

"From Protest to Agenda-Building: Description Bias in Media Coverage of Protest Events in Washington, D.C."

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Introduction

Social movement actors seeking to influence public and political agendas are highly dependent upon the mass media to help them communicate their political messages to a wider audience. In his classic work, "Protest as a Political Resource," Lipsky argues that leaders of groups lacking routine access to the policy process can appeal to their ultimate (legislative or governmental) targets only *indirectly* by attracting influential third parties to their causes. Because they lack direct contact to these influential publics, most relatively powerless groups can only communicate with these audiences through the mass media {Lipsky, 1969}. The message that is conveyed, and the government response it helps generate, are conditioned largely by the influence of the bystander publics that movements seek to reach.

Since the time of Lipsky's seminal article, there has been a tremendous growth in the use of public protests as a form of political action, particularly in Washington D.C. [INSERT NUMBERS??] This growth in the frequency of public protest contributed to the development of policing institutions designed to manage public protests {McCarthy, 1998 #xxx}. As a consequence, some have argued that protest activity has become normalized, and is therefore less effective as a political resource for powerless groups {??Everett, 1991; OTHERS --CITE??}.

Whatever these claims, social movement actors continue to advocate change through the use of public demonstrations. Protests are an almost daily fixture in the United States's capital city, and their numbers show little sign of yielding, despite more effective policing and the fact that the social movement sector has developed other methods of communicating with a wider audience -- such as door-to-door canvassing and direct mail -- that do not depend on the sympathies of the mass media. Indeed, the importance of the mass media for social movement actors in the United States may be further enhanced by the greater reliance of citizens on mass media news sources --especially televised ones -- and the declining influence of locally published newspapers {Iyengar, 1985}.

Our research has attempted to illuminate how the mass media packages the images of protest they project to the general public, including those influential third parties Lipsky views as vital to protest success. Lacking direct contact with influential groups, social movements must rely on the mass media as an indirect means of communicating with potential sympathizers. But movements' heavy reliance on the mass media complicate their efforts to convey political messages, as media institutions operate under logics that are independent of -- and often contradictory to -- movement agendas. This can undermine social movements' impact on public policy. Understanding relationships between media routines and social movements is therefore crucial to illuminating processes of social change.

Social movements try to transform the general notions in society about what problems deserve attention and about how these problems should be addressed. This means that they are often engaged in framing contests with other actors in society as they seek to raise issues to the social agenda and to suggest ways of thinking about these issues. Graber {#xxx 1993}

distinguishes between "agenda-setting," which is the process of identifying and advocating issues for inclusion on public and governmental agendas, and "agenda-building," or efforts to influence the context in which social problems are considered. When social movement actors gather in the streets and in other public spaces to demonstrate for their respective causes, they seek to set agendas by bringing new or greater attention to a particular problem. But political actors, including social movement actors, are not simply concerned with influencing *what* people think about, but they also hope to shape *how* people think about social problems and their solutions. Thus, protesters are ultimately interested in shaping the agenda-building process by helping define how issues are framed in the mass media.

In an earlier article {McCarthy, 1996 #xxx}, we identified two distinct forms of bias in the media's recording of protest events as *selection bias* and *description bias*. Selection bias involves agenda-setting, and it results from media gatekeepers' choices of a very small number of protest events from a large pool of possible events on which to report. Description bias reflects agenda-building processes, and it introduces another distinct way in which media personnel shape the political messages conveyed in their news reports by making choices about how a protest event is portrayed in a media story.

This paper seeks to uncover the factors that shape the portrayal of public protests in the mass media by examining media reports on protest events that took place in Washington, D.C. during 1982 and 1991. By doing so, we hope to illuminate the political dynamics of agenda-building processes as well as to provide an interpretive baseline for researchers using media records as evidence of protest activity.

Media Routines & Reporting on Social Movement Activities

Our findings regarding media selection bias suggested that media agendas can drive the selection of protest events that are reported, independently of the numbers or activities of protesters themselves. In other words, "objective" matters such as the demonstration's size and characteristics have little bearing on whether or not the event is reported in the mass media. This appears increasingly true in more recent years, and is especially the case in television news reporting. Thus, social movement agents seeking to influence media agenda-setting cannot simply rely on generating large numbers of protesters or on engaging in unusual forms of collective action.

Rather, they must also consider how their issue might be tied to media issue cycles. In other words, rather than simply reflecting "objective" occurrences, the operations and procedural logics of mass media institutions are important predictors of what events get reported. The practical need to select a limited number of issues on which to report leads to claims of selection bias in how editors and reporters go about the business of determining the news that is "fit to print." Since they are, by definition, "outsiders" to political institutions and processes, social movements are typically marginalized by mainstream media routines.

Once they achieve media attention to their protest event, demonstrators often find that the coverage of their protest fails to portray their cause as they would have liked. Often the more unruly activists are highlighted or the most vocal leaders advanced by reporters seeking images that they hope will appeal to their mass readership {Gitlin, 1980}. The specifics of protesters' policy concerns or the organizational details involved are largely irrelevant to those reporting on public protests. This may be a function of media gatekeepers, whose motivations, routines, and professional interests support the status quo. It may also result from the failure of many social

movement challengers to engage in conscious efforts to wage an "insider media game" {Ryan, 1990 #xxx :5}. Plagued with limited staff, time, and money and with the inherently contradictory necessity of simultaneously appealing to constituents, publics, and targets, social movement actors often lack media strategies.

Ryan (1990) summarizes the main theoretical models of news production routines according to: gatekeeper models which focus on daily operations and routines of media institutions; political economy or propaganda models, which explain media routines according to broad socioeconomic forces including media ownership patterns; and cultural studies, which emphasizes the role of mass media in maintaining the political and social hegemony of elites {Ryan 1990 #xxx : 22-25}. Clearly the operations of and influences on the mass media as well as the consequences of how the news is received are of interest to social movement researchers and activists. And recent media research suggests that a dynamic, process-oriented approach will best explain how the news is produced and to what consequence {#xxx see, e.g. Clayman, 1998; OTHER CITATIONS HERE?}.

Gatekeeper Model. *Gatekeeper models presume that in order to understand how social movements interact with the mass media, we must account for the institutional logics that shape how mass media operate. This approach might also be called the "newsmaking approach," as it sees the mass media as not simple mirrors that reflect what goes on in society, but rather as actors in and of*

themselves that construct images and compile messages {Kielbowitz, 1986 #xxx :75}. Viewing media institutions as news makers leads one to account for how they determine what constitutes a newsworthy event. Social movements are faced with the dilemma of justifying why some chronic problem such as poverty or racial injustice is more worthy of attention today than it was yesterday. In other words, those seeking to raise routine issues onto media agendas must portray these issues as changing or somehow exceptionally interesting in order to mesh with media newsgathering routines.

The identification and use of sources is another area where gatekeeper models help us understand media routines. Gans {#xxx 1979} and others have pointed out the institutional logic behind the decisions about deploying reporters and selecting sources -- all of which work against the access of social movements to the mass media. Editors favor reporters who are generalists rather than specialists in the area on which they write, because

generalists are cheaper, easier to control, and they are more reliant on their sources for information (thus removing responsibility from the media organization). A preference for government and official experts as sources derives from the ease of reaching their centralized press offices and the norm that has evolved of viewing government sources as credible and unbiased, requiring no routine fact-checking or corroboration. The reliance on government sources thus both reduces the costs of newsgathering and limits the risks {Herman, 1995}. It also tends to reproduce the agendas of these sources {Gans, 1979; Kielbowitz, 1986}.

The need to understand media logics and to find ways to mesh with media news gathering routines means that movements whose leaders provide the most appealing media images and rhetoric will be the most likely to gain media coverage {Gitlin, 1980}. Movements, moreover, need to provide consistent streams of images that appeal to the mass media in order to sustain media focus on the issues. This leads activists to escalate their tactics in an ongoing effort to create "new" hooks for media attention {Kielbowitz, 1986}. Social movement actors have long recognized that generating media attention requires the creation of an event that is somehow "newsworthy." Social movements have traditionally relied on public demonstrations -- among

other activities -- to attract media attention that might further their aims and amplify their issues on social agendas. However, the tactics that are most likely to attract media attention are not often those that win respectability among the legislative and governmental targets that movement actors ultimately hope to influence {Gamson, 19xx}.

Propaganda Model. Propaganda models generally assume that the structure of media ownership leads to an inherent bias in the mass media in favor of capitalist interests. Scholars adopting this perspective such as Edward Herman have argued that the privatization and commercialization of broadcasting during the 1970s and 1980s has severely constrained access to the mass media and limits the range of ideas conveyed through them {Herman, 1995 #xxx: 169}. *The "free market model" outlined by Herman sees market forces "naturally" marginalizing dissent by crowding out any ideas for which there is no substantial economic backing, or "effective demand." The commercialization of the airwaves restricts democratic access to the mass media by: 1) limiting media control to those with the large amounts of capital required to purchase and run large corporate structures that control media networks; 2) creating a market where reliance on advertising is essential to media operations; 3) driving the search for cost-effective news*

production, where the crucial need for cheap, "credible" sources leads editors to favor centralized government sources over hard to gather dissident sources that (unlike government sources) require fact-checking; 4) creating a fear of "flak" or "negative feedback" that imposes costs on or threatens the media, often leading to self-censorship; and 5) reinforcing ideological premises that favor capitalist institutions such as private property, the merits of free enterprise, the threat of state ownership and intervention, the benevolent role of the government in international affairs, and anti-communism. "One of the great merits of this system of control is that it operates so naturally, without collusion or explicit censorship, merely by the decentralized pursuit of a set of micro-interests. It 'just works that way'" {Hermann, 1995 #xxx :170}.

One effect of the corporate control of media institutions is that news production becomes dependent upon what advertisers will support. When they buy air time, sponsors align their products with certain images. As

consumers demanding services from news production agencies, advertisers can withhold support of certain kinds of news programming. For instance, the portrayal of news about the Persian Gulf war was shaped to make it more appealing to advertisers:

Pressure from advertisers led to the proliferation of upbeat "home front" stories of the war as network executives sought to assuage the worries of their sponsors. For instance, CBS executives "offered advertisers assurances that the war specials could be tailored to provide better lead-ins to commercials' with 'patriotic views from the home front'" { Andersen, 1995 #xxx:211, Quoted from Carter 1991 }.

While this kind of influence over programming may be good for business, it does little to advance peoples' understandings of complex social and political issues. And it divides the agendas of social change agents even further from those of the news media, which -- in theory -- serves as the public's "watchdog" against abuses by government, business and other elites.

The propaganda model would lead one to expect little if any media coverage of social movements that threaten the capitalist order. And whatever coverage such movements might attain would be expected to marginalize or

otherwise de-politicize their messages. One additional *theme in the propaganda perspective is the focus on the increasing centralization of mass media institutions into corporate structures that control other aspects of social and economic life. The emergence of media monopolies has serious implications for the free exchange of ideas. With a media environment that is relatively free of competition, there are smaller news holes and fewer incentives to seek out innovative stories. This further threatens social movement access to the mass media {Kielbowitz, 1986}.*

Cultural Studies Model. Like propaganda models, cultural studies models of media operations explain the choices made in the selection and interpretation of the news in terms of broader power relations. The focus of these models, however, is more upon the subtle ways in which economic and political elites control images and meaning. According to these perspectives, the conveyance of information is used to reinforce ideas and interpretations of events that support existing power structures. Such models would lead us to expect that mass media coverage of social movements, particularly those that promote ideas that differ most strongly from dominant ideologies, will tend to marginalize social movement agendas. One way that this done is by framing stories in a way that suggests individualized or non-systemic causes and solutions to problems on which social movement activists work.

Iyengar's {1991} field experiments led him to support the ideas in the cultural studies model; he concluded that how the media portray a problem affects public attributions of blame and their presumptions about appropriate solutions. Iyengar's study begins with the assumption that news stories can be categorized as either "episodic" or "thematic" in nature. Episodic news frames are event-oriented, and they focus on concrete issues such as an individual welfare mother or a terrorist bombing. In contrast, thematic news frames provide information that helps contextualize social problems, focusing more on general trends and conditions that set the stage for more dramatic events such as terrorist attacks. "The essential difference between episodic and thematic framing is that episodic framing depicts concrete events that illustrate issues, while thematic framing presents collective or general evidence" (Iyengar 1991:14). Thematic coverage in Iyengar's study was associated with systemic attributions of blame, while episodic coverage typically led subjects to see individuals as responsible for the problem at hand.

Relating this idea to the relationship of social movements to the mass media, we note that social movements often seek to attract media attention to some broad social concern by generating an event that may be newsworthy in itself. But this demands that the coverage of the protest event focuses on the issues the movement seeks to address, rather than on the event used to attract media coverage. By creating a newsworthy event or episode, movement leaders hope to draw attention to underlying themes of injustice, inequality, or oppression. Social movements address chronic social problems that they attribute to some abstract, systemic cause. In order to appeal to the mass media and the general public, they must find ways to link these chronic problems with some more concrete, tangible event or focus. In other words, they must try to repackage what they see as an ongoing, systemic problem (e.g., poverty, racism) into an "acute" issue that demands urgent

attention on a crowded social agenda {see Rochon, 1997 #xxx :178-9}.

Movements generally seek support for their claims that the political and/or economic system is the source of some problem and that without systematic reforms the problem will persist.ⁱⁱ Thus, we would expect that more thematic -- rather than episodic -- coverage of their issues best advances the aims of social movement actors. Moreover, because they use protest events as "pegs" on which a news story might be based, we would expect to see a tendency towards more episodic reporting of social movement protests.

Hypotheses

Our understandings of media routines and institutions led us to expect that the print media would provide more thematic coverage of political issues related to protest events, given that its audience tends to be among the more politically active and attentive segments of the general public {Iyengar, 1985; OTHER CITES on participation & media attentiveness}. However, our earlier study of selection bias suggest that the relatively fewer stories on protest that are selected by the electronic media are chosen because they correspond to ongoing media issue agendas {McCarthy, 1996}. This may mean that television coverage tends to be more thematic than print coverage, which was less sensitive to issue agendas in its selection of protest events on which to report. Our first hypothesis accounts for these contradicting tendencies.

H1: Television news is more selective in the range of social movement events it reports, but the coverage of these events is more thematic than print coverage.

Media routines and gatekeeper motivations would also lead us to expect that extraordinary activities such as arrests and violence will attract more episodic coverage. This is partly due to the

fact that these events themselves are considered newsworthy, especially in cases such as the demonstrations by and against the Ku Klux Klan, which triggered large-scale riots in downtown Washington D.C. Arrests and violence also signal some social controversy, which reporters and editors often seek out in their daily reporting routines. Certainly the presence of dramatic incidents and controversy on which to report does not preclude a reporter from incorporating some discussion of the underlying social tensions that motivate public demonstrations. Indeed, the main strategy behind public demonstrations is to trigger attention to some broad social problem through a dramatic event, and the character of the drama (e.g., size of demonstration or personal sacrifices made by protesters, etc.) should highlight the relative importance or scale of injustice the issue involves and thereby generate more in-depth consideration of the issue. But small newsholes, reporters' limited knowledge, and financial concerns of media gatekeepers constrain the extent to which the underlying concerns of protesters become the primary focus of stories on highly controversial protest events. In short, while demonstrators may seek to use extraordinary activities such as violence or civil disobedience to gain media attention, the attention they get in response to these activities may contribute less to their overall political objectives than was initially hoped.

H2: Controversy such as the presence of counter-demonstrations, arrests and/or violence generate more episodic than thematic coverage of a protest event.

Issue attention cycles are also likely to be important forces shaping media gatekeepers' reporting on public protests. As we noted earlier, the issues motivating protests were important factors in explaining which demonstrations received media attention. In some cases, protests provide a segue into reports on ongoing social problems just as reports on airline crashes often turn

into discussions of the overall safety of air transportation infrastructures. So the daily updates on the progress of the war in the Persian Gulf were often accompanied by highlights from the ongoing demonstrations against and for the war. Or a protest by homeless advocates may trigger a more in-depth story on the causes of homelessness or national policies to mitigate its effects. This leads us to our third hypothesis:

H3: Issues that are related to ongoing media issue agendas will attract more thematic coverage than episodic coverage.

Propaganda and cultural models of media reporting on social movement activity would lead to expectations that most coverage of protest events would tend to favor authorities in their "spin," and that they would rely on sources outside the movements for information about the protest and/or the issues motivating it. These models would also predict that coverage of protest demonstrations -- particularly those promoting goals that contradict major economic interests -- would tend to be episodic. Less controversial or threatening issues may attract more thematic coverage, and in these cases news reporting may even appear to favor demonstrators and even to rely on movement leaders for information.ⁱⁱⁱ

H4: Social movements that most threaten the existing socioeconomic order will attract more episodic than thematic coverage.

H5: Media coverage of social movements will tend to favor the status quo; the "spin" of news stories will in general favor government and other authorities.

Our account here of the relationships between episodic and thematic coverage and social movement protests builds upon the belief that social movement aims are best served by coverage that is more thematic, or that delves into the underlying social problems to which movements

attribute some injustice. We would hold, then, that stories taking a thematic rather than an episodic frame would be most supportive of movement actors. This leads us to our sixth hypothesis about the relationship between the "news spin" and the framing of a story:

H6: The "spin" of thematic stories is more likely to favor social movement actors than is that of episodic stories.

Data and Methods

Media stories on public protests in Washington, D.C. were collected for the entire years of 1982 and 1991 from the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, and from the *Vanderbilt Network News Index and Abstracts* summaries of television network news broadcasts. Media records were matched with evidence on the protest event drawn from police records.^{iv} A detailed codebook was developed to assess various features of the coverage, focusing particularly on the extent to which the coverage reflects a thematic or episodic frame.^v Coders read each media story and coded the reporting on each demonstration mentioned in the story. Thus, a single article may have been coded three separate times, each reflecting the details of a distinct protest event. Roughly two-thirds of all articles or news abstracts reported on more than one protest event. Often, news stories reported on protest *campaigns* or series of linked protests that are carried out over a number of days by the same groups and for the same issues.

Our work to develop and test a codebook pointed to the difficulty of systematically assessing the extent of episodic or thematic coverage in each protest event report. We therefore developed multiple different measures of each concept, asking coders to record their level of confidence for judgements related to episodic or thematic coverage. [INTER-CODER RELIABILITY; CONFIDENCE RATINGS] We included specific questions asking for separate

evaluations of how much (on a 7 point scale) of the text of an article was devoted to describing the goals of protesters, and to the details of the protest event. Following these more concrete questions, coders were asked to make judgements (again, using a 7 point scale) about how episodic an article appeared (not at all or "highly episodic") and how thematic the article appeared. We did not presume that these concepts were mutually exclusive, and we left it to the coder to judge each concept independently. Finally, the coder was asked to place each protest event report on a 3 point scale as to whether it was "primarily episodic," "primarily thematic," or a "mixture of episodic and thematic." In addition to coding evidence about the framing of a particular event report, coders recorded information on the location of the story in the news lineup, the amount of time or space devoted to an event report, the "spin" of the coverage (whether it favored protesters or authorities), and whether there were reports of counter demonstrators, violence, or arrests.

Using this trichotomous scale we find that, of 635 protest event reports for which relevant data were present, 34% were considered "primarily episodic," 24% were "primarily thematic," and 41% were a mixture of both thematic and episodic coverage. Table 1 presents correlations between this summary measure and other indicators we collected on the episodic and thematic nature of each event report.^{vi}

Table 1 About Here

On the specific questions where coders were asked to determine how much of the article was devoted to the details of the protest or to the issues underlying protesters' activities, we found

strong correlations which reflected the expected relationships. Reports with primarily episodic coverage (coded 1) tended to have greater emphasis on the details of the event, while those that were primarily episodic (coded 3) devoted more attention to the issues and specific goals addressed by protesters. Also, coder evaluations of the extent of episodic or thematic coverage correspond highly with their ranking of a story as primarily episodic or primarily thematic. The one measure that does not appear to adequately capture the concept we hoped it would is the question of how much the report emphasized incidental details of the event such as the weather or protesters' clothing, which we had presumed would be related to more episodic framing. Given the correspondence of our other measures, however, we believe that we have constructed a reliable and valid measure of news framing.

Having determined that our measure of news framing is valid, we examined whether the framing of news coverage is related to variables associated with the source of the news report, the context of the demonstration, or the issues the protesters seek to address. In addition to the episodic/thematic variable, we look at the relationship of our predictor variables to two other measures of relationships between social movements and media coverage. These include news spin, or the extent to which the story favors demonstrators (coded 1) or authorities (coded -1) and a 7-point scale of the extent to which the story discusses the issues protesters are addressing (ranging from 0-"none" to 6-"all").^{vii}

Table 2 About Here

Table 2 shows positive relationships among the dependent variables we examine in this study.

Stories whose spin favors demonstrators tend to devote more attention to discussion of the underlying issues (as opposed to the details of the protest event) and to encompass a more thematic frame. As expected, there is a strong tie between the amount of the story devoted to the issue and thematic framing. Source variables were related to the extent to which a report was thematic or episodic. Television news tended to be more thematic than print news coverage. The reliance on any demonstrator source (e.g., organizer, literature, posters, etc.) as opposed to a government or "expert" source for information on the story was related to more thematic coverage. Over time, the coverage of the issues was slightly more thematic, and more attention was devoted to the issue itself rather than the demonstration, but there was less tendency for stories to "spin" towards demonstrators in the later time period.^{viii}

Context measures focused on whether there was some kind of controversy involved in the protest event. The presence of a counter-demonstration tended to produce more episodic framing of the report. Also, the presence of arrests and/or violence was associated with more episodic frames. This finding is reinforced by the negative relationships between the amount of the story devoted to discussion of the issue and conflict measures. Bivariate correlations also show that where controversy or counter protests are present, the spin of the story tends to favor authorities rather than protesters.

The propaganda and gatekeeper models of news production would lead us to expect the issues at stake in a public demonstration to be important predictors of the news frame. Indeed, we found that issues were important in determining whether or not a protest was reported in the media, so it would not be surprising to find that issue cycles also drive the nature of media coverage. We took the top issues around which demonstrations were held in 1982 and 1991 for

which there were significant numbers of media reports.^{ix} Many issues that attracted the largest numbers of protests did not receive enough media coverage to assess description bias in the reporting on those protests.^x The bivariate correlations between particular issues and news frames reveal none or very weak relationships. The strongest pattern appears in the coverage of protests involving the Ku Klux Klan, which tended to favor authorities in their spin, to devote less space to discussion of the issues, and to be more episodic. These patterns are probably due to the frequent presence of violence and arrests at these events, which tends to focus coverage more on the protest event itself rather than on the motivations of demonstrators. The disruption and violence that helped attract media attention to the story also led to stories favoring authorities rather than movement actors.

Other patterns of note are that the news spin in these instances reveal a tendency of the media to support nationalistic frames. The coverage of the protests against the Gulf war tended to support government authorities, while that of demonstrations marking the opening of the Vietnam Veterans memorial in Washington, D.C. supported demonstrators. The coverage of the Gulf war, moreover, tended to be more thematic than coverage of other issues. This ongoing, major media story attracted massive amounts of news coverage, and demonstrations provided a regular source of "hooks" for these reports which quickly became routine in the daily newspapers and nightly news reports.

Table three presents regression estimates for models predicting the amount of a story devoted to the issue, and news frame (episodic/thematic scale) from variables related to the media source, the context of the protest, and issue. Table four presents the analysis of our news spin variable, examining what factors appear to be related to whether or not the stories' subtext supports

demonstrators or authorities.

Table 3 About Here

The analyses in table three show consistent patterns of greater thematic emphases in television as opposed to print media reports.^{xi} The models also reveal that stories relying on government or expert sources had characteristics that worked against social movement framing efforts: They were more episodic, and they devoted less space to a discussion of the issues at stake. Looking to table four, we can see that stories depending on government or expert sources also tended to favor the interests of authorities rather than demonstrators.

Another pattern that was fairly strong and consistent across the models was the role of controversy in shaping coverage of protests. The presence of a counter-demonstration tended to detract media attention away from the underlying issues relevant to a demonstration and towards more episodic coverage. It also fostered coverage that tended to favor authorities. Similar patterns are seen when arrests and/ or violence was present as part of a demonstration event.

Issues had less consistent and generally weaker relationships with the dependent variables we examine, and they contributed a relatively small amount to explaining variation in the dependent variables. One unexpected finding is that coverage of the Gulf war tended to be more thematic, but the negative coefficient for the model predicting amount of the story devoted to discussing the issue suggests that the coverage remained superficial.^{xii} Coverage of demonstrations around the establishment of a Vietnam Veterans Memorial tended to be thematic and their spin favored demonstrators. In contrast, coverage of anti-Ku Klux Klan demonstrations (which degenerated into violent confrontation) tended to be episodic, to spin towards authorities, and to devote relatively less attention to the issues underlying protests.

In table four we also examine how the news frame is related to the spin of the story. We hypothesized earlier that thematic coverage would generate news spin that favored demonstrators. The bivariate correlation between our thematic/ episodic scale and news spin suggest some support for this argument ($r=.289$). The last column of table four provides further support for this argument while controlling for other variables. Adding the episodic/thematic scale to the model explains an additional 6% to of the variance in news spin. Thus, our hypothesis that thematic coverage reinforces the goals of social movements is supported.

The substantive importance of thematic coverage for social movement framing contests lead us to ask for more detail about the relationships between news framing across print and electronic sources. Iyengar's research led him to expect greater thematic emphases in the print media, given that this source generally has a larger potential newshole than national network news programs {Iyengar, 1991 #xxx :129}. Table 5 contrasts the coverage in the print media sources with that in the electronic media, attempting to uncover any systematic differences in episodic versus thematic framing. The first two columns display the analysis of all cases, and they reveal a strong difference in news frames between print and electronic media. Indeed, the strongest effect is found here, and electronic sources tended to provide more thematic coverage. The next strong effects, which hold throughout most of the other models, are those measuring whether protesters were relied upon as information sources for the report and whether or the "spin" of the report favors protesters or authorities. As the propaganda and cultural models would predict, when protesters and their banners or flyers constituted the main source of information for a report, news frames tended to be more episodic. Experts and government sources were more likely to be consulted in stories with a thematic emphasis. Also in cases where the "spin" of the story

appeared to favor demonstrators, the coverage tended to be thematic, and where the "spin" favored authorities, the coverage of the protest was more episodic.^{xiii}

Table 5 About Here

The presence of controversy around a demonstration -- such as a counter-protest or the presence of violence or arrests -- had a smaller impact on the nature of coverage, though it led consistently to more episodic reporting, as we had expected. Finally, in the model including all the cases, we found that issue agendas contributed relatively little to explaining variation in news frames. The Gulf war coverage tended to be thematic, but other issues had little overall effect. In contrast, the model including only the electronic media reports shows incredibly strong effects of issue agendas. Measures of the model's explanatory power increased dramatically with the addition of issue variables. In television reports, coverage of veterans' issues and of protests surrounding the Ku Klux Klan tended to be episodic, while Gulf war coverage, which made up a large proportion of the electronic reports, were typically thematic. In the print media reports, we found much smaller effects of issue agendas on the tendencies of news frames.

Discussion and Conclusions

We set out in this study to examine how social movement attempts to influence media coverage impact their efforts to affect public debates about social and political change. Based on the work of other social

movement researchers, we know quite well that public demonstrations have uncertain and often contradictory effects on social movement campaigns. And yet they remain one of the main tactics available to social movement actors in their efforts to shape broader public agendas. The hypotheses stated above set out expectations about the relationships we should expect to see given what we know about social movements' relationships with the mass media. In short, we expected that media reports overall would not favor demonstrators' interests, particularly on issues that most threaten existing economic and political elites.

Supporting our earlier findings about coverage of protests by television news media, we found strong tendencies in both 1982 and 1991 for reports on public demonstrations in the television media to be more thematic than print media reports. This finding reinforces the notion that television news is more driven by issue agendas than by some independent selection of events deemed newsworthy. Demonstrations selected for

television news coverage tended to fit within ongoing issue agendas, and the content of the stories tended to focus on the issues themselves more than on the details of the protest event.^{xiv}

In keeping with the expectations of the gatekeeper model, we found that controversy generated media coverage that was more episodic. The presence of counter-demonstrators, arrests, and/or violence produced more reporting on the demonstration event itself and less attention to the issues at stake. These conditions also tended to produce news spin that favored authorities rather than demonstrators. Also, we have limited evidence on which to base our claim that issues related to ongoing media agendas may receive more thematic coverage. The evidence that suggests support for this claim is the reporting on the anti-Gulf war demonstrations, which provides only one case that is suitable for testing this hypothesis. Additional research based on a larger range of issues should test this hypothesis further.

We were not able to adequately test our hypothesis derived from propaganda models of media reporting, largely because our dataset did not include enough stories on demonstrations that could be considered to be about issues potentially threatening the socioeconomic order.^{xv} One issue that Herman and Chomsky have directly linked with their claims about the pro-capitalist bias of the news media is the coverage of protests against U.S. intervention in Latin America. Although a large proportion of all Washington D.C. demonstrations were focused on this issue [INSERT % of ALL 1982 demos on LATIN], only 8 of these were covered.^{xvi} This suggests that a pro-capitalist bias may be more strongly operating in the agenda-setting process than in the

priming or agenda-building that the media does. The reports we examined on protests related to socioeconomic issues did not provide strong evidence one way or another here. Although the sign of the regression coefficients for our episodic/thematic scale and for the amount of the story describing the issue run counter to our expectations, the coefficients are weak and non-significant. Further examination is warranted to test the hypothesis that movements posing a threat to the capitalist order receive media attention -- to the extent that they receive it at all -- that marginalizes their messages.

Our last two hypotheses relate to our expectations about the news spin of the reports on protest demonstrations. Our fifth hypothesis, that the "spin" of protest event reports will in general favor government and other authorities was not supported by the evidence we have assembled here. Only 27% of all the stories we coded revealed any discernible bias, and the bulk of those stories favored demonstrators rather than government authorities. Nevertheless, the news spin variable still showed patterns that are consistent with what we expected. The "spin" of thematic stories was more likely to favor social movement actors than was that of episodic stories. And stories that relied on government and expert sources tended to reinforce the agendas of those sources by displaying news spin that favored authorities.

In conclusion, social movements seek to both to draw attention to issues they deem important. They also seek to influence how these issues are portrayed to the general public. A common strategy for influencing public and policy agendas is to stage mass demonstrations as a way to dramatize a problem. But this common social movement strategy is not an effective tool for either influencing media agendas (roughly 2% of all public demonstrations in Washington D.C. receive any media attention) or for influencing the media frames used to portray issues. Of all

news stories on demonstrations in 1982 and 1991, only 24% were reported in a manner that emphasized primarily the social issues manifest in protesters' demands. An additional 41% of the stories included some discussion of the underlying issues along with reports on the protest event itself. Thirty-four percent of all reported demonstrations were treated primarily as events in their own right: the underlying demands were left unexplored by the media reports as the activities of protesters and police, incidental factors such as the weather, and other details of the protest event constituted the focus of the story.

According to research on the impact of news frames on peoples' interpretation of social problems, the episodic frame through which many public protests are portrayed leads consumers of mass media away from systemic explanations for the problems protesters are seeking to address:

[E]xposure to episodic framing tends to elicit individualistic (or nonsocietal) attributions of responsibility for most of the issues studied. . . . Because television news generally fails to activate (and may indeed depress) societal attributions of responsibility, however, it tends to obscure the connections between social problems and the actions or inactions of political leaders. By attenuating these connections, episodic framing impedes electoral leadership. . . . In the long run, episodic framing contributes to the trivialization of public discourse and the erosion of electoral accountability. {Iyengar, 1991 :141, 143}

News frames that are thematic tend to portray social movements in a positive light. However, public demonstrations do not appear to be an effective means of communication for challengers.

Changes in the mass media industry also threaten opportunities for wider public debate, including the consideration of social movements' agendas. Corporate ownership and centralization, combined with management strategies that have downsized the news staffs of major networks {#xxx see Kimball, 1994} generate news gathering routines that are increasingly less likely to include social movement sources or activities.

-Implications for social movements-- media strategy

-Implications for research

**Table 1:
Correlations of Episodic/ Thematic Scale with
Alternative Measures of News Frame¹**

<u>Episodic Coverage</u>	
Article emphasizes details of the protest event	-.497**
Article emphasizes details incidental to protest event	.108**
Episodic emphasis of news article (0=not at all episodic, 6=highly episodic)	-.857**
<u>Thematic Coverage</u>	
Article emphasizes issues addressed by protesters	.499**
Article mentions significance of protester goals	.313**
Article mentions specific goals of protest	-.047
Thematic emphasis of news article (0=not at all thematic, 6=highly thematic)	.852**

¹Episodic/Thematic Scale is based on coders' determination of the overall frame of the news article. This variable was coded 1 if the news article was considered "primarily episodic," 2 if it was "a mixture of episodic and thematic reporting," and 3 if it was considered "primarily thematic."

Number of news articles with valid data: 635

*Sig. at .05 level

**Sig. at .01 level

Table 2: Bivariate Correlations

	News Spin (1=pro-demonstr. ; -1=pro-authority)	Description of Issue (0 through 6=none to all)	Episodic/ Thematic (1=episodic; 2=mixture; 3=thematic)
Spin	-----	.206**	.289**
Description of Issue			.499**
<u>Source Variables</u>			
Year (1991=1)	-.130**	.224**	.139**
NY Times/Post (Post=1)	-.042	.118**	-.013
Print/ TV (Print=1)	.025	-.201**	-.313**
Info. Source (1=Protesters)	-.018	-.070	-.144**
<u>Context Variables</u>			
Confrontation	-.206**	-.190**	-.078*
Counter-Demo	-.212**	-.200**	-.174**
<u>Issue Variables</u>			
Socio-Economic	.032	.118**	.038
Veterans	.281**	-.010	.074
Lebanon	.034	.052	-.029
Vs. Gulf War	-.113**	-.000	.175**
Vs. KK Klan	-.176**	-.177**	-.134**

*Sig. at .05 level

**Sig. at .01 level

**Table 3: OLS Regression Estimates:
Media Coverage of Washington Demonstrations 1982, 1991**

	Thematic/Episodic		Description of Issue	
<u>Source Variables</u>				
Print/Electronic (Print=1)	-.723**	-.727**	-.635**	-.664**
Info. Source (1=Protest; 0=Authorities)	-.460**	-.454**	-.617**	-.683**
<u>Context Variables</u>				
Counter-Demo	-.338**	-.260**	-.495**	-.447**
Confrontation	-.230**	-.246**	-1.012**	-.876**
<u>Issue Variables</u>				
Socio-Economic		.110		.095
Veterans		.252*		.150
Lebanon		.118		.465*
Vs. Gulf War		.363**		-.541**
Vs. KK Klan		-.027		-.128
Year (1991=1)	.179**	.034	.923**	1.265**
Constant	2.925**	2.842**	3.510**	3.480**
R2	.198	.227	.256	.278
Adj. R2	.191	.213	.250	.265
SE	.685	.676	1.190	1.177
N	572	572	579	579

‡Sig. at .10 level

*Sig. at .05 level

**Sig. at .01 level

Table 4: News Spin in Coverage of Washington D.C. Demonstrations

	News Spin		
<u>Source Variables</u>			
Print/Electronic (Print=1)	.008	.004	.146*
Info. Source (1=Protest; 0=Authorities)	-.094*	-.104*	-.015
Episodic/Thematic Scale			.196**
<u>Context Variables</u>			
Counter-Demo	-.284**	-.195**	-.144*
Confrontation	-.216**	-.157**	-.109*
<u>Issue Variables</u>			
Socio-Economic		-.004	-.017
Veterans		.358**	.309**
Lebanon		.035	.012
Vs. Gulf War		-.038	-.109
Vs. KK Klan		-.186*	-.181*
Year (1991=1)	-.129**	-.064	-.071
Constant	.377**	.310**	-.246**
R2	.105	.156	.219
Adj. R2	.097	.141	.204
SE	.495	.483	.464
N	572	572	572

*Sig. at .05 level

**Sig. at .01 level

**Table 5: OLS Regression Estimates:
Thematic vs. Episodic Media Coverage of Washington Demonstrations 1982, 1991**

	All Cases		Electronic Media		Print Media	
<u>Source Variables</u>						
Print/ TV (Print=1)	-.726**	-.729**	----	----	----	----
Source (1=Protesters; 0=Authorities)	-.424**	-.414**	-.714‡	-.530	-.421**	-.413**
Spin (1= Pro-demon- strator; -1=Pro-auth.)	.389**	.384**	.093	.319**	.463**	.453**
<u>Context Variables</u>						
Counter-Demo	-.227**	-.185*	-.099	-.197		
Confrontation	-.145*	-.186**	-.181	-.061	-.239**	-.234*
					-.136‡	-.165*
<u>Issue Variables</u>						
Socio-Economic		.109		-.205		
Veterans		.115		-.772**		.178‡
Lebanon		.105		---		.214*
Vs. Gulf War		.377**		.739**		.137
Vs. KK Klan		-.045		-1.710**		.257*
Year (1991=1)	.229**	.058	.315*	-.232		.175
Constant	2.778**	2.723**	3.029**	2.982**	.209**	.148
					2.046**	1.945**
R2	.262	.285	.096	.393	.217	.237
Adj. R2	.254	.271	.039	.320	.210	.221
SE	.658	.651	.670	.564	.653	.648
N	572	572	84	84	487	487

‡Sig. at .10 level

*Sig. at .05 level

**Sig. at .01 level

Notes

References

- i. *Potential costs of "flak" are advertising boycotts, threats of libel suits, FCC actions, or congressional hearings.*
- ii. This may be called system attribution, and it is seen as a key to the emergence of social movements. McAdam {#115 1982} refers to this as "cognitive liberation."
- iii. Recall Iyengar's finding that thematic coverage leads viewers/ readers towards more systemic explanations for social problems. Thus, thematic coverage of issues would tend to support many social movements' objectives, since movements generally seek the transformation of broad social and political institutions and require a system critique in order to mobilize and motivate adherents.
- iv. These data are described in McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith (1996).
- v. The codebook is available from Smith or McCarthy.
- vi. Developing questions that would generate reliable and valid measures of thematic and episodic coverage proved more difficult than we had anticipated. Our codebook basically leads the coder to ask whether the coverage tends to focus on the details of the demonstration itself or on the issue more generally. Of course, we would have liked to ask whether the coverage of the issue tended to be episodic -- e.g., focused on individualistic or localized interpretations rather than systemic ones -- but this proved impossible given the range of issues covered in this study. The latter kind of question is most appropriate in a study that focuses on a smaller range of issues in greater detail.
- vii. Just over six percent of all cases were coded as having a spin that favored authorities, compared to 21% favoring demonstrators. The remaining cases (73%) were considered neutral. The mean score for the amount of the story devoted to discussing the relevant issues was 2.47 (st.dev.=1.42).
- viii. Further research is needed to determine whether these are trends or idiosyncratic.
- ix. In both years, this includes the top protest issue, which was the Israeli-Lebanon war in 1982 and the Gulf war in 1991.
- x. These issues included, for instance, demonstrations against U.S. Central America policy in 1982, demonstrations against the policies of foreign governments in both years, and pro-environmental demonstrations in 1991.
- xi. The large number of television reports devoted to coverage of the Gulf war in 1991 meant that there may have been an unusually high emphasis on thematic coverage of antiwar demonstrations. But the patterns of greater thematic emphases in the reporting on demonstrations in the television

news was found when we repeated the analysis for only the 1982 cases.

xii. This may be a function of the nature of this study, where we had to ask coders to base decisions about thematic vs. episodic coverage on the story's emphasis of the issue at stake versus the details of the protest itself rather than on some decision about the framing of the issue the demonstrators sought to advance. For instance, in the Gulf war case, there were likely to be news stories of the war regardless of whether or not protests occurred, and the stories that appeared seemed to use the demonstrations as a "hook" for routine coverage of the war. These stories involved much discussion of the war effort and administration policy, but were not generally concerned with detailing the critical views of antiwar protesters (see also note ??6?? above).

xiii. Most reports (73%) were considered to have no readily observed "spin" that favored authorities or demonstrators. Roughly 6% of the reports were coded as favoring authorities and 21% favoring demonstrators.

xiv. This points to a limitation of Iyengar's claim that television news coverage is less thematic than print news, although it is relevant for only a small portion of news stories devoted to covering protest events. Indeed, had we --as Iyengar did-- reviewed all the coverage of the issues about which we were concerned, we might also find that print media were more thematic in their reporting. Instead, we look only at stories on public demonstrations in the nation's capital.

xv. Our attempts to characterize demonstrations according to the extent to which each posed a threat to the socio-economic order were highly problematic, in part because few demonstrations posed any serious threat. This suggests that cross-national or historic research may be necessary to systematically assess this hypothesis.

xvi. Of the eight stories on anti-interventionist protests regarding Central America, three were considered "primarily episodic," one was "primarily thematic," and four were "a mixture of episodic and thematic coverage."