procurement, with the government as a force that creates opportunity and fraud. This research aims to understand an area of cognitive uncertainty better: Do newspaper articles portray a positive or negative view of public procurement? And, assuming a lack of balance, what interest or group do articles favor in their portrayal of the public procurement scenario? Utilizing Entman's cascading activation model, it is offered that negative coverage of procurement should not be seen as objective, isolated instances of news coverage but rather a concerted effort over time to support what are fundamentally political positions vested in neoliberalism and New Public Management—that government processes are inherently flawed, prone to waste and sloth, and in need of private-sector makeovers, if not being contracted out entirely.

First, government procurement is reviewed through lenses of opportunity and potential for fraud. Framing and the cascading activation model are reviewed next. Given a sentiment analysis approach for the year 2019 of articles referencing "government contract" published in the *New York Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, the authors of this paper propose that newspapers' negative reporting on government procurement policies is regularly invested in partisan-serving projections, betraying a lack of understanding about core government functions. The results of this analysis suggest that the negative perception of government contracting is reinforced and exacerbated by sensationalized media coverage, with a negative impact on the policymaking process, public discourse, and public trust in government results. An environment is created where political self-dealing is increasingly possible, and effective public contracting becomes even less plausible.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Government Procurement: As Opportunity and Source of Fraud

Government contracting represents a widely known example of privatization, and the approachability of contracts signals an opportunity to the business community and the potential for partnership with the government to serve public needs. The government's buying habits are extensive and impressive—in the United States, Federal government spending alone is estimated at USD 4.829 trillion (Amadeo and Berry-Johnson 2020). Because the government spends a lot of money and does, in fact, purchase a wide variety of products and services to fulfill its public goals, this public spending represents a tremendous potential opportunity for interested vendors.

However, this great reserve of opportunity does not exist without the potential problems of political influence, among other concerns (Lu 2013). While government procurement holds great potential for firms that have the capacity and wherewithal to succeed—to stay in the market, obtain contracts, perform adequately, and achieve repeat business—vendors nevertheless are aware that there are significant barriers in government contracting that prevent new vendors from entering the market and undermine the performance of existing vendors (Josephson et al. 2019). Even with all the supposed opportunities in

the market, the response governments receive for contract opportunities is often non-competitive (Johnston and Girth 2012).

The rise in the number of government purchasing contracts, coupled with the complexity of technology utilized to accelerate approval or consent, and payable cycles; the increase in goods and services outsourcing; and the pressure and willingness to cut or reduce costs have caused government organizations to be more exposed and unprotected to fraud risks in procurement (Curry 2017; Piper 2017; Rendon and Rendon 2016). Contracts with government involvement can include various agencies and departments, and the complexity can lead to procurement fraud and procurement problems (Curry 2017; Rustiarini et al. 2019). Fraud may be defined as "any activity that relies on deception to achieve a gain", and it becomes a crime when misrepresentation is undertaken knowingly (Association of Certified Fraud Examiners 2022). Some government contracts do not include adequate adherence to rules, regulations, and standards of fairness.

Because framing can be rooted in an us-versus-them mentality, which can result in a public discussion environment lacking factual basis and candor in favor of brutish identity politics, these notions are particularly relevant. Bias in journalism may lend itself to the notion of objectivity and journalism that protects the public interest, but instead mainly undermines public sector legitimacy with exaggerated accounts of greed, excess, and fraud to sell newspapers and advertising space. The result is a loss of public trust (Meeks 2020). Most newspapers have reported on government procurement fraud and waste in past years. Procurement fraud is regularly assumed as prevalent; government organizations are shown as susceptible to fraud and waste in their procurement processes (Piper 2017), with organizations such as the Department of Defense being identified as high risk for fraud (Rendon and Rendon 2016). Procurement processes continue to be more susceptible to fraudulent activities due to the vast amount of funds channeled through public procurement into the market (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2016).

Procurement fraud destroys the reputation of government agencies, causes waste and financial loss, and weakens the public's confidence in governmental structure and management. In government contracts, during the bidding and negotiation process, as well as the performance of the contract, certificates and affidavits are required to be submitted by a contractor that may later serve or provide the basis for false claim cases (Curry 2017). The U.S. Government Accountability Office reported that "Government-wide, improper payment estimates totaled $124.7 billion in fiscal year 2014, a significant increase of approximately $19 billion from the prior year's estimate of $105.8 billion. The estimated improper payments for fiscal year 2014 were attributable to 124 programs spread among 22 agencies" (United States Government Accountability Office 2015, p. 2).

Most contractors present false claims cases, and the four common charged fraud cases of government contract are those alleging progress payment fraud, nonconforming materials fraud, defective pricing, and cost overcharging: Progress payment fraud happens when a contractor fraudulently certifies that costs warranting reimbursement have been incurred and purposefully applies for payments during the progression of a contract. Nonconforming materials fraud occurs when government contractors falsify documentation that all materials conform to contract specifications. Defective pricing arises when the contractor or an agent falsifies or inaccurately submits information regarding costs or prices. Cost mischarging happens when costs not allowable or sanctioned under the contract are charged against the Government for costs concerning a separate contract and when the Government is overcharged (Androphy 2020). Many contractors have become the focus of criminal investigations concerning the violations of criminal statutes (Curry 2017). Procurement fraud causes significant monetary loss worldwide in government organizations. Contracts and procurements usually move alongside collusion and corruption. The amount of loss can be substantial—as an example, a 2011 report found USD 60 billion lost due to fraud and abuse in contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan war efforts (Shane 2011). Many people, organizations, and entities fight for the same contract, so some may do almost anything to win the contract.

Procurement fraud and waste are becoming a common problem worldwide as most fraud cases internationally are somehow connected to procurement processes through bid rigging or bid manipulation to influence or manipulate the award of the contract to a favored supplier (Curry 2017; Rendon and Rendon 2016). Procurement fraud has been defined as "any methodology or plan designed to defraud a buying activity, or degrade the integrity of the acquisition process" (Defense Acquisition University n.d.). According to Rustiarini et al. (2019), procurement fraud has become a complicated problem in any phase involved in the procurement processes of products or services. It can be initiated or committed by an employee, an outside supplier, and a few employees working together in the organization (Rustiarini et al. 2019). Procurement fraud involves a series of fraudulent acts emanating as a result of a required recognizing scheme, bid-rigging, and solicitation irregularities during the pre-contract awarding phase to falsify invoices for the claims of undelivered goods and services or goods and services that do not meet contract specifications during the post-contract award stage (Curry 2017; Rustiarini et al. 2019). Procurement fraud originates in various forms and can be described and branded in several ways. The most common instances are procurement fraud involving employees and fraud that involves contractors. The contractors also conspire among themselves (Rustiarini et al. 2019); this can also create market inconsistencies that undermine government efforts to purchase quality products and services at the lowest cost.

One of the most common examples of government stretching the truth about the availability of vendors to provide a product or service exists with the concept of a no-bid or sole-source contract. Sole source contracts can be defined as follows: "Contracts are awarded to qualified firms, without any bidding, either because the firm proposed a unique and best idea or because the proposer is the only firm that can do the specific work" (Christodoulou 2003, p. 155). A problem occurs when the procurement process avoids competition and either the rationale for sole sourcing is inadequate or the decision is made based on inaccurate or falsified information. Sweetheart deals with well-connected vendors are at the intersection of political corruption and theft of public resources, making them especially interesting to news organizations and the public alike.

Politics and a tendency toward privatization can affect how a public sector procurement operation works and how it is perceived. Even though fraud and corruption do occur in public procurement, it is an exaggeration to suggest that instances of such abuse are the rule rather than exceptions. Governments at all levels engage in a large volume of business in pursuit of the public's work, and too often, the focus in popular understanding is on the exceptions. A problem with focusing on abuse rather than the regular, acceptable work and outcomes of government is that the assumption increasingly becomes regular fraud—something to be stopped. This misplaced focus also undermines the hard work of a trained, capable public procurement workforce.

Privatization is a typical response to real and perceived abuses in the public sector. Privatization can benefit the government, but it should be noted that a move toward private provision of public services "is a policy choice based on ideological, political, and economic decisions pertaining to values" (McNamara and Morris 2008, p. 575). Governments may seek to contract out some services, such as waste removal, to lower transaction costs, and because some work is complicated, such as recycling services (Walls 2005). However, some decisions on privatization are sometimes made on thin reasoning and are more political than business-driven. To paraphrase Ribreau (2004), a poor private program is not preferable to a good public program; the fact that the private sector runs a public-facing program does not necessarily or automatically improve it. This approach has also been suggested in the context of the military (Camacho 2015) and in education, where privatization may adversely influence public accountability (DiMartino and Scott 2012).

Corruption can enter into privatization when very little or no control is established. There is comfort in continuing to work with known vendors, so having a previous contract with a government entity increases the chance that another contract will be awarded (Plaček et al. 2019). However, the attention in privatized contracts to efficiency and low

costs can undermine other priorities, such as protecting workers through labor standards (Holley 2014). Contractors are led by profit motives and rent-seeking, as Resh (2019) noted. Privatization has not offered a better response in reducing the potential and incidence of self-dealing and corruption. Incentivization does not always help to justify added expenditure; Girth and Lopez (2019) found that "incentive contracts are not consistently associated with shorter durations, lower costs, or more favorable technical performance" (p. 335).

The existence of corruption in the public space has fostered a ready narrative of fraud and lousy business dealing in government contracting. The denigration of public sector purchasing could be purposeful. In an increasingly polarized context, the narrative of self-serving, incompetent public administration serves the cause of populism and reformist tones: the need to clean out a system, "drain the swamp", or make changes to allow for business-mindedness and common sense (Cole 2020). Supposedly the media has a liberal bias, so it would be reasonably expected that its coverage would put a positive spin on the government; to the extent that coverage of government processes is negative, this may support the presence of other biases.

2.2. Framing and the Role of the Media

While a comprehensive discussion of the role of media in framing public policy discourse is well beyond the scope of this paper, some comment is appropriate to provide context for this discussion. Lasswell (1971) observed that the media has a role in scrutinizing the environment and public mobilization beyond entertainment. In performing this function, the media constructs reality for mass consumption. This raises the concept of framing, where "the media transform the nature of events through 'formats,' which constitute ideological or value perspectives in which the media focus on 'storylines,' symbols, and relevant stereotypes" (Naveh 2002, p. 8).

Because reality is being constructed through decisions made by others, it necessarily matters who these people are and what they think. As a result, the ideology of the editorial staff weighs heavily on framing. Further, events that may be "defined as negative will get better coverage", as will events that can be made relevant to the public (Naveh 2002, p. 7). If an event matches a previous pattern, such as waste and public abuse of trust, then it matches an existing frame and might possibly prove useful.

In their propaganda model, Herman and Chomsky (2002) suggested that there might be pushback against negative coverage of government excesses—that the media might fear government action in this regard. There is a reason to question this concerning government contracting, where it is cliché to guffaw at excesses of government contracting and paying too much for products and services. If anything, questioning government contracting has been encouraged, especially in recent years. The government has done a tremendous job of making criminals pay for committing fraud in public tenders (Hogan 2018); government is no powerless victim. Yet, a particular framing perpetuates itself in media coverage.

It is worth asking, though, whether this framing and storytelling style—essentially shaming government contracting, an area of work that is rule-bound and complex beyond standard understanding, without much thought—leads to useful ends. Does this type of media surveillance lead to needed government reform? It can, but the attention has to be focused enough, and public attention sustained for an extended period of time, and this is not the usual result of government contracting news coverage (Mothershed 2012). There are scandalous stories, but government contracting is often very competitive, and scandals do not always occur (DiGiacomo and Kleckner 2006). It is possible that interest groups are served by coverage, including elite interests.

For example, there may be interest in less competition in contracting, which would ultimately serve the neoliberal interests of large corporations. In such an example, public contracting specialists would be shown as incompetent, incapable of negotiating good contracts with excellent value on behalf of the public, and ignoring potentially any rotten dealings on the part of the private sector, which may play some nefarious role (remembering

that the private sector is almost always involved in government contracting in some respect). Consider for a moment that in the Federal government in the United States, much of the contracting occurs in the Department of Defense, both in the volume of contracts and total dollar value. Government contracting is big business, lobbyists have essential roles to play in decisions that are made, and it is reasonable for observers to be concerned about fairness in processes.

From the media perspective in framing, the media might intervene by providing negative coverage of government procurement processes, in essentially picking and choosing examples of bad contracting and not covering the more common positive examples; this serves the media's interests in driving continued sales and advertising revenue. Stories might be framed in ways that downplay the professional expertise of public contracting specialists, with stories packaging (Callaghan and Schnell 2001) discourse as yet more abuse of public trust, in times when public trust in government institutions is already historically low.

2.3. The Cascading Activation Model

It has been suggested that the mass media helps guide popular understanding of often complex issues in a manner that suggests a preferred interpretation of processes and events. Certain words and images are highlighted in coverage, producing long-standing views in the popular consciousness—views that are often generalized well beyond the original instance or example. Framing involves "selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution" and gains traction in the repetition of "noticeable, understandable, memorable, and emotionally charged" words and images (Entman 2003, p. 417). In fact, framing is a central aspect of journalistic work: how journalists present a story so that it encourages certain perceptions and downplays others. Inherent in producing a new frame is identifying an issue as a problem, identifying a cause or possibly someone to blame for the problem (making a moral judgment), and aligning the coverage with means of resolving the problem (Entman 2003). Instances of journalistic framing and counter-framing lend themselves to repeated use of discernible categories. For example, Meeks (2020) suggested that attacks, praise, and bias form prominent categories in framing in a review of President Donald Trump's tweets attacking the media. Framing helps to tell stories. There are expected aspects of storytelling in news articles, including some notion of equilibrium (how things should be), an account of disruption, and efforts to resolve the disruption. Because the story is constructed between storyteller and audience, there is also a need to have the story meet general expectations of the closeness of fit with reality. However, there is an understanding that, in storytelling, some aspects of the story are accentuated and others are downplayed or left out entirely (Fulton et al. 2005).

The cascading activation model "explains how interpretive frames activate and spread from the top level of a stratified system . . . to the network of . . . elites, and on to news organizations, their texts, and the public—and how interpretations feedback from lower to higher levels" (Entman 2003, p. 415). The model proposes that presenting salient words and images to the public invokes the calling to the mind of related images and the building of value-laden constructs; some ideas are selected or disregarded as needed to create a certain image. In cascading activation, preferred words and images, and ways of thinking about contested issues, may extend from sources of political power to news organizations and to the level of the public, where individuals are influenced by the resultant interpretations of news coverage. News organizations bring their own work and value to the process of providing interpretation on an ostensibly objective basis but may shift along with political leadership (Handley 2010). Frames may favor elite interests and may be set forward to motivate the public toward some end—to think about a point that is beneficial to some view of society and order or to encourage action (Entman 2003). With the production of a frame, the potential exists for a counter-frame to be offered through politics, possibly, and

pushed forward by the media. Such choices have much to do with the storyteller's whim and can be seen as artificial if not arbitrary.

In more recent literature, it has been suggested that the flow of thinking in this model is less top-down and more decentralized. Elites are still served by the flow, but other interests have obtained influence (Meeks 2020). Vucetic's (2016) study of Canada's F-35 program, initially supported by the Harper government but vilified in the press, shows that agreement on official interpretation can collapse in the face of consistent media interpretation or clear lack of fit with generally conceived reality (Fulton et al. 2005). Ravi (2005) posited that "newspaper coverage seems to reflect notions, values, and ideas that resonate within particular societies" (p. 59). Frames work best when they have "cultural relevance" (Rowling et al. 2015).

We now turn to an overview of the materials and methods for the paper's analysis.

3. Materials and Methods

This paper employed comparative qualitative content analysis of news articles from the *New York Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*. The *New York Post*, founded by Alexander Hamilton in 1801, is now owned by Rupert Murdoch, known for the tabloidization of newspapers (Kellner 2012). The *New York Post* is a preferred news source for former U.S. President Donald J. Trump (Lippman 2019). It is famous for its sensational approach (Rosenbaum 1983), making it ideal for exploratory consideration. The *Los Angeles Times* is the largest newspaper in the United States that is not located on the east coast. It was selected for comparison purposes because it is outside the east coast metroplex and represents a different viewpoint than the large east coast newspapers. The *New York Post* is a conservative newspaper, leaning right, and the *Los Angeles Times* leans left, serving a more liberal market in California (AllSides 2021); this makes for a proper and telling comparison.

We used the Data Miner extension for the Google Chrome browser to scrape URL addresses and text of articles based on a targeted google search of stories involving the search term "government contract" (without quotation marks) on the newspaper's domain (nypost.com), for the period 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019. For the *Los Angeles Times*, a subscription was obtained to search the newspaper's paywalled contents, and Data Miner was used again to identify URLs of articles mentioning "government contract". The stories were then downloaded, forming a corpus for comparison. The year 2019 was chosen because it is the most recent complete year predating the influence of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) virus on public procurement and government in general. The stories were read and reviewed for relevance to the topic of government contracting in its various forms; irrelevant stories (involving whale deaths, the sale of Paul Manafort's condominium, and the National Basketball Association, among other topics) were removed, leaving 111 stories in the final sample for the *New York Post*. The *Los Angeles Times* website search for government contracts returned 766 stories analyzed here. The specific phrase "government contract" appeared 57 times in 2019 stories. Still, other stories also included some relationship to government contracting, so the decision was made to include all 766 stories in the analysis. The stories span the year and allow for saturation in gaining a general sense of the tone and tenor of *New York Post* and *Los Angeles Times* stories related to government contracting. This material formed the corpus for analysis.

The articles were analyzed on two bases, as suggested by the research question: do newspaper articles portray a positive or negative view of public procurement, and what interest or group do articles favor in their portrayal of the public procurement scenario? This analytical base allowed for the discernment of journalistic frames, or narrative–ideological packages (Ha 2017), which show bias and interest in preferred interpretations of government procurement beyond the specific case.

4. Analysis

To answer the first part of the research question, sentence-level sentiment analysis was conducted using NVivo on the 111 *New York Post* articles and 766 *Los Angeles Times*

articles composing the corpus. Sentiment analysis allows for an understanding of "the connotations of the frequently recurring words [in a text], which signal different feelings and can be classified into positive, negative, or neutral" (Reyes-Menendez et al. 2018, p. 6). The decision was made to use NVivo for computer-driven analysis, through natural language processing (NLP)/machine learning, based on expectancy–value theory (EVT) (Mindorff et al. 2021), for a variety of reasons. The first reason is consistency in evaluating a large volume (in the case of the *Los Angeles Times*, in particular, but across the entire dataset) of articles; utilizing the NVivo program allows for a consistent evaluation of each article with no variation based on personal biases. This leads to the second reason for using computer-driven evaluation—the potential for bias, given the potentially political nature of the coverage. While neither author would consider themselves biased on the point of public procurement coverage, it remains possible that certain coverage could be construed in manual coding as positive or negative simply on some political point; using a computer-driven approach removes this potential. Further, readers of this article might assume a bias, even if none was present, simply because they disagree with the finding if the analysis was not impartial—a computer-generated analysis is perhaps the most impartial available. Still, there is potential for error inherent in the sentiment analysis conducted by NVivo itself and in coding decisions made by QSR International, but this is acceptable and has not prevented utilization of the software in a variety of research settings and subsequent publications of the results (see for example Pudaruth et al. 2018; Reyes-Menendez et al. 2018; Asare et al. 2021; Septia Irawan et al. 2022).

As shown in Table 1, the coverage can be characterized as negative, with 69.1% of sentiment being negative and 30.9% being positive for the *New York Post*'s articles and 68.53% being negative and 31.47% being positive for the *Los Angeles Times*. While the *New York Post* is more pointedly negative regarding government contracting coverage, the *Los Angeles Times* is about as negative in coverage as the *New York Post*. This is perhaps an unexpected result, indicating that newspaper coverage of contracting generally steers toward more negative aspects, regardless of the political context or leaning of the newspaper.

Table 1. Sentiment analysis, articles on government contracting in the *New York Post* and *Los Angeles Times*, 2019.

	Very Negative	%	Moderately Negative	%	Moderately Positive	%	Very Positive	%	Totals
New York Post	525	31.91%	611	37.14%	406	24.68%	103	6.26%	1645
Los Angeles Times	2674	22.80%	5363	45.73%	2909	24.80%	782	6.67%	11,728

4.1. New York Post Articles

A review of the stories indicates that a negative view of public purchasing is informed by a common perspective that the government is incompetent, with officials often engaged in self-dealing. Major themes from the analysis include partisanship; broad, hollow constructs; incomplete representations of procurement; and writing that might be described as folksy. This aligns with traditional *Post* perspectives as employing sensationalistic coverage (Rosenbaum 1983). Where the private sector is discussed, involvement is primarily offered as positive. This illustration of public business as bungling and inept is perhaps not surprising, as shocking revelations of waste, fraud, and abuse sell newspapers. In contrast, accounts of honest, hard-working public officials would perhaps sell fewer copies.

Major areas of focus of the year for government contracting included frequent articles on the city's Metropolitan Transportation Authority. As infrastructure problems plague the city's public transportation system, large contracts are naturally expected. Even cost overruns are not necessarily surprising in the difficult context of mass transit maintenance and improvement. However, they deserve all the attention they receive from news sources such as the *Post*. The coverage, though, is negative and may give an impression to the reader that contracting processes do not work at all, let alone work as well as intended. Implicit

in the discussion is that absent the public sector involvement, infrastructure problems would be resolved more quickly and thoroughly. Gelinas (2019) described the problem as a thicket of corruption: "Key industries, including real estate, depending on special subsidy carve-outs from the state for their business models and can't upset politicians. Nonprofits depend on government funding . . . private-sector officials in the financial industry are terrified of raising their profile and aggravating a bigger backlash".

A *Post* editorial described an instance of fraud and claimed it was "plainly just the tip of the iceberg" (New York Post Editorial Board 2019a) while not providing much, if any, evidence. While discussing large-scale infrastructure projects is welcomed, other coverage tends toward blatant partisan politics. The funding and building of a border wall in the southern United States were covered. Amazon and the rivalry between Amazon and Microsoft for the lucrative DOD war cloud project were included in articles published by the *Post* representing government contracting (Associated Press 2019a). The paper also had an interest in Google and its dealings in China. There were articles on several occasions referencing Hunter Biden, Burisma Holdings, and allegations of corruption. Any of these could be reasonably aligned with political dictates from the White House and the influencing of further thinking and action by the White House. Framing and purposeful simplification of the sort described by Entman are clearly in evidence; the coverage is necessarily limited, focusing on some aspects and not others, and in a manner favoring preconceived notions rather than challenging assumptions.

Surprisingly, the use of cartoonish, faux-folksy, sometimes evocative language portends to carry honest, unbiased truth to the public. Public leaders are called "honchos" (Klein 2019). The *Post*'s editorial board, describing the city budget process, speaks of a "state grab of fees", a "naked cash grab", gimmicks, and "bleeding the public" (New York Post Editorial Board 2019b). Mayor Bill de Blasio is referred to as a "big fellow", running a "corruptocracy", while "gumshoe" enforcement officials track him down (McManus 2019b). A system for recording public sentiment in police activities is referred to as "touchy-feely" (Edelman 2019b), and the award of the contract to a city university campus was questioned, even though it is not clear that any procurement rules were violated.

Hallmarks of a positive, open public procurement system are undermined openly as matters of partisan interest: "contract-bidding-regulation reform and value for dollars spent—well, just forget about that" (McManus 2019a). Some contracting discussion occurs in the context of the reform of public systems, such as the pension system. While there are clearly problems with the system, the *Post* seems comfortable enough quoting the Center for Cost-Effective Government, a nonprofit think-tank. The organization has the goal of taking on "inefficiency in government and empower[ing] the public to take the legal and logistical steps necessary to actually implement the solutions promulgated by government reform think tanks" (2020), an interesting, but not entirely representative or legitimate, proposition.

The *Post* has favored President Trump, with language about his real estate ventures portraying the dashing businessman: "it was a brash move by the young Queens native who corralled government approvals and tax exemptions" (Weiss and Lapin 2019). Several articles consider the topic of whistleblowers in highlighting public misconduct. They considered a whistleblower who called out abuse against those in city power (who happen to be politically opposite the prevailing sentiment of these articles) (Edelman 2019a); this instance of whistleblowing was subsequently praised by the editorial board (New York Post Editorial Board 2019c). The *Post* had previously gone as far as publishing a Marketwatch article about whistleblowers in general, noting their value to the process of good government while also being honest about the inherent personal risk and finishing with something of a how-to guide on blowing the whistle on official corruption (Jagannathan 2019).

In this respect, the *Post* took a leadership position in supporting whistleblowers, which encourages government legitimacy and professional accountability from a professional integrity perspective. This stands in sharp contrast to some pronouncements from the

White House, disparaging whistleblowers at the Federal level, with the president at one point even retweeting the name of a person who was ostensibly a whistleblower (Associated Press 2019b). However, the positive support of whistleblowers is tempered by the fact that the *Post* also published, concurrently and frequently, in a negative fashion about whistleblowers when the matter was contrary to the interests of the White House; the *Post* published the name of the assumed Federal whistleblower, undermining the rules in place to protect whistleblowers, but perhaps currying partisan favor (New York Post Editorial Board 2019d).

4.2. Los Angeles Times Articles

Like the *New York Post* articles, the *Los Angeles Times* articles frequently questioned government contracting decisions. A notable difference is that the *Los Angeles Times*' coverage of the topic is more frequent and has a national focus, including federal contracts. The more prominent focus is on local contracting and union and school district contracting issues. Some pieces, such as the Pentagon investigation into a contract for Trump's border wall project, were from the Associated Press; there was also coverage of the Amazon–Microsoft dispute over an incredibly lucrative government cloud contract via Bloomberg. There was considerably less coverage of politically leaning topics such as Burisma and Hunter Biden, limited to a column pointing out the inconsistency in the Trump administration. Other pieces, though, show investigative effort on the part of the *Times* staff, such as a piece on a Federal contract award to a Native American tribe in Alabama not recognized by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Elmahrek and Pringle 2019b). Another piece by the same writing team investigated government contracts obtained by ineligible firms elsewhere (Elmahrek and Pringle 2019a). This interest in contracting awards to ineligible firms is notable because fraud is a serious issue in some programs that seek to benefit certain socio-economic groups; it is an important topic worthy of newspaper investigation and government action to reduce the potential for such fraudulent activity.

A common element with coverage in the *Post* is that problems with government contracting are an evergreen topic, sparking outrage and selling newspapers. The spin on government contracting narratives in the *Times* is not markedly more positive given California's liberal climate; there is no apparent government-favoring narrative. The negativity of the coverage does not typically focus on the good of government contracting, which is likely less attractive to the public. Newspaper staff writers might not set out to show bias against government contracting as a necessary public process. Still, because stories are written more often when something is wrong, or an outcome is in question, it might appear to a casual observer that all government contracting is rife with corruption when that is not the case. What is very different is the tone and tenor of narrative in the two newspapers; readers of one publication would likely not enjoy the other as much because they exist for two different audiences, but both clearly see the benefit of coverage of government contracting as a narrative focal point.

5. Discussion

Where the *Post* chooses to publish on the topic, invariably, the finding is that the procurement system is broken, money and resources have been wasted, and fraud and corruption have run rampant. This is not simply a matter of providing exciting reading material; these are narrative moves in furtherance of political ends. The newspaper has an agenda for partisan outcomes and how the government is seen. The *Los Angeles Times* also publishes investigative journalism on government contracting issues. While a clear bias is less obvious, the coverage is nevertheless negative more often than not, even if there are efforts to provide a more balanced view. The frame that is used, pushing forward a valuable narrative of corruption and fraud in government contracting, works for various purposes—selling news as a commodity and attaining political ends.

Public procurement is not a simple matter of buying goods and services, like a consumer at a grocery store; given a thicket of regulations and requirements, it is challenging,

and its effective implementation requires the expertise and knowledge of competent public servants. Even in addressing the reform of public systems, there is a tendency to downplay the complexity so that the choices are evident and readily apparent without considering the different views of those on the other side of the debate. The effect is creating an echo chamber where writers and readers all agree without confronting differing viewpoints. It is no doubt tempting for a newspaper to want to create such a forum, but it could be an injustice to the medium's readership.

The framing that occurs in the *Post*'s coverage is business-friendly and arguably hostile to the function of the public sector enterprise in its idealized form. The coverage is not balanced and, as noted in the sentiment analysis conducted above, is primarily negative. This recalls views of government functioning as being too slow, or government as a whole as a problem to be solved, mainly by adopting business processes akin to the New Public Management. The problem is that simply replacing government functions with those of business does not solve fundamental concerns because the roles of the public and private sectors are, and should remain, purposefully quite different. Because there is little effort to account for diverse viewpoints or the public sector side of any argument, the view presented is impassioned, clear, and on a message from a partisan standpoint, but incomplete at best and wrong at worst. Problems with *Los Angeles Times* coverage are more nuanced and likely related to trying to bridge the gap between a newspaper's role as an investigator and means of keeping the government accountable and the realities of needing to sell newspapers and subscriptions with stories that border on the sensational.

Fraud and corruption do occur in government contracting, but one might believe from the coverage in both newspapers that such occurrences are the rule rather than the exception.

In answering the second part of the research question, it is clear enough that both newspapers find themselves more served by negative coverage of government contracting. As previously discussed in the section on framing, this coverage would be consistent with theories about media framing, but this falls far short of balanced coverage and fairness in considering this essential aspect of the government process. Government contracting, being the primary means of obtaining the goods and services needed for the government to function, is too often the subject of ridicule, which is out of line with the reality of its work and with the journalistic obligation to seek truth, avoid bias and stereotyping, and report the truth (Society of Professional Journalists 2014). From an ethical standpoint, this shortfall is essential because falling into the trap of reporting only on negative contracting instances has severe and demonstrable negative impacts on public trust over the long term.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

It is essential to consider the role of news outlets in shaping policy agendas and eventual policy. With our consideration of the *Post*, the view is necessarily, though perhaps appropriately, limited. Further research may consider news coverage of government contracting in specialized instances (for example, procurement by a specific agency, such as the Department of Defense) to note how news agendas frame procurement issues and challenges and lead to adjustments and decisions made differently. The inclusion of *Los Angeles Times* coverage provides some comparison that, with further investigation, may indicate a larger issue with government contracting coverage in newspapers generally. A review of coverage in other news outlets would also be worthwhile, as would consideration of a more extended period for articles, but this is beyond the scope of this particular paper. Specifically, it would be worthwhile to look at other sources of news beyond traditional print newspapers to see how other media outlets portray government contracting, whether there is a difference, and how to quantify and describe the differences that exist.

This paper was written during the COVID-19 crisis, which is ongoing worldwide and in the United States especially. Future research on how the COVID-19 crisis has been covered in the news media and how this may have shaped government choices for procurement at all levels of government would also be welcome. Because individuals in influential positions have explicitly read the *Post*, and the *Times* is an influential newspaper in its own right, biased coverage of public procurement to any extent is troubling. Newspapers provide information about events and frame how people think about those events. Government contracting is rule- and process-based and complex. Attempting to simplify complexity for widespread consumption, or worse, to paint decisions as partisan matters when past choices and rules inform them undermines the public procurement process and the public's trust in government.

Suppose the public were to read and digest nothing other than the *Post*'s coverage of government procurement. In that case, they might reasonably assume that the government is incompetent, its officials self-serving, and contractors all on the take. In reality, the system of buying goods and services for public agencies to serve their functional needs often does work—more often than not. The agencies obtain the materials and services needed to accomplish their functions, the public is served appropriately, and contractors are paid. This is a story that lacks interest though. Reading regulations, similarly, is not specifically interesting to people engaged in criticism of the public enterprise, even if it is essential to the practice of government.

The cost to be paid for primarily negative coverage of a process such as public contracting is potentially high. The assumption that government officials are regularly or even usually incompetent and corrupt is wrong and irresponsible. The undermining of public trust by such reporting is not easily set right and likely has assisted in widening the divide in the United States on belief about the proper role of public systems and structures and even what truth is. An important consideration is that most public will have little interest in government contracting. It is doubly important, in that context, that news media avoid misrepresenting processes and outcomes for the sake of partisan or self-serving ends.

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