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Linda L. Putnam * *and Martha Shoemaker* **

I. CONFLICT AND MEDIA ROLES

Conflict is not a new arena in media studies. For the most part, the media have a vested interest in conflict. Various models of news production cast different roles for the media in covering social conflicts. Several of these roles include treating the press as an unbiased participant that neither defends nor attacks the status quo. The media also serve as gatekeepers to process information, act as watchdogs to protect the public, and function as mediators to build consensus and manage community tensions.[1] Even though the type of role that the media play depends on particular disputes, reporters and editors are active agents who aid in identifying stakeholders, casting the issues in particular ways, and defining social conflicts,.[2]

Conflict is also a type of media framing that is employed in the production of news. Framing refers to the ways that newsmakers cast stories, highlight what is figure and ground, and impute meaning and motives. "Figure" is what takes center stage in how one sees a situation, while elements that form "ground" fall to the background or the periphery of a situation. Aspects of a story that become figure often influence how newsmakers cast the definition of an issue, problem, or event. Framing a situation as a conflict highlights incompatibilities, disagreements, or oppositional tensions between individuals, groups, and institutions. In the U.S., conflict is one of the most commonly used media frames in coverage of politics and crime, second to a responsibility frame.[3] A responsibility frame focuses on what or who was responsible for the problem, who should alleviate it, and what type of action is needed to address it.

This article examines the role of media and conflict framing in four major turning points of an environmental controversy. In particular, it focuses on the media's role in defining the dispute and altering the naming and blaming among constituents during these turning points. It also examines how these changes relate to escalation and de-escalation of the conflict.

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1. Sara U. Douglas, *Negotiation Audiences: The Role of Mass Media, in* COMMUNICATION AND NEGOTIATION 250-72 (Linda L. Putnam & Michael E. Roloff eds., 1992).

2. AKIBA A. COHEN, HANNA ADONI & CHARLES R. BANTZ, SOCIAL CONFLICT AND TELEVISION NEWS 19-21 (1990).

3. Holli A. Semetko & Patti M. Valkenburg, *Framing European Politics: A Content Analysis of Press and Television News*, 50 J. COMM. 95 (2000).

A. Media Framing

Media framing is a complex and multifaceted area of research. More than a decade's worth of investigations reveals three major processes: frame construction, framing effects, and frame definition.[4] Frame construction focuses on the way that journalists cast the elements of news stories, especially the formats that they use, newsmakers' intentions and values, and the devices that journalists use in their work. For example, research on frame construction might examine what stories get reported, which sources are cited or not cited, and where a story appears in the layout of the news. Framing effects research centers on the outcomes of news framing and the interaction between the media and audiences. Thus, the research encompasses studies of two-way flow among media, discourses of public opinion, and prior knowledge of audience members.[5] Finally, frame definition centers on the content of news stories that arise from how the media contributes to defining the situation. This process focuses on the discourse units that convey news frames. Thus, the media construct particular views of reality through limiting the range of information, selecting sources strategically, and setting parameters for policy debates. This study adopts the latter perspective to the study of media framing and combines it with work on conflict framing.

B. Conflict Framing

Framing is also an important topic in conflict research.[6] In conflict situations, framing refers to the way that participants define the situation—that is, what they attend to or ignore in an ongoing stream of events, what counts as important, and what actions should they take. In conflict situations, framing is evident in two processes: discourse use and development of the issues.[7] In discourse use, framing is performed through the naming or labeling of events, the use of words that imply blame, and explanations about the nature of a situation. Actors label a situation as a problem, infer causes for why it occurred, and provide accounts for the sequence of events.

These framing patterns are closely related to descriptions of issues or agenda items. Issues in a conflict are not objective topics or proposals. Rather, parties construct them through a continual process of assessing and reassessing issues in light of attacking arguments, information exchange, and interpretations of events. In effect, stakeholders, and particularly the media, frame issues through naming what the conflict is about, exploring causes for it, and providing explanations for ongoing events. This process is continual as stakeholders negotiate, persuade, and co-develop understandings of a conflict.

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4. Paul D'Angelo, *News Framing as a Multiparadigmatic Research Program: A Response to Entman*, 52 J. COMM. 870, 880 (2002).

5. *Id.* at 882.

6. *See, e.g.*, Linda L. Putnam & Majia Holmer, *Framing, Reframing, and Issue Development, in* COMMUNICATION AND NEGOTIATION 128-55 (Linda L. Putnam & Michael E. Roloff eds., 1992); Laura E. Drake & William A. Donohue, *Communication Framing Theory in Conflict Resolution*, 23 COMM. RES. 297-322 (1996).

7. *See* Deborah Tannen, *What's in a Frame? Surface Evidence of Underlying Expectations, in* NEW DIRECTIONS IN DISCOURSE PROCESSES 137-81 (Roy O. Freedle ed., 1979).

To examine these features, this study adopts a version of Gray's model of conflict framing.[8] This model analyzes the ways that stakeholders characterize each other (characterization) and how they recommend alternatives for managing a conflict (conflict management). Characterization centers on the positive and negative views that stakeholders have of each other. Conflict management includes references to collaborative actions (e.g., fact finding, joint problem solving, or authority-based decisions drawn from stakeholder input) and to non-collaborative approaches (e.g., adjudication; appeals to political action; or references to struggle, sabotage, or avoidance). Finally, this study examines how the press treats a conflict as escalating or de-escalating in intensity.

In essence, conflict functions as both a type of and process for media framing. As a type of framing, conflict calls attention to oppositional tensions, disagreements, and incompatibilities. In covering these events, the media define a conflict through the language used and the issues included in their stories. Conflict framing entails the naming or labeling of a controversial situation, exploring causes for it, and providing explanations for ongoing events. Thus, the media frame some elements of a conflict as figure and others as ground, search for labels to capture the nature of a struggle, and try to forecast the outcomes of a dispute.

II. THE EDWARDS AQUIFER CONFLICT

The Edwards Aquifer is an underground, limestone water formation in the south-central region of Texas that stretches 176 miles through portions of six counties. It was the source of controversy for over fifty years and particularly from 1988-1999, after several droughts led to reduced water usage. The controversy centered on its limited physical structure, multiple and growing number of water users, potential contamination in times of drought, and possible harm to the endangered species that lived in the springs which flowed out of the aquifer.

Moreover, in the state of Texas underground water is private property while surface water belongs to the state; thus, the conflict encompassed debates about a landowner's right to capture water below his or her property, the regulation and distribution of water from a common resource, and protection of the species and habitats that lived in the water. The major episodes in this conflict included the demise of a regional water management plan, the declaration of the aquifer as an underground river, the Sierra Club's confrontations and lawsuits, the opening and closing of a large catfish farm, and the senate bill that authorized the Edwards Aquifer Authority.[9]

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8. Barbara Gray, *Framing of Environmental Disputes, in* MAKING SENSE OF INTRACTABLE ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS: FRAMES AND CASES 11-34 (Roy J. Lewicki, Barbara Gray & Michael Elliott eds., 2003).

9. *See* Linda L. Putnam & Tarla Peterson, *The Edwards Aquifer Dispute: Shifting Frames in a Protracted Conflict, in* MAKING SENSE OF INTRACTABLE ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS: FRAMES AND CASES 127-58 (Roy J. Lewicki, Barbara Gray & Michael Elliott eds., 2003) (full case description of this conflict); Todd H. Votteler, *The Little Fish That Roared: The Endangered Species Act, State Groundwater Law, and Private Property Rights Collide Over the Texas Edwards Aquifer*, 28 ENVTL. L. 845 (1998) (same).

A. *Turning Points in Conflict*

These episodes overlap and form four major turning points within the long-term conflict. A turning point is a dramatic moment in which the conflict shifts in a new direction.[10] Triggered by changes in internal procedures or in the ecological, legal, or political context, these turning points act as abrupt shifts in conflict development. Turning points often occur after a crisis or impasse in a conflict's development.

These shifts represent actual as well as reported changes in conflict developments and typically cast the situation as escalating or de-escalating. Escalation in conflict refers to an increase in contentious tactics—for example, demands, angry statements, threats, and attacks—that move the parties further from agreement. Conflicts depicted as escalating typically reveal an increase in the number of issues in a dispute and the costs that parties are willing to bear.[11] Framing patterns may also change in conflicts seen as escalating. Specifically, descriptions of conflict events that highlight polarization among stakeholders, negative characterizations, use of non-collaborative approaches to conflict management, and descriptions of non-negotiable issues and unacceptable alternatives typify reports of escalation.

De-escalation is the process of moving a conflict toward an agreement through highlighting reductions in the intensity, emotional costs, and contentious tactics of the situation. Descriptions of de-escalation shift the naming of the conflict, cast stakeholders in positive ways, highlight cooperation among opposing parties, and unite oppositional groups through common enemies. De-escalation patterns also show an increase in multiple explanations for a conflict and a decrease in narrowing or simplifying complex problems.

B. *Turning Points in the Edwards Aquifer Conflict*

Interviews with stakeholders involved in the Edwards Aquifer conflict revealed four major turning points: the withdrawal of the western counties from the Edwards Underground Water District, the Sierra Club's lawsuits, the catfish farmer's movement into the region, and the passage of legislation to authorize the Edwards Aquifer Authority. An examination of 193 newspaper articles before, during the time of, and immediately following these turning points uncovered patterns in media and conflict framing that were linked to escalation and de-escalation. The remainder of this article summarizes the different patterns of media framing that labeled what the dispute was about (naming) and who or what caused it (blaming) during these turning points. In addition, this study examines the way that the press used characterization, conflict management, and escalation/de-escalation framing. Finally, the article draws some conclusions about

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10. *See* Daniel Druckman, *Turning Points in International Negotiations*, 45 J. CONFLICT RESOL. 519 (2001); Daniel Druckman, *Stages, Turning Points, and Crises: Negotiating Military Base Rights, Spain and the United States*, 30 J. CONFLICT RESOL. 327, 332 (1986).

11. DEAN G. PRUITT & SUNG HEE KIM, SOCIAL CONFLICT: ESCALATION, STALEMATE, AND SETTLEMENT 87-100, 171-88 (2004).

ways that the media limited or expanded the range of information and how press coverage set parameters for policy debates in this conflict.

1. The Regional Water Management Plan

In the first stage of the conflict, a drought in the mid-1980s led to collaboration among stakeholders in the aquifer region. After five years of work and what appeared to be a consensus, several counties in West Texas rejected a Regional Water Management Plan and withdrew from the Edwards Underground Water District (EUWD). The plan called for regulating pumping to make sure that the volume of water taken from the Edwards did not exceed the average rainfall. This episode constituted a turning point because it shifted the conflict from near agreement to a struggle when the farmers and ranchers voted against the plan, set up their own underground water boards, and lobbied the state legislature to defeat the plan.

Media coverage of the event pitted different stakeholders in a battle to name the conflict, with the farmers declaring their "right of capture in jeopardy" and the mayor of San Antonio labeling the plan as "a balanced example of consensus building."[12] The farmers and ranchers blamed San Antonio for cornering "the hog's share" of the resources and asking the western counties "to sacrifice and spend money" on the plan while other stakeholders blamed "the spineless EUWD"[13] which could not garner support for the plan. Thus, the media named the conflict as urban versus rural interests and cast the dispute as "a fight for water rights,"[14] "feuding interests,"[15] and "a regional water battle."[16]

Media coverage of this turning point revealed a shift from the use of interest frames to reliance on negative characterization of other stakeholders. Prior to this point, coverage of the conflict centered on the needs and proposals of different parties, but after the withdrawal of the western counties, patterns of framing revealed an increase in negative characterization. In particular, newspaper articles highlighted the EUWD's lack of authority, San Antonio's reluctance to build their own reservoirs, the farmers' refusal to compromise, San Antonio's need to preserve their lucrative tourist industry, and the unreasonable demands of the farm community. By naming the conflict as a battle, press coverage also shifted from collaborative, joint problem solving to sabotage and political struggle frames. A corresponding increase in escalation framing occurred, especially as the media highlighted nonnegotiable issues, failed settlements, polarization of the parties, and the increase in emotional intensity. Phrases such as "storm brewing in the West,"[17] "warring urban and rural factions,"[18] and "stymied efforts to resolve differences"[19] appeared in the press coverage.

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12. NELSON W. WOLFF & HENRY CISNEROS, MAYOR: AN INSIDE VIEW OF SAN ANTONIO POLITICS, 1981-1985 68 (1997).

13. J. Michaels & J. Lewis, *Mayor Fears Worst, Pushes for Aquifer Legislation,* SAN ANTONIO LIGHT, May 28, 1989, at A4.

14. Jim Woods & Diana R. Fuentes, *South Texans Ready to Fight for Aquifer,* SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS, June 30, 1990, at A3.

15. Patrick Crummins, *Federal Officials to Look into Aquifer Situation,* SAN ANTONIO LIGHT, June, 28, 1990, at A4.

16. Woods & Fuentes, *supra* note 14, at A8.

17. WOLFF & CISNEROS, *supra* note 12, at 68.

2. Sierra Club Lawsuits

A second major turning point occurred when the Sierra Club entered the conflict and threatened to file lawsuits against federal governmental agencies. With the entry of the Sierra Club, a federal presence was brought into what had been a regional and state conflict. This event occurred after the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority (GBRA) filed a lawsuit to declare the aquifer an underground river subject to state regulation—an action deemed "ridiculous," "unacceptable," and "entering a new ball game."[20] This effort eventually failed in the courts, but in the meantime, the Sierra Club and GBRA joined forces to file a lawsuit against the Department of Interior and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for failure to protect the endangered species that lived in the spring flow from the aquifer. Media coverage that labeled what the conflict was about shifted as did the blaming during this three-year period. Some stakeholders named it "federal intervention"[21] while others regarded it as "protecting the springs," "something that had to be done," and assuring the "economics, public health, and environment" of the region.[22] Thus, the media framing shifted from labeling the conflict as "a fight" to calling it "threats of federal intervention," a label that stakeholders used to rekindle negotiation among parties. Although some stakeholders continued to blame San Antonio for the conflict, blaming moved away from a rural versus urban struggle to questioning the legislature's lack of constructive action.

This second major turning point also revealed shifts in the use of characterization, conflict management, and escalation/de-escalation frames. Negative characterization frames declined in this period as news coverage focused on how to manage the conflict, including appeals to political action and adjudication. Less coverage focused on escalation and struggle in response to the Sierra Club lawsuits, and de-escalation occurred as negotiators searched for "a miracle agreement" to avoid federal intervention.[23] But as the Sierra Club lawsuits continued, the conflict escalated again, as evident in a marked increase in highlighting the series of unsuccessful interventions and unacceptable settlements.

3. The Catfish Farmer

The third major turning point in the conflict occurred when a catfish farmer moved into the San Antonio area and began pumping nearly 40 million gallons of water from the aquifer per day. This turning point arose concomitantly with the Sierra Club lawsuits and introduced water waste and pollution as issues in the conflict. Because the catfish farmer used an excessive amount of water, a number

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18. Patrick Crummins, *Regional Plan for Aquifer at Dead End: EUWD Reps Fault City's Water Plan*, SAN ANTONIO LIGHT, June 23, 1990, at A3.

19. Bill Collier, *Edwards in for a Dry Spell*, AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN, Feb. 25, 1990, at B7.

20. Patrick Crummins, *Aquifer Battle Boiling*, SAN ANTONIO LIGHT, Apr. 17, 1992, at A14.

21. Tom Bower, *Sierra Club to Pursue Water Suit*, SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS, Apr. 23, 1992, at A15.

22. Stephanie Scott, *No Truce in Sierra Club Suit*, SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS, May 17, 1992, at A1.

23. Tom Bower, *Hall Says Pact Near on Aquifer*, SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS, June 18, 1992, at 11A.

of stakeholders felt that this incident illustrated why right of capture should be limited. Although the catfish farmer felt like a scapegoat and an underdog used to address the state's water problems, media efforts to frame the episode as a "David and Goliath problem"[24] were overshadowed by other stakeholders who viewed the catfish farm as "a source of pollution that dumps waste particles," as "breaking the state law," and as "a violation of the water code."[25] Thus, in this episode, the naming of the conflict shifted from the right of capture to "protecting a precious water resource" and finding "long term management at the regional level."[26]

In like manner, media use of negative characterization and non-collaborative conflict management frames increased during this episode. In particular, the media cast the conflict through the lens of intense escalation, marked by negative characterizations of the catfish farmer, attacks on bureaucrats and state regulators, and blaming state agencies. Efforts to negotiate a settlement that characterized the early stages of the Sierra Club turning point shifted to calls for political action, appeals for state control, threats of lawsuits, and cries for the Environmental Protection Agency to intervene. Media coverage of this turning point noted three times as many non-collaborative conflict management frames as did prior episodes. The media also cast the conflict "as a war zone in the latest battle over who will control the rights to water in Texas" and "as lawsuits that thrust parties into a battle in the courts."[27] The dispute culminated with two state agencies filing suit against the catfish farmer for wasting water and polluting the San Antonio River, and with the passage of legislative bills to prohibit water waste by placing a moratorium on the development of new wells that had flows greater than 3,000 gallons per minute.

4. The Edwards Aquifer Authority (EAA)

The fourth turning point was a response to the calls for political action. After developing different water management plans, the Texas Senate and House of Representatives "ironed out their differences"[28] and "inched their way toward a compromise."[29] This event represented a turning point because the state took control of the dispute, developed a bill to appoint a nine-member regional agency (the EAA) to limit pumping, issue permits, and manage the aquifer. Controversy ensued over setting up the permitting system, ensuring the spring flow, and abolishing an elected agency (the EUWD) to replace it with an appointed one (the EAA). The latter issue led to a Voting Rights Act challenge regarding the appointed board and a shift in viewing the conflict as a "milestone" and a "great piece of legislation" to "a setback" and "a blow to the city as well as a blow to the

24. David Lemore, *A Gushing Controversy: Fish Farm Owner Battling Charges of Aquifer Overuse*, DALLAS MORNING NEWS, Aug. 25, 1991, at D5.

25. Patrick Crummins, *Investigators Raising Stink Over Catfish Farm*, SAN ANTONIO LIGHT, Aug. 21, 1991, at A1, A10.

26. Lemore, *supra* note 24, at D6.

27. *Id.* at D8.

28. Stephanie Scott, *House Passes Plan to Limit Aquifer Usage*, SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS, May 25, 1993, at A1.

29. Stephanie Scott, *Conferees Facing Off Over Aquifer*, SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS, May 28, 1993, at A14.

whole Edwards aquifer region."[30] The media sources indirectly blamed the developers and lawyers who had political and financial interests in the area[31] while the farmers blamed San Antonio. After the bill was rewritten and the EAA was declared constitutional, this turning point was named "a Texas solution to a Texas problem" and "the last chapter in a saga of water rights."[32]

During this period, the media use of characterization, conflict management, and escalation/de-escalation framing was extensive. For the most part, the media employed a large number of positive, as well as negative, characterization frames—ones that praised state government, underscored the ways that parties compromised, and lauded the legislature for working hard to make the bill fair. These positive characterizations emerged amid cries that San Antonio was running the show, that the House of Representatives was too sympathetic to the farmers' plight, and that the EAA could not get off the ground. Tradeoffs between positive and negative characterizations combined with a low number of polarization frames differentiated this turning point from previous ones.

De-escalation gained a privileged stance through media framing that emphasized "big steps forward," "sacrifices" that stakeholders made, "applauding" the decision, and the "accomplishments" of the court ruling. Contrary to expectations, the media did not frame stakeholders as more collaborative or cooperative than in the past. Rather, the media reminded the public that the clash was more than a century old and that bickering on groundwater rights had continued for decades. Media coverage during this turning point continued to employ non-collaborative frames, such as calls for adjudication and appeals to political action. In general, the resolution to this conflict was not consensual. The court ruling carved a divide between those who believed that state law was needed to protect a crucial resource and those who felt that the state ran roughshod over landowners' rights.[33]

III. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Several patterns emerged in tracking the media framing across the four turning points of this conflict. First, the media played a central role in naming or labeling a conflict episode at each turning point. In the first turning point, the media cast the conflict as "a battle between urban and rural interests," which shifted to labeling it as "federal intervention" during the Sierra Club lawsuits and to "water waste" in the catfish farmer dispute. In the final turning point, the media cast the congressional bill as a "milestone," "the great compromise," and "a Texas solution to a Texas problem."[34] Each stage of naming the conflict moved further away from the original issue of the right of capture, even though farmers in the western

30. Ralph K. M. Haurwitz, *Aquifer Bill Dealt Stunning Setback: Justice Department Has Proponents of Water Plan Scrambling for Options*, AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN, Nov. 23, 1993, at B2; Tom Bowers, *Justice Department Rejects Appointed Aquifer Authority*, SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS, Nov. 20, 1993, at 1B.

31. Ralph K. M. Haurwitz, *Aquifer Bill Dealt Stunning Setback*, AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN, Nov. 23, 1993, at C8.

32. *State Retains Edwards Aquifer Control; Morales Hails Ruling as a Texas Solution to a Texas Problem'*, FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM, June 29, 1996, at 1A.

33. *Id.* at 7A.

34. *Id.* at 1A.

counties continued to use private property rights framing as the essence of the conflict.

In like manner, the media added complexity to the conflict through altering patterns of blaming and explaining the dispute. Moving from blaming the farmers and San Antonio in the first stage, news coverage shifted to blaming the ineptness of regional water agencies, the state for its inaction, and a catfish farmer for excessive pumping. These shifts in blaming also led to new alliances among stakeholders, especially when the federal courts entered the fray.

Given that each turning point was a major dispute in its own right, media coverage continued to employ a heavy dose of negative characterizations of stakeholders, non-collaborative conflict frames, and frequent reports on escalatory patterns, including highlighting unacceptable alternatives, broken settlements, and nonnegotiable issues. Of central importance, however, the media gradually downplayed the use of contentious tactics and emotional intensity of the conflict, even though several stakeholder groups continued to make demands and threats throughout the conflict. Thus, the media participated in the de-escalation process through a shift in naming the dispute, an alteration of the blaming patterns, the introduction of multiple explanations for actions, and the casting of the federal government as a common enemy that united many stakeholders. This de-escalation occurred simultaneously with embracing incompatibilities and oppositional tensions that typified a traditional conflict frame in news coverage.

Overall, the media play a critical role in conflict framing. They highlight what is figure and what is ground in the evolution of a dispute and they impute meaning and motives to actions. In the Edwards Aquifer dispute, the media limited the range of information on key episodes to central issues in the conflict frame. Key issues that laid groundwork for a settlement were rarely covered— issues and actions such as the Water Master's visits to each region, town hall meetings, the recurrence of sections of the Regional Water Management Plan in various proposals, and the role of conservation in finding a solution.

The media also set parameters for policy debates through highlighting issues, sorting out differences among stakeholders, and dropping coverage of repeated interests. For example, media attention to the right of capture became increasingly downplayed as stakeholders voiced concern about federal intervention, protecting the spring flow, and excessive pumping. In effect, the content of news stories is not simply reflections of actual events. News media rely on a conflict frame as a prototype to construct its stories, define events, and set parameters for policy debates.