

# From Protest to Agenda Building: Description Bias in Media Coverage of Protest Events in Washington, D.C.\*

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## *Abstract*

*Social movements often seek to draw attention to issues they deem important by organizing public demonstrations with the aim of attracting mass media coverage. But only a small proportion of all public demonstrations receives any media attention. This article asks whether even the minimal coverage that demonstrations receive reveal any influence of social movements in shaping how issues are framed by the mass media. Analyzing newspaper and television news stories on Washington, D.C. protests held during 1982 and 1991, we ask whether news reports on protests are framed in ways consistent with the aims of protesters. Do demonstrators receive media coverage that highlights the issues about which they are concerned, or does coverage focus on the protest event itself, to the exclusion of the social issues that movements target? Our results support much of the surmising among media scholars, that even when movements succeed at obtaining the attention of mass media outlets, media reports portray protests in ways that may undermine social movement agendas. Despite this obstacle to communicating protest messages through demonstrations, movements engage in other forms of communication that can affect public interpretations of mass media frames.*

Social movement organizations seek to draw attention to the problems and issues they deem important by organizing public demonstrations often with the aim of attracting mass media coverage.<sup>1</sup> But most protest events do not receive any print

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or electronic media attention.<sup>1</sup> Our analysis of newspaper and television news stories on Washington, D.C. protests held during 1982 and 1991 asked whether protest events are represented in the media in ways that are consistent with the aims of protest organizers. Are public demonstrations effective means for challengers to communicate their messages? Our results tend to support much of the surmising among media scholars: even when movement organizers succeed at obtaining the attention of mass media coverage, the reports represent the protest events in ways that neutralize or even undermine social movement agendas.

Reviewing the relationship between social movements and the mass media, we identify two major sources of bias in media representation of public protests: selection and description bias. Analysts have developed different explanations of media bias, and we review these perspectives and outline several hypotheses they suggest. Using newspaper and television news reports of Washington D.C. protests held during 1982 and 1991, we analyzed the ways that major media sources portray public protests in an attempt to test these hypotheses. Our aim is to better understand how media processes and reporting shape the communication of social movement agendas to a wider public. But we begin with a discussion of the strategic purposes behind the demonstration that go beyond simply attracting the attention of the mass media.

### **Protest as a Political Resource**

Social movement organizations seeking to influence public opinion and political agendas depend in part upon the mass media to communicate their messages to a more general audience. In his classic (1968) article, Lipsky identifies the four groups targeted by political protests as: (1) protest group constituents; (2) communications media; (3) reference publics; and (4) government or political target. In this analysis, protest serves both internal solidarity-building functions as well as broader functions of communicating movement critiques and generating pressure for change. Protest constituents have means of direct communication with protest organizers, through participation in demonstrations themselves, interpersonal ties, or through movement publications and electronic communications. The messages conveyed to constituents are thus mediated through sympathetic sources. But movements are generally dependent upon external or indirect mechanisms to help convey their messages to influential actors that lie outside of the protest group itself.

The typical political targets of protests are insulated from direct contact with protesters, and the target's "reference publics" are generally groups with routine and direct access to political influence. Thus, social movements — or politically marginalized groups that lack direct access to polity members — must find indirect means of communicating with these targets. Usually this happens through the mass media. By organizing protest events, activists hope to attract the attention of and

intervention by these third parties with the policy formulators and decision makers. But third party assistance is contingent upon whether and how the protest event is represented by the mass media.

Since Lipsky's seminal statement, there has been tremendous growth in the use of public protests as a form of political action, particularly in Washington D.C. There are several paradoxes in this growth. While the number of protests has increased over the past several years — police and permit records reveal that more than 1,000 occur annually in the nation's capitol — the amount of disorder attached to protest events has almost disappeared. This paradox is due in large part to the "routinization" of procedures for managing public protests (McPhail, Schweingruber & McCarthy 1998; McCarthy & McPhail 1998; McCarthy, McPhail & Crist 1999).<sup>3</sup> Some scholars argue (Everett 1992) that protest activity, its increase notwithstanding, has become less effective as a political resource for powerless groups. Whether or not this is the case, social movement organizations continue to advocate or oppose social change by means of public demonstrations. Protests are daily fixtures in the capitol city of the U.S., and their numbers do not appear to be declining. This trend also continues despite the fact that social movements have developed other methods of communicating directly with a mass audience — such as door-to-door or telephone canvassing, direct mail, and the Internet — that do not depend on the sympathies of the mass media. Indeed, the importance of the mass media for social movement actors in the U.S. 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 & Kinder 1986).

Our research (McCarthy, McPhail & Smith 1996; McCarthy et al. 1998) has investigated how the mass media package the images of protest they project to the general public, including those third parties Lipsky views as vital to protest success. Our analysis suggests that social movement organizers who adopt Lipsky's analysis cannot assume that mass media attention will necessarily represent their protest event(s) in ways that are consistent with social movement organization interests; to the contrary, mass media representation may complicate their efforts to convey the messages they seek to send to policy and decision makers. One reason for this complication is that media institutions operate under logics that are independent of and often contradictory to movement agendas. For example, Gitlin (1980) documents the effects of the media's need for centralized organization and charismatic leaders on the internal cohesiveness and mutual trust and support of participants in the U.S. student movement of the 1960s. The contradictions between movement and media agendas are most dramatic for movements that directly challenge the economic system on which the corporate mass media depend, and here we can expect media coverage of protest to undermine the potential policy impact of movements. The illumination of relationships between media routines

and social movements is therefore crucial to our understanding the processes of social change.

Social movement organizations try to influence public opinion about which problems deserve attention and about how those problems should be addressed. As social movement organizations seek to raise issues to prominence on the social agenda and to suggest ways of thinking about these issues, they are often competing with other actors in society regarding which issues are most important and how they should be addressed and resolved. Graber (1993) distinguishes between "agenda setting," which is the process of identifying and advocating social problems for inclusion on public and governmental agendas, and "agenda building," or efforts to influence the interpretation and prioritizing of those problems. When social movement activists 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 activists, are not simply concerned with influencing *what* people think about; 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 interpreted in the mass media.

While this interpretation attributes a central role for the media in determining the success of political protest, we emphasize that movements are not wholly dependent on media sympathies. They can also communicate to a wider audience through a variety of alternative media as well as through societal organizations, and to the extent that they succeed in spreading their framings of social problems, news media are interpreted through a critical popular lens (e.g., Gamson 1992).

### Media Selection and Description Bias

Since social movement organizations are by definition "outsiders" to political institutions and processes,<sup>4</sup> they can be further marginalized when mainstream media fail to cover their protests or the issues they seek to raise. Nonetheless, it is unrealistic to expect the media to cover all the protest events that occur in Washington, D.C. Both print and electronic media editors must select a limited number of events to observe and report. This has often led to charges of selection bias (e.g., Herman & Chomsky 1988) in how editors and reporters go about the business of deciding what events are "newsworthy" as well as how the selected events are represented in media reports. In an earlier article (McCarthy, McPhail & Smith 1996), we identified two distinct forms of bias in the media's recording of protest events: selection bias and description bias. Selection bias involves media gatekeeper's (e.g., editors') choices of a very small number of protest events to report from a much larger pool of events which could be reported. That selection is part of the media's agenda setting role. Description bias involves how a selected protest event

is portrayed in a media story. Inherent in this term is the assumption that the media construct interpretations of protest events that differ from both the objectives of protesters and interpretations of other observers. That media portrayal helps shape agenda-building processes.

#### SELECTION BIAS

One finding from our media selection bias analysis is that media agendas can influence the selection of protest events that are reported, independently of the characteristics of the event as such. For example, with the exception of size, "objective" matters such as the form of a protest event or its timing are not correlated with whether an event is reported in the mass media. As well, the strong correlation of protest size with media coverage has declined over time for television news reports of protest events.

Both print and electronic media regularly focus upon selected issues for intensive and continuous coverage over a sequence of days and sometimes longer, creating the phenomena of "issue attention cycles." Our research has established that regardless of a protest event's size or form, that event will likely be reported if its substantive focus can be used to illustrate some issue with which the media are already concerned. Thus, social movement organizations 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 ongoing media issue cycles and news production routines.

#### DESCRIPTION BIAS

Once a protest event receives media attention, however, protesters often charge that the media fail to portray their causes as they would like. Protest activities or organizers are often portrayed in a manner that reporters believe will appeal to their mass audience (Gitlin 1980). Conveying protesters' specific policy or issue concerns is of secondary importance to those reporting on public protests. This could be a function of media gatekeepers whose motivations, routines, and professional interests tend to support the status quo; or it could result from the failure of social movement organizers to engage in deliberate efforts to become sufficiently familiar with media news production routines so that they can develop strategies that effectively engage the media — in other words, to wage what Ryan (1991:5) calls an "insider media game." Already plagued by limited staff, time, and money and with the inherent paradox of simultaneously appealing to movement members and recruits, to the general public, to potential elite allies, and to government targets, social movement organizers must also court the media. Research on news media reporting isolates three main factors that influence the

packaging and portrayal of news. These models can be summarized as organizational, structural, and ideological (e.g., MacGregor 1997).

## Media News Production Routines and Reporting on Protest Events

### ORGANIZATIONAL MODELS

Organizational models see the institutional logics guiding mass media operations as influential in the selection and portrayal of news. Also called the “gatekeeper” or “newsmaking approach,” these models account for the ways media actors construct images and compile messages (Kielbowitz & Scherer 1986:75). Viewing media institutions as news makers leads us to ask how they determine what constitutes a newsworthy event (e.g., Clayman & Reisner 1998). Given media organizational routines, social movement actors must justify why some chronic problem such as poverty or racial injustice should receive more media attention today than it has in the past. In order to elevate routine issues onto media agendas, movements must portray those issues as occurring or changing in exceptional fashion — increasing, spreading, intensifying — so as to make them sufficiently interesting to warrant incorporation into media news gathering routines.

Gans (1979) and others have examined the institutional logics behind editors’ decisions about which reporters to deploy and which sources of information to accept. None of these “logics” favor social movement organizers’ access to the mass media. Editors favor reporters who are generalists rather than specialists, as generalists are cheaper to hire, easier to control, and more reliant on sources for information. They also prefer government or “official” sources because these are convenient and readily available, reducing the costs of newsgathering. Moreover, official sources limit risks of alienating influential elites. Most media portray government sources as credible and unbiased, and they often present them without critique, thereby reinforcing the agendas of official sources (Bennett 1983; Herman 1995).

The practices of media gatekeepers, in short, work against the likelihood that social movement organizations will attract favorable media attention. They insure that only those social movements whose leaders provide the most appealing media images and rhetoric will be likely to gain media coverage (Gitlin 1980). Some scholars suggest (e.g., Kielbowitz & Scherer 1986) that social movement organizations must provide consistent streams of images that appeal to the mass media in order to sustain media focus on — and thus government attention to — particular issues. This leads organizers to vary and intensify their tactics in an ongoing effort to create what appear to be new hooks. It is paradoxical but probably true that the tactics most likely to attract media attention are not the same tactics

that appeal to the legislative and governmental policy and decision makers that movement actors ultimately hope to influence (Gamson & Modigliani 1989).

#### STRUCTURAL MODELS

Structural models assume that the broader structure of power relations in society affect the portrayal of the news. In these accounts, the mass media are invariably biased in favor of the capitalist interests of their owners. The privatization, commercialization, and concentration of media ownership during the 1970s and 1980s, moreover, has severely limited the range of ideas conveyed through these media sources (Herman 1995:169). Market forces “naturally” marginalize dissent by crowding out any ideas for which there is no substantial economic backing and perpetuating self-censorship practices in media institutions (Herman 1995:170). In this view, news production becomes dependent upon what advertisers will support. When they buy air time, sponsors align their products with certain images. Advertisers may demand a *quid pro quo* from the news agencies and they can withhold support of certain kinds of news programming. For instance, advertisers’ worries about the impact of war stories on their potential customers led CBS executives to offer them “assurances that the war specials could be tailored to provide better lead-ins to commercials with ‘patriotic views from the home front’” (Andersen 1995:211; 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 and business elites.

Structural models would lead one to expect little if any media coverage of social movements that threaten or criticize the capitalist order. Further, whatever coverage such movements might receive would likely marginalize or otherwise de-politicize their messages. Moreover, the increasing concentration of the mass media industry limits competition over the exchange of ideas, creating smaller news holes and fewer incentives for editors to seek out innovative stories. This further threatens social movement access to the mass media.

#### IDEOLOGICAL MODELS

Ideological models of the media explain the choices made in the selection and interpretation of the news in terms of the cultural reproduction of broader power relationships. The focus of these models, however, is more upon the subtle ways through which economic and political elites control images and meaning. Information is used to reinforce ideas and interpretations of events that support existing power structures. To the extent that the mass media reports on social movements, they will marginalize social movement agendas by, for instance,

framing stories in a way that personalizes, de-contextualizes, or dramatizes them (Bennett 1983: 7-27). By suggesting individual responsibility rather than social systemic causes of a problem, by portraying a problem without reference to its structural parallels or causes, or by emphasizing the drama of a protest event rather than the substance of protester critiques, the mass media encourage shallow understandings of these issues and discourage the critical engagement of audiences.

Evidence from Iyengar's (1991) field experiments led him to support the ideas in the ideological models. Arguing that media portrayal of a problem affects public attributions of responsibility and presumptions about appropriate solutions, Iyengar categorized stories as either "episodic" or "thematic" in nature. Episodic news frames are event or episode 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 contextualizes an issue or problem, focusing more on general developments, trends, or conditions that contribute to problems such as surges in welfare dependence or increased 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).

Relating Iyengar's work to our evaluation of the relationship between social movement organizations and the mass media, we note that social movements often seek *thematic* media attention to some broad social concern by generating an *episode* or event that may be newsworthy in itself. A successful effort requires that media 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, movement organizers hope to draw attention to underlying themes of injustice, inequality, or oppression. Social movement organizers address chronic social problems that they attribute to some social structural or systemic condition or process. In order to appeal to both the mass media and the general public at the same time, movement organizers 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 1998:178-79).

Many movements seek support for their claims that the political and/or economic system is the source of some problem and that without reforms of the system the problem will persist.<sup>5</sup> Thus, we would expect that more thematic — rather than episodic — media representation of protest issues best advances the aims of social movement organizations. However, social movement organizers are at the mercy of the media representation of whatever organizers do. And the evidence suggests that this does not work in organizers' favor: fewer than a quarter of the news reports we analyzed framed protests in thematic ways.



## Hypotheses

### ELECTRONIC VS. PRINT MEDIA FRAMES

Iyengar's study of news framing was based on analyses of television news broadcasts, and he said nothing of how his conclusions would relate to print media sources. Because of its more limited "news hole," we would expect television news to be more selective in the protests it covers, and that the stories on which it reports would be more tied to ongoing themes in the issue attention cycle than would print media stories. In other words, we would expect television news more than print news sources to present more thematic coverage of protests.

On the other hand, one could also reasonably expect the greater amount of space that print sources have compared to television news outlets, coupled with the possibilities that the print medium allows for more complex presentations of information, to produce more discussion of the underlying systemic causes of the problems protesters address. More thematic coverage would also be expected given that print news audience tend to be among the more politically active and attentive segments of the general public (Iyengar & Kinder 1986).<sup>5</sup> One might also expect television news cameras to favor the colorful images of public demonstrations, leading to more episodic television news reporting of public protests. Using this logic, we would expect television news reports to be more episodic and newspaper sources more thematic in their coverage of public protests.

Our earlier study of selection bias supports the former expectation, showing that reports on protest by the electronic media correspond to ongoing media issue agendas (McCarthy, McPhail & Smith 1996). This suggests that television coverage tends to be more thematic than print coverage, which was less sensitive to media issue agendas in the protest events they reported. Our first testable hypothesis builds upon these earlier findings.

*Hypothesis 1:* Television news, with more limited "temporal space," 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 such confrontations themselves — such as the 1982 demonstrations by and against the Ku Klux Klan which triggered large-scale riots in downtown Washington, D.C. — are considered newsworthy. 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 motivated a public demonstration. Indeed, the main strategy behind public demonstrations is to focus attention on some broad social problem with a dramatic event, and the

character of the drama (e.g., size of demonstration or extraordinary actions performed by protesters, etc.) should highlight the relative importance or scale of injustice the issue involves, thereby generating more in-depth consideration of the issue. But small news holes, reporters' limited knowledge of issues, and financial concerns of media gatekeepers constrain the extent to which the underlying concerns of protesters become the primary focus of stories on the more controversial protest events. In short, while demonstrators may seek to use extraordinary activities such as dramaturgy or even civil disobedience to gain media attention, the amount and type of attention those activities are given by the media may contribute less to their overall political objectives than organizers anticipated.

*Hypothesis 2:* Controversy such as the presence of counter-demonstrations, arrests, dramaturgy or violence generate more episodic than thematic coverage of a protest event.

Issue attention cycles are also important factors shaping media gatekeepers' reporting of public protests. As we noted earlier, the issues motivating protests were significant correlates of demonstrations receiving 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:

*Hypothesis 3:* Issues that are related to ongoing media issue agendas will attract more thematic coverage than episodic coverage.

Structural and ideological models of media reporting on social movement activity lead us to expect that most coverage of protest events would favor authorities' "spin" on those events, and that editors and reporters would rely on sources outside the movements for information about the protest and/or the issues motivating it. The implications of these models is that coverage of protest demonstrations — particularly those promoting goals that contradict major economic interests — would tend to be episodic. Less controversial or threatening issues might attract more thematic coverage, and in those few cases that are covered, the thematic stories may even appear to favor demonstrators and rely on movement leaders for information.

*Hypothesis 4:* Media coverage of social movements will tend to favor the status quo; the "spin" of news stories will in general tend to favor government and other authorities.

*Hypothesis 5:* Protest event stories that spin in favor of the status quo will rely principally on the government and authorities for information.

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 is consistent with Iyengar's finding that thematic coverage leads viewers or readers towards more systemic explanations for social problems. Thematic coverage of issues would thus support social movements' framings about the need for the transformation of broad social and political institutions, frames that require a system critique in order to mobilize and motivate adherents. This leads us to our sixth hypothesis about the relationship between the "news spin" and the framing of a story:

*Hypothesis 6:* Thematic news reports are more likely than episodic ones to "spin" in favor of social movement actors and to rely on movement information sources.

### Data and Measurement

Newspaper reports of public protests in Washington, D.C. were gathered for the years of 1982 and 1991 from the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* by reading each daily issue in order to identify every protest event. Transcripts of ABC, CBS and NBC television network news broadcasts from the *Vanderbilt Network News Index and Abstracts* were consulted for the same years and each mention of a Washington, D.C. Protest event was recorded. Tapes of those stories that included such mentions were purchased from the *Vanderbilt Network News Index and Abstracts*, and the stories were transcribed. Copies of the newspaper stories and the transcriptions of the electronic stories served as the text that was coded for details of media coverage. Our unit of analysis is a media report of a protest event. Many events were reported in more than one of the five media sources. The media records of events were matched with other information on each protest event drawn from police records.<sup>7</sup> A detailed codebook was developed to assess various dimensions of the coverage of theoretical interest, focusing particularly on (1) the extent to which the coverage reflected a thematic or episodic frame, (2) the extent to which the issues raised by protesters were described in the coverage, and (3) the "spin" of the coverage toward either the demonstrators or their targets.<sup>8</sup>

Table 1 presents bivariate correlations between our primary measure of episodic/thematic coverage (episodic was coded as 1, mixed as 2 and thematic as 3) and the other indicators we created to tap the episodic and thematic nature of each event report.<sup>9</sup> We have grouped the measures into those we expected to predict more episodic coverage and those we expected to predict more thematic coverage. Table 1 shows that the more the story emphasizes the details of the protest the more episodic its coverage ( $r = -.497$ ). As well, the episodic vs. thematic scale

TABLE 1: Bivariate Correlations between Dimensions of News Frame<sup>a</sup> and Episodic/Thematic Scale of Media Coverage of Washington Demonstrations 1982, 1991

	<i>Coefficient</i>
Description bias elements	
<i>Episodic elements</i>	
Article emphasizes details of the protest event	-.497**
Article emphasizes details incidental to protest event	.108**
Episodic emphasis of news article <sup>b</sup>	-.857**
<i>Thematic elements</i>	
Article emphasizes issues addressed by protesters	.499**
Article mentions significance of protest goals	.313**
Thematic emphasis of news article <sup>c</sup>	.852**
(N = 635)	

<sup>a</sup> News frame is coded according to episodic or thematic emphasis in a report on a protest event. The variable is coded from a 7 point scale: 1 = "episodic coverage," 2 = "mixed thematic/episodic coverage," and 3 = "thematic coverage."

<sup>b</sup> This is a dummy variable where coders were asked to evaluate the overall emphasis of a story. 1 = "primarily episodic"

<sup>c</sup> This is a dummy variable where coders were asked to evaluate the overall emphasis of a story. 1 = "primarily thematic"

\*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed test)

is strongly correlated with the two items we used to independently assess the articles' episodic or thematic emphasis ( $r$ [episodic] =  $-.857$ ;  $r$  [thematic] =  $.852$ ). We expected that attention to incidental details of events, such as the weather or protesters' clothing, would predict episodic coverage, but that measure is weakly associated with more thematic coverage ( $r = .108$ ). Alternatively, coverage of the protesters' issues and mentions of the significance of protest goals are both significantly associated with more thematic coverage ( $r$ 's, respectively,  $.499$ ,  $.313$ ). The results seen in Table 1 provide some confidence in the validity of our primary measure of the thematic/episodic dimension to be used in subsequent analyses.

In addition to the episodic/thematic variable we are interested in, for the reasons we adduced above, both the extent to which the coverage described the issues raised by the protesters and the spin, or bias, of the coverage toward either the targets of the protest or the protesters themselves. As noted, coders were asked to assess the amount of the coverage that was devoted to describing the issues being raised by the protesters. We created a dichotomous description of issue variable where the categories are no description through less than half of the story devoted to issue description which included 56.5% of the stories (coded 0) and about half through

the entire story constituting issue description, which included 43.5% of the stories (coded 1).

Coders were also asked to make an assessment of the "spin" of the coverage of the event (whether it favored protesters or authorities). Our data shows that just over six percent of all cases were coded as tilting in some measure toward authorities, compared to 21% leaning in some degree toward demonstrators. The remaining cases (73%) were considered neutral. In subsequent analyses the spin variable is a dichotomous one where spin favoring demonstrators (coded 1) is contrasted with a combination of a neutral spin and one that favors authorities (coded 0).

The distribution of responses on this measure was quite unexpected. First, they suggest that media reports tend to provide rather balanced, neutral accounts of encounters between dissident groups and authorities, much as media representatives would have it. Second, they suggest that if there is any pattern of spin it favors demonstrators rather than their opponents. These may be more consistent with the claims of conservative media critics, who suggest a liberal bias motivates "media elites" (e.g., Lichter, Rothman & Lichter 1986), than those of the more progressive critics we have discussed.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the thematic/episodic framing of a particular news report, the extent to which it described the issues concerning the protesters and the spin toward protesters or authorities, coders recorded information on the location of the story in the news lineup, the amount of time or space devoted to an event report, and whether there were reports of counter demonstrators, violence, or arrests. Only 19% of the events included reports of counter demonstrators. An event was coded as confrontational if there were reports of violence and/or arrests, and this included 23% of the events. We also recorded whether or not the details of the coverage relied upon information provided by demonstrators (e.g., organizer/demonstrator comments, literature, signs, etc.) in addition to that provided by authorities and other observers.

The issues selected for analysis are among the most frequent protest issues during 1982 and 1991 *that also received media attention*. Many issues that drew substantial amounts of protest are not reflected in this analysis because media selection of protest events tended to favor certain issues over others (McCarthy, McPhail & Smith 1996). Thus, many of the protests around U.S. intervention in Central America and around environmental concerns, while popular issues of contention, are excluded from this analysis. Socioeconomic protests are those focusing on unemployment, homelessness, and resistance to Reagan's economic liberalization policies. Veterans includes primarily protests and rallies surrounding the opening of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. during 1982. Many of these demonstrations focused on veterans benefits and the status of Vietnam veterans in American society. Protests surrounding the 1982 Israeli-Lebanese war were primarily Arab groups protesting the war by this U.S. ally. *Anti-*

*Gulf War* includes all demonstrations that protested against U.S. military action in the Persian Gulf. Finally, our category *Ku Klux Klan* includes articles reporting on 1982 and 1991 Klan marches and related counterdemonstrations, which were among the most disruptive of all the protests in both years.

## Results

In what follows we model the effects of the media type and source of reporter information, the context of the protest event, and the protest issue upon our three measures of description bias in media coverage of protest events; the amount of each story that describes the issues raised by protesters, primarily thematic coverage and a pro-demonstrator news spin. This family of indicators, we suggest, provide us a glimpse of the important dimensions of description bias that previous analysts have suggested characterize media coverage of protest events. Thematic reporting and greater emphasis upon description of protester's issues are conceived as alternative measures of thematic coverage, and are quite strongly related ( $r = .499$ ,  $p < .01$ ). News spin is conceived as an alternative dimension of bias, and is somewhat more independent of thematic coverage and of the space/time devoted to issues description ( $r = .289$ ,  $p < .01$ ; and  $r = .206$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively). The covariation we observe here between our three measures of description bias in the coverage of protest events is consistent with the theoretical approach we outlined in the beginning of this article. For each measure of description bias we present nested models, first assessing the impact of the source and context variables, and then including five substantive issues that were the focus of the largest number of protests receiving media attention.

Table 2 displays logistic regression estimates of the effects of media source, protest context and protest issue upon the likelihood of more extensive description of demonstrators' issues and of thematic coverage, and the results bear upon several of our hypotheses. We have included a year variable as a control since it was clear from our results that coverage tended to be more thematic in 1991 than it had been in 1982. With a few minor exceptions, the addition of the issue variables in model 2 does not alter the pattern of results for the source and context predictor variables.

Our first hypothesis led us to anticipate that print and electronic media would differ in the extent to which they cover protest events and that the electronic reports would tend to be more thematic. The rate of coverage of events supports our expectation. The three network nightly news programs together covered 17% of the permitted Washington protest events that received any media coverage in 1982 and 1991, while *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, together comprised the remaining 83% of stories. Electronic coverage also tended to be more thematic than print news coverage, judging both by its direct measure and by the measure

**TABLE 2: Logistic Regression Estimates of Source, Context, and Issue Effects on the Likelihood of Description of Issues and Thematic Coverage of Demonstrations**

	Dependent Measures			
	Description of Issue at Stake <sup>b</sup>		Thematic/Episodic Coverage <sup>c</sup>	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Independent measures <sup>a</sup>				
<i>Source variables</i>				
Year	1.242**	2.093**	.680**	-.118
(1982 = 0)	(.211)	(.319)	(.219)	(.336)
Print/electronic	-.979**	-1.043**	-1.914**	-2.049**
(Electronic = 0)	(.280)	(.286)	(.272)	(.290)
Information source	-.805**	-1.049**	-1.332**	-1.341**
(Authority or neutral = 0)	(.224)	(.241)	(.242)	(.251)
<i>Context variables</i>				
Confrontation	-1.911**	-1.661**	-.246	-.452
	(.264)	(.274)	(.252)	(.283)
Counter-demonstration	-1.136**	-.889**	-1.090**	-.824*
	(.273)	(.326)	(.318)	(.380)
<i>Issue variables</i>				
Socioeconomic		.117		-.583
		(.319)		(.426)
Veterans		.262		.825*
		(.315)		(.352)
Lebanon		.814*		—
		(.385)		—
Vs. Gulf War		-1.407**		1.561**
		(.331)		(.351)
Ku Klux Klan		-.948		-.675
		(.539)		(.649)
Constant	1.317**	1.409**	1.273**	1.304**
N	580	580	580	580
Approx. model $\chi^2$	129.885**	158.601**	95.276**	132.049**
-2 Log-likelihood	668.356	639.640	563.542	526.769
Df	5	10	5	9

<sup>a</sup> Standard errors in parentheses.

<sup>b</sup> 0 = "none" through "less than half"; 1 = "about half" through "all."

<sup>c</sup> 0 = "primarily episodic" and "mixture of both episodic and thematic"; 1 = "primarily thematic" coverage.

\*  $p < .05$  (two-tailed test) \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed test)

of issue description shown in Table 2. The odds-ratios showed that print media were about a third as likely as electronic media to emphasize the protester issues over the details of the protest event. Electronic sources were roughly 8 times more likely than print sources to report on protests in thematic ways.<sup>10</sup>

Providing support for our second hypothesis, we see that counterdemonstrations and the presence of arrests or violence tended to produce less thematic coverage and less description of protester issues than did less conflictual demonstrations. As seen in both full models in Table 2, events with confrontations were less likely to receive extensive description of the demonstrator's issues, and they were less likely to receive thematic coverage and those events that lacked some form of confrontation. Also, events with counterdemonstrations were less than half as likely to receive extensive description of demonstrators' substantive concerns, and protests without counterdemonstrations were more than twice as likely to receive thematic coverage as were those with such conflicts.

Our third hypothesis led us to expect that demonstrations about issues already on media agendas will receive more thematic coverage. In an independent assessment of issue coverage for the two years of interest (See McCarthy, McPhail & Smith 1996:494-95), we discovered that veterans issues and the Gulf War were among the most frequently covered issues (among those issues attracting public protests during 1982 and 1991). Socioeconomic issues and the War in Lebanon were considerably less likely to be reported. The Ku Klux Klan, aside from coverage of its demonstrations, received almost no coverage. When we introduced the content of demonstration issue into the models in Tables 2, we found that veterans issues and Gulf war protests were more likely to receive thematic coverage, (more than 2 times and nearly 5 times more likely, respectively).

When we consider the amount of the story devoted to discussing the issue, however, Gulf war stories were *less* likely to provide detail on the demonstrator's issue (about one fourth as likely as other issues). This contradicts our expectation that thematic coverage would correspond with greater attention to underlying issues of the protest. Stories on the protests against the Israeli-Lebanon war were more than twice as likely to provide extensive detail about the demonstrator's issues than were reports on other protests. This did not, however, translate into reporting on anti-Israel protests that was considered primarily thematic.<sup>12</sup> The pattern of results for our measure of thematic coverage supports our third hypothesis, that protests on issues that were already on media issue agendas at the time were more likely to receive thematic coverage than were protests that sought to bring new issues onto the media and public agendas. However, the results for our secondary measure of thematic news frame — the extent of attention to the demonstrators' issues — is not consistent with our expectations in hypothesis 3 (we will return to this inconsistency in our discussion below).

Table 3 presents the analysis of our measure of news spin, examining which factors are related to the likelihood that a stories' subtext tends to favor



TABLE 3: Logistic Regression Estimates of Source, Context, and Issue Effects on News Spin<sup>a</sup> in Media Reports on Demonstrations

	Dependent Measure News "Spin" of Article <sup>a</sup>	
	Model 1	Model 2
Independent measures <sup>b</sup>		
<i>Source variables</i>		
Year (1982 = 0)	-1.540** (.273)	-1.414** (.383)
Print/electronic (Electronic = 0)	.091 (.332)	.119 (.335)
Information source (Authority or neutral = 0)	-.051 (.272)	-.049 (.283)
Episodic/thematic scale (Episodic and mixed = 0)	1.261** (.267)	1.116** (.282)
<i>Context variables</i>		
Confrontation	-.836* (.333)	-.589‡ (.348)
Counterdemonstration	-1.155** (.379)	-.587 (.422)
<i>Issue variables</i>		
Socioeconomic		-.753‡ (.414)
Veterans		.922** (.325)
Lebanon		-.394 (.454)
Vs. Gulf War		-.112 (.454)
Ku Klux Klan		-1.877* (.812)
Constant	-.843 ‡	-.888*
N	580	580
Approx. model $\chi^2$	89.765**	116.302**
-2 Log-likelihood	524.973	498.435
Df	6	11

<sup>a</sup>"News Spin" = 1 if reporting favors demonstrators; 0 = if reporting is neutral or favors authorities.

<sup>b</sup>Standard errors in parentheses

‡  $p < .10$  \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed tests)

demonstrators. We noted above that this evidence contradicts our fourth hypothesis: the vast majority of news reports were judged as neutral in their coverage, and of those that revealed some spin either toward demonstrators or authorities, more tended to favor the demonstrators.<sup>13</sup>

Our fifth hypothesis led us to expect that the less reporters depended upon demonstrators for the information included in their stories, the more likely the spin of a story would favor authorities rather than demonstrators. The evidence in Table 3 does not provide strong support for that expectation. The coefficient for information source is not statistically significant.

One of the strongest effects upon the likelihood that a story favors demonstrators is the presence of thematic coverage, which made it more than three times more likely that a story would provide a movement-friendly spin as opposed to a neutral or pro-authority one (see model 2, Table 3). This supports our sixth hypothesis, which led us to expect that thematic news frames, because they provide more information about the issues at stake than details about the protest event itself, would tend to spin in favor of demonstrators and their concerns. Also consistent with hypothesis 6 is the impact of relying upon government or other "expert" sources as opposed to a demonstrator source (e.g., organizer, literature, posters, etc.) for information included in the story. This is consistent with our finding in Table 2 that reliance on movement information sources was associated with less extensive description of protest issues. Stories relying on neutral sources or on authorities were nearly three times more likely to provide extensive discussion of the issue as were stories relying on protester sources. They were also nearly four times more likely to be thematic. Stories relying on movement sources thus exhibited characteristics that worked against social movement framing efforts: They devoted less space to a discussion of the issues at stake, and they tended to be less thematic in their frames than were stories based primarily on government or expert information sources.

While we lack strong coefficients to provide a rigorous test of the structural account of media bias, the results of our socioeconomic variable in the models of thematic coverage and news spin showed negative associations between protests on economically based conflicts (e.g., homelessness, unemployment) and reporting that generally supports protester goals. Protests on economic conflicts were less likely to be thematic in their frames (though this coefficient was not statistically significant), and they were about half as likely as other issues to receive a favorable news spin.

The additional pattern of findings in Table 3 is consistent with our general expectations. Events characterized by arrests and/or violence were about half as likely as nonconfrontational events to be framed in a way that favored demonstrators. While not surprising, this suggests that protesters that avoid overt conflict are more likely to draw attention to the substantive issues that concern them. Consistent with this theme is the finding that stories reporting events staged

by the more highly regarded war veterans were more likely to favor demonstrators, and those reporting on Ku Klux Klan marches were less likely to favor those demonstrators.

## Discussion and Conclusions

We set out in this study to examine how social movement attempts to influence media coverage affect their efforts to influence 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. We sketched a set of expectations about the relationships we anticipated given what we know about social movements' relationships with the mass media. In short, we expected that media reports would not favor demonstrators' interests, particularly on issues that most threaten 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. This finding contrasts Iyengar's claim that television news coverage is less thematic than print news, although it is relevant for only that 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.

In keeping with the expectations of the gatekeeper model, we found that controversy-generated media coverage was more episodic. The presence of counterdemonstrators, 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.

One issue that structural model proponents, 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 (13% of the 1,200 demonstrations held in 1982 addressed the Central America conflict, representing the largest number of protests on a single issue in that year), only 8 of these were covered.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that a procapitalist bias may be more strongly operating in the selection or the agenda-setting process than in the priming or agenda-building that the media do.

Nevertheless, much of our preceding discussion suggests that the corporate interests behind editorial decisions about what to air, coupled with ideological factors and operating procedures favoring authorities as sources of information for news stories lead to the expectation that most reporting on public protests would be episodic. In other words, news reports would tend to marginalize or de-emphasize the issues behind public protests, and they would rely primarily on government and other authorities for information on the protest and surrounding issues. We would expect that social movements most threatening to the existing socioeconomic order tend to attract more episodic than thematic coverage.

Considering that protest demonstrations generally reflect some challenge to the existing social or political order, we can provide a rough test of this general hypothesis by looking at overall rates of episodic versus thematic reporting on these protests. Twenty-four percent of reports (153) were characterized as primarily thematic, while 34% (219) were considered primarily episodic. This rough measure doesn't provide strong support for the structural models' hypothesis, but it runs in the expected direction, supporting the pattern of findings in our earlier analyses. When we isolated those reports on protests over specific U.S. economic and ideological controversies (e.g., homelessness, unemployment, opposition to U.S. policy in Latin America, and opposition to Reagan's economic policies)<sup>15</sup> we find stronger support for this hypothesis. In fact, 43% (31) of those stories were characterized as primarily episodic, while only 12% (9) were primarily thematic.<sup>16</sup> This evidence, then, provides moderate support for structural models of media bias.

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 conveying a news spin that favored

authorities, while stories on protests over economic conflicts were less likely to reveal prodemonstrator spins than were other stories.

Research on the impact of news frames on peoples' interpretation of social problems revealed that episodic frames lead consumers of mass media away from systemic explanations for the problems protesters are seeking to address:

Exposure 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)

Thus, social movement actors engaging in protests as a means of attracting media coverage to their grievances ideally seek thematic framing of the reports on their protests, since social movement aims are best served by coverage that addresses the underlying structural sources of the problems they target. However, the majority of news coverage of protests is episodic or, at best, represents some mixture of episodic and thematic framing.

Moreover, the factors that were most strongly associated with thematic news frames were largely outside the control of social movement actors. These include the type of media (electronic/print), the absence of counterdemonstrators or violence, and whether or not the issue the demonstration targeted could be readily related to an ongoing media issue agenda. The only factor that holds some room for possible social movement influence is in reporters' selection of sources for information on the demonstration about which he or she is reporting, although even this is shaped by remote forces that may be resistant to social movements' change efforts.

Broader changes in the mass media industry also threaten opportunities for social movements to encourage wider public debate through public demonstrations. Corporate ownership and centralization, combined with management strategies that have downsized the news staffs of major networks (see Kimball 1994) generate news gathering routines that are increasingly less likely to include social movement sources or activities. In short, we know that most social movement demonstrations actually do not receive any attention in the mass media, even though for many groups a major goal is to attract wide public attention to their cause. Even when they do receive media attention, this attention tends not to serve the interests of the movement in promoting public awareness and understanding of the issues about which they are protesting.

So does this mean that protests are ineffective strategies for social movements? Clearly not if one of their goals is to promote internal solidarity and commitment among movement adherents. Also, participants in protests are generally connected

to broader societal networks, and they therefore provide alternative sources of information that can affect interpretations of media portrayals by protesters' kinship, friendship, and professional networks. In other words, by staging public demonstrations as well as other collective activities, movements can affect the broader social contexts in which media messages are received.

Although the mass media have important impacts on policy agenda-building, movements are not wholly dependent upon them in their efforts to influence policy. In addition to using public protests to communicate their messages to influential publics through the mass media, social movements communicate directly with other groups in society through their efforts to influence what McCarthy, Smith and Zald (1996) have labeled "public" agendas (as distinguished from media, electoral, legislative, and governmental agendas). In other words, movements can seek to influence the context in which news is interpreted. Public agendas are most broadly accessible through citizens' groups, schools, churches, grassroots media, newsletters, and increasingly the Internet. Movements work to shape public agendas through the use of electronic communications, publication of books, pamphlets, and other monographs, and the production of videos or documentaries. Presumably issues that gain prominence on public agendas move onto the other agendas, but the processes defining access differ for each (and certainly all issues that resonate on public agendas do not find their way to media agendas). To the extent that a movement has influenced the public agenda, it helps expand the opportunities for variable interpretations of media framings of protests. In other words, the mediation of the message by the mass media is shaped by a movement's success at shaping other agendas of public and policy discourse (e.g., Gamson 1992).

As the recent protests in Seattle and Washington D.C. have made dramatically clear, modern communications technologies, especially the Internet, allow for a more decentralized channeling of information about public demonstrations than is possible through mass media outlets. Observations of those demonstrations revealed many more cameras (still and video) among the protesters themselves than among the corps of mass media journalists. Indeed, one key protest organization, the Independent Media Center (IMC), established a media headquarters near the site of the protests and issued press passes to volunteer photographers, journalists and videographers who documented the protests and disseminated their independent analyses and reports through its web site.<sup>17</sup> Such activity is likely to proliferate in the social movement sector as the major mass media outlets become more highly concentrated and more biased in their selection and description of conflictual issues such as resistance to corporate globalization. This may reflect new dynamics of agenda setting and agenda building as movements and authorities learn from past interactions and adapt their efforts to new opportunities and technologies.

## APPENDIX: Details on Content Coding of Newspaper Reports

*Description of the Issue:* What proportion of the article devoted to this demonstration describes the broad purpose and goals or the narrower practical objectives of the demonstrators (e.g., description of the movement industry, details of the protester's goals). Responses were scored on a seven point scale ranging from none to all.

*Episodic/Thematic:* Coders were provided the following definitions:

Episodic coverage stresses predominantly the details of the demonstration itself (e.g., numbers of people, the weather, speakers or entertainers), with minimal or no attention to the issues raised by the demonstration.

Thematic coverage, on the other hand, focuses on the more general issues raised by the demonstration. For example, a thematic article on a homeless demonstration would provide statistics on the number of homeless and suggest socioeconomic reasons for his problem or it might detail pending legislation on the issue.

Coders were then asked, Given this distinction between episodic and thematic coverage, is this article primarily episodic, primarily thematic or a mixture of both?

*Newspin:* After reading the article, so you see the "spin" of the article as favoring the perspectives of the protesters or their targets (e.g., government, management, etc.)? Responses were scored on a seven point scale ranging from favoring demonstrators to favoring authorities with the midpoint defined as neutral.

## Notes

1. We are grateful to Melissa Bolyard for her methodological assistance.
2. In Washington, D.C. less than 15% of permitted protest events were covered in by any major media outlet (McCarthy, McPhail & Smith 1996). Fillieule (1998) finds even a smaller proportion of such events covered by daily newspapers in France (less than 5%), while Barranco and Wisler (1997) find somewhat higher rates of coverage in several cities in Switzerland. Hocke (1998) finds 38% of protests known to the police in Freiberg, Germany are reported in the local press, and Oliver and Myers (1999) find that 44% of such events are reported by either of the daily newspapers in Madison, Wisconsin.
3. Routinization of protest is the result of many processes: the recommendations of U.S. Presidential investigative commissions on urban and campus disorder that police be retrained to protect First Amendment Rights; U.S. Supreme and Federal District Court decisions creating a body of First Amendment and Public Fora law; widespread retraining of police administrators and subsequent changes in the policies and procedures for public order policing; and the widespread adoption of protest permit application and review procedures protecting First Amendment rights of protesters regardless of the content of their claims and demands. At the same time, Supreme Court decisions gave local police jurisdictions the right of imposing restrictions on the time, place, and manner of protests. It is those limitations that some scholars believe have had a moderating effect on protest despite the increased frequency of protest events.

4. We note that not all demonstrations in Washington D.C. are organized by political "outsiders." A number of demonstrations are organized by policy insiders like Congresspersons and political party elites who use this "outsider" strategy to try to amplify their influence by mobilizing or activating public opinion behind particular policy agendas. A large majority of D.C. political protests, however, are initiated by political outsiders.

5. This may be called system attribution, and it is seen as a key to the emergence of social movements. McAdam (1982) refers to this as "cognitive liberation."

6. Some analysts have noted that competition for shrinking print news markets have led newspapers to emulate electronic news sources, and therefore this would lead us to expect less difference between print and electronic news reports on protests (e.g., *USA Today*). However, given that our sources (*The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*) are ones that appeal to a particular audience of politically active and/or attentive public, we would expect them to be less affected by this trend than other print sources might be.

7. These data are described in more detail elsewhere (see McCarthy, McPhail & Smith 1996).

8. Further details of the measurement of the three dependent variables is presented in Appendix I. Coders read each story and coded the content of the reporting on each demonstration mentioned in the story. Nearly all of the coding was done by two graduate research assistants who were trained by comparing their coding of stories with those also coded by one of the principal investigators. A single story may have been coded two or more 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. Articles on protest campaigns would be coded for each of the two or more protest events on which they report.

We developed a primary measure of the thematic/episodic dimension of coverage that required coders to make a forced choice between primarily episodic and primarily thematic with a mixed category available for reports which were not easily categorized as one or the other. Using this measure of episodic/thematic coverage we found that, of 635 protest event reports for which we had information, 34% were rated "primarily episodic," 24% were rated "primarily thematic," and 41% were rated a mixture of both thematic and episodic coverage.

Our work to develop and test this new measure pointed to the difficulty of systematically assessing the extent of episodic or thematic coverage in the protest event reports. Our concerns about validity led us to develop multiple measures of the concept as well as related concepts, as well as asking coders to record their level of confidence for judgements related to episodic or thematic coverage. (Intercoder reliability tests were carried out early in the coding process. Estimates were at least .80 for all items, with most above .90). First, we created questions asking for separate evaluations (on a 7-point scale) of the extent to which the text of an article was devoted to describing the goals of protesters, and the details of the protest event. [In three separate questions, coders were asked to indicate the approximate proportion of a story devoted to the protest event, to the issues on which the protest was targeted, and on things incidental to the protest, such as the weather. The 7-point scale ranged from "none" through "about half" to



“all.”] Second, beyond these more concrete questions, coders were asked to make judgements (using a 7- point scale) about how episodic the content of the article appeared (not at all to “highly episodic”) and how thematic the content appeared. This measurement approach did not presume that the episodic and thematic concepts represented a single dimension, but instead, we asked the coder to try to judge each concept independently.

9. Developing questions that would generate reliable and valid measures of thematic and episodic coverage proved more difficult than we had anticipated. In general the coders were asked whether the coverage tended 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 focus on individualistic or localized interpretations or on systemic interpretations of a problem, 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.

10. Some of this effect is certainly due to the fact that our population of events includes both progressive and conservative protest issues. Moreover, we found that a portion of the political demonstrations in our database were organized by political “insiders” using protests to supplement their other means of influencing policy agendas. Such insiders are likely to generate differential coverage by the mass media at least because of their greater familiarity with media routines and journalists’ reliance upon their insider status for access to authoritative information.

11. 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. However, 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.

12. The relatively small number of cases on this issue precluded our efforts to include it in the model for thematic coverage, where only two stories were judged as “primarily thematic.”

13. The significance of year in this model results from the fact that, in 1991, more than half the stories (173) were related to Gulf War protests. Reports on Anti-Gulf War protests were statistically significant and negative in spin (e.g., pro-authorities) when the model is run without year.

14. 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.”

15. Number of cases is 74.

16. Comparisons of these cases with those on other demonstration issues showed statistically significant differences in thematic versus episodic reporting ( $t = 2.38$ ).

17. Since the Seattle meeting, IMC organizations have been established in a number of other cities and countries (see [www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org)).

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