
STRIKE TALK:

A CASE STUDY OF NEWS

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Introduction

This article presents an exploratory analysis of strike news as reported by two Toronto dailies during the 1980 postal strike, in light of a number of recent British studies of industrial relations news (Beharrell and Philo, 1977; Clarke and Taylor, 1980; Connell, 1979; Edwards, 1979; Glasgow Media Group, 1976, 1980; Hartmann, 1975-6; Morley, 1976). These studies point to the way in which industrial relations news is framed so as to draw upon and reproduce certain dominant assumptions and beliefs about the nature of social reality. In this respect, they bear closely upon other recent conceptualizations of news as 'ideology' (Fishman, 1978, 1980; Gitlin, 1980; Hall et al., 1978; Tuchman, 1978). This concept avoids the overly empiricist and psychologically reductionist limitations of the conventional idea of news 'bias' by viewing the form and content of discourse as socially determined, as the structural outcome of cross-cutting relations of power. The implication is that discourse remains partial in the sense that what is included stands in usually silent relation to what is excluded, viz. alternative ways of seeing and knowing the world. Thus, news accounts may be unbiased and balanced but nonetheless ideological in that they are bounded unwittingly and uncritically by assumptions about what is newsworthy in particular and credible knowledge in general.

The conclusion of these studies can be summarized in two points. First, news of industrial relations tends to take the more specific form of news of industrial action, notably strikes, by workers against employers. The emphasis of news ideology on the abstraction and personalization of discrete events focuses greater attention on the actions and views of workers and unions as they are the ones seen to initiate the suspension of normal, i.e. orderly and harmonious, employment relations. This attention upon workers and unions is often accompanied by greater adjectival qualification of their motives and actions, in ways that imply divisiveness (workers described as "militants" versus "moderates") and emotionality rather than rationality (workers described as "angry", "frustrated", "dissatisfied", etc.). These characterizations complement a tendency to view industrial relations in a way that plays down their relational character. Conflicts are defined in standardized ways as "labour disputes/-troubles/problems" rather than labour-management conflicts; workers are said to make "demands" while employers reply with "offers".

Second, as news ideology tends to define newsworthiness in terms of deviance, disorder, and conflict, so employment disputes that receive prominent news coverage tend to be framed primarily in terms of their disruptive -and by implication socially harmful -effects, rather than their origins and dimensions. This presupposes a certain definition of social order and conformity which tends to equate the interests and perspectives of dominant institutions with those of society. This is evident in the reliance on those with certifiable and authoritative bureaucratic identities (officials and experts) as primary news sources.

Important substantive differences do exist here between the framing of private and public sector disputes. In the former case, disruption is often presented in terms of the deleterious consequences for the 'national interest': losses of production and efficiency that adversely affect 'confidence' in industry, the investment 'climate', and market competitiveness. In the latter case, the disruption frame stresses inconvenience to the public-as-consumer, exacerbated by the monopolistic character of many state services which offends the democratic ideology of the marketplace by denying alternative sources of supply. When the effects frame, finally, is turned upon workers and unions themselves, disruptiveness is similarly stressed: division and dissension rather than solidarity and unity.

The analysis below addresses the applicability of these two points in a Canadian context. The discussion is based upon a case study of news coverage in the *Toronto Star* and *Globe and Mail* of the unofficial strike by clerical and regulatory (C.R.s) employees of the federal government between September 9th and 17th 1980. The case study approach clearly lacks the sample representativeness of a more broadly based survey, and is therefore restricted in the extent to which its findings can be generalized. At the same time, it is more useful for initial, exploratory study in that it allows a more detailed analysis, in this case the ability to examine more closely narrative and semantic structure in addition to the quantitative decomposition of manifest content (cf, Edwards, 1979).

The C.R. strike was chosen for two reasons. First, it was a prominent news story, receiving in both papers a very high proportion of front page coverage. Second, it offered a number of interesting features for analysis and explana-

tion: it was an unofficial (though perfectly legal) walkout by a group of predominantly women workers who had never been on strike before. The selection of the *Star* and the *Globe and Mail* was similarly based on two considerations. First, they both serve the same geographical market -the Toronto area -and so allow us to examine indirectly the extent to which they differed significantly in their portrayal of the strike. Second, Toronto was the principal locale of the strike.

Mapping the Coverage

Table One presents a breakdown of the content of the coverage in terms of effects, dimensions, and causes, as measured by a paragraph count.¹ The data generally confirm the findings of the Glasgow Media Group (1980) that news of the effects of industrial action tends to predominate over other aspects. This is clearest in the *Star*: over two-thirds of its coverage was devoted to the strike's effects outside the immediate vicinity of the dispute. Effects coverage predominated in all but two reports. In the first, that of September 13th, the predominance of non-effects coverage was only slight; this story, moreover, was the only one for that week not to be carried on the front page. The second story, that of Monday September 15th, was probably affected by the general slow-down in the supply of newsworthy information that normally occurs over the weekend when the major areas of news -the economy and the state -are relatively dormant.

In the *Globe and Mail*, effects coverage was less predominant overall, being evenly split with coverage of the other aspects combined. Non-effects coverage predominated in five stories out of ten. This picture needs some qualification however. One of these stories, that of Monday September 15th, was probably

similarly affected by the general slow-down in the development of further effects news taking place over the weekend when mail delivery (the principal area of the strike's effects --see below) did not occur anyway. Another story, the breaking news report of the strike on September 9th which was devoted overwhelmingly to the background to and causes of the dispute, was affected by the strike's having just begun with the result that its effects were still undeveloped and unclear. A third story was the background feature on the strikers, and the remaining two news event reports (the 13th and 16th) were only marginally weighted to non-effects.

The predominance of the effects frame emerges more clearly for both papers when headlining and narrative structure are examined. Given that headlines are the principal way in which a news story is designed to catch the attention of the reader, it is reasonable to read them as an index of its putative significance. The summary of headlines in Table Two reveals clearly the dominance of the effects frame in both papers. In the *Star*, every account was headlined in terms of the strike's effect upon the interruption of mail services. So dominant was this theme, in fact, that reference to the strike itself disappeared from the headlines on the reports for September 10th, 11th, and 12th. In the *Globe and Mail*, two reports, those of September 13th and 15th, were the only ones not headlined in terms of the strike's effects, together with the background feature story.

Given the common journalistic practice of writing in the style of the 'inverted pyramid', it is also reasonable to assume a strong relationship between the imputed significance of particular information and its positioning in the narrative, viz. that coming earlier being considered more important. Table Three identifies the location in the body of each news report of the first paragraph(s) devoted to news

Table One: THE C.R. STRIKE: CONTENT BREAKDOWN BY EFFECTS, DIMENSIONS, AND CAUSES¹

Story Date	Effects ²				Dimensions				Causes				Total			
	Star		G&M		Star		G&M		Star		G&M		Star		G&M	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Sept. 9th	19	86	6	27	1	5	5	23	2	9	11	50	22	100	22	100
Sept. 10th	20	61	7	54	4	12	5	38	9	27	1	8	33	100	13	100
Sept. 11th (a)	14	93	20	67	-	-	5	17	1	7	4	13	15	100	30*	100
(b) ³	-	-	2	13	-	-	9	56	-	-	2	13	-	-	16*	101
Sept. 12th (a)	25	89	17	59	2	7	6	21	1	4	5	17	28	100	29*	100
(b) ³	-	-	9	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9	100
Sept. 13th (a)	22	100	12	44	-	-	12	44	-	-	3	12	22	100	27	100
(b)	10	45	-	-	8	35	-	-	4	17	-	-	23*	100	-	-
Sept. 15th	9	29	3	17	20	65	13	72	1	3	2	11	31*	100	18	100
Sept. 16th	8	67	9	43	4	33	8	38	-	-	4	19	12	100	21	100
Sept. 17th	-	-	13	81	-	-	3	19	-	-	-	-	-	-	16	100
TOTAL	127	68	98	49	39	21	66	33	18	10	32	16	186	100	201	100

* some paragraphs coded mixed.

1. All breakdowns are based on a paragraph count.

2. Categories defined as follows:

- a. Effects: All news about the consequences of the walkout beyond the immediate vicinity of the dispute, primarily news of the effect of the strike on the mail service.
- b. Dimensions: Coverage of the background, numbers, and attitudes and job characteristics (with the exception of remuneration, hours of work, and attitudes relating to the walkout) of the strikers, and news of the relationship between the latter and their union, concretely the development of divisions and disagreement.
- c. Causes: Information about the financial situation of the strikers, the state of the contract negotiations, and the motives and opinions of the parties to the conflict in so far as they spoke to the reason for the walkout.

Coding based on author's judgement.

3. All stories analysed were regular news event reports with two exceptions, both in the Globe and Mail. September 11th (b) was a background feature on the strikers, their attitudes about the walkout, and the question of how the strike was related to the end of passivity among female workers. September 13th (b) was an editorial about disruption in the postal service, and how this was primarily a result of government weakness in enforcing its legal representative of the national interest.

Table Two: C.R. STRIKE HEADLINES, STAR AND GLOBE AND MAIL

<u>Date</u>	<u>Toronto Star</u>	<u>Globe and Mail</u>
9/9/80	Metro mail left in chaos as posties honour picket line	Picketing federal clerks halt mail flow in major centre
10/9/80	Don't send mail, Post Office asks	Post Office appeals to public not to send mail during strike
11/9/80	Mail still halted as P.O. gives firing warning	a) Cross pickets or face firing, drivers told b) Pickets timid, feeling lonely (background story)
12/9/80	10,000 posties face layoff, national shut-down looms	a) Drivers threaten strike over picket lines dispute Subhead: Clerks still disrupt Toronto and Ottawa mail b) Left at the post, again (editorial)
13/9/80	a) Metro pensioners promised cheques -despite strike b) Clerks' union wants to end Metro mail disruption	Ottawa cuts off dues in clerks' union battle
15/9/80	Clerks defy call to end mail tie-up	Clerks in Toronto resist union plea to return to work
16/9/80	Mails' back in Toronto as clerks pull pickets	Pickets promise mail for Toronto until strike
17/9/80	No story	Mail is moving after federal clerks lift picket lines

of the strike's effects. This frame dominated the opening of every report of the strike in the *Star*, and all but two reports in the *Globe and Mail*. Even the latter's breaking story, which carried the second highest proportion of non-effects coverage, opened with a statement about effects.

Table Three: LOCATION OF FIRST PARAGRAPH(S) OF EFFECTS NEWS

<u>Story Date</u>	<u>Star</u>	<u>Globe and Mail</u>
Sept. 9th	1-3	1,6
Sept. 10th	1-3	1-7
Sept. 11th (a)	1-6	1-12
(b)	n/a	3,4
Sept. 12th (a)	1-3	1-11
(b)	n/a	1-9
Sept. 13th (a)	1-22	5-15
(b)	1-2	n/a
Sept. 15th	1,3-7	3,7
Sept. 16th	1-3	1-9
Sept. 17th	n/a	1-13

n/a not applicable

In the *Star*, news of non-effects aspects generally appeared sooner in the narrative than in the *Globe and Mail*. This is the only measure on which the effects frame was less prominent in the former than the latter. It was, however, more likely to be confined to a single paragraph reference. In this respect, the *Star's* narrative structure was more standardized than the *Globe and Mail's*: initial reference to non-effects aspects normally occurred somewhere in the second to seventh paragraph of each story, most commonly the fourth. The *Globe and Mail's* reports, on the other hand, fall into two

groups: those in which non-effects references occurred very early in the narrative, and those where they arose in the middle or final half.

In sum, this breakdown of content in terms of manifest composition, headlining, and narrative structure suggests fairly clearly that the principal discursive framework for news of the strike was the latter's effects outside the immediate radius of the dispute. At the same time, there are noteworthy differences --of degree rather than kind --between the two papers in that the effects frame was less accentuated in the *Globe and Mail* than in the *Star*. Even for the former, nonetheless, only two reports --September 13th and 15th --were unambiguously framed in terms of non-effects aspects on all three measures used, aside from the background feature. News of the strike, then, was primarily news of its effects elsewhere.

The Dominant Frame

By itself, however, the quantitative decomposition of manifest content does not enable us to grasp the qualitative, semantic dimensions of the text. This requires a closer semiologic analysis of the text's lexical and semantic organization. The substance of the dominant frame was not the unofficial or unprecedented nature of the strike, but rather its impact upon the interruption of the mail service. (see Table Two). This was established initially through the 'intertextuality' of news discourse. Specifically, the dominant frame grew out of (and fed back into) an existing body of knowledge, established through earlier news accounts, about problematic industrial relations at the Post Office. What helped in large part to give the strike its initial newsworthiness is what Barthes (1973, 1977, 1979) calls 'myth': the uncritical interdiction of the 'already known', in this case the militancy and disruptiveness of postal workers and their unions.

The two papers differ, however, in the way in which this was brought out. The *Globe and Mail*, in its news event reports, relied on terminology with more neutral connotations to frame the strike's main effect. Apart from five references to "disrupt(ion)", the text referred primarily to "stopping", "halting", "drying up", "slowing down", and "tie-up" of the mail as the strike's principal consequence. It was in the editorial commentary of September 12th, titled "Left at the Post, Again", that the 'myth' of postal disorder was most clearly evoked with reference to the "familiar territory of the post office picket line". The *Star*, on the other hand, which carried only news event reports of the strike, framed the interruption of mail service in more openly negative ways in its general coverage: the effects of the strike were described as "disruption" (nine references), "chaos" (seven references), "crisis" (two references), "strangling", and "crippling" (one reference each).

The immediate cause of the interruption of mail service was framed in terms of the refusal of mail delivery truck drivers (members of the Letter Carriers' Union of Canada: L.C.U.C.) to cross picket lines set up by striking C.R.s outside Toronto area postal sorting plants. Both papers cited the views of L.C.U.C. officials and an official representative of the regional Post Office. The situation was framed by both papers, however, primarily in terms of the latter's definition of the dispute as a conflict between the conditions of employment set down in a legally formalized contract on the one hand, and the union's own policy of respecting the pickets of other workers on the other. This view tended to equate the position of Post Office management with the Law, and thereby implicitly with society in general. In this way, the situation came to be framed as a problem of legality rather than as, for example, a

case of solidarity between workers. (cf. Clarke and Taylor, 1980).

Again, the two papers differed somewhat in the way they interpreted this situation. The *Globe and Mail* tended to view it more as the result of poor management within the Post Office. The report of September 11th highlighted the "threat" of disciplinary action made by the Post Office against those drivers who refused to cross the pickets. This was balanced by the response of an L.C.U.C. official that the union would not be "swayed" by this "threat", that the policy of respecting pickets was "as simple as that", and that similar action in the past had never been "challenged" in court. On this basis, the paper later editorialized in a way that put the onus upon management weakness in not enforcing its legal rights: "repeated failure to insist upon the fulfilment of a contract is a sure formula for endless trouble". The *Star*, on the other hand, gave greater prominence to the attitude of the L.C.U.C. and its members in a way that connoted contempt for the Law. On September 12th it was reported in the second paragraph that "militant truck drivers are threatening to pull the plug" should they be disciplined; later in the same report it was noted that an L.C.U.C. official "dismissed" the warning about discipline and "laughed off" the suggestion that the picket line action was illegal.

While a suspension of mail delivery is almost universal in its effect, given the virtually monopolistic position of the Post Office, certain groups were given attention by both papers as being especially affected in an adverse way. The *Star* focused upon "small" businessmen and the dependents of the welfare state. The *Globe and Mail* focused largely on the latter, and did not really introduce businessmen into the narrative until September 17th when it cited remarks

from the President of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business about "hardships" and "problems" caused by the mail stoppage.

The *Star* devoted both earlier and greater attention to the plight of small businessmen, up to the point of making them the victim of the strike by "postal clerks" in its editorial page cartoon of September 13th.² What is significant about this attention, however, is that they were not depicted as victims of the strike in their own right so much as the conduit for other victims, those of their employees that would have to be laid off as a result of declining business. Apart from general references to "anger", "frustrat(ion)", "serious handicap(s)", and "incalculable" financial losses, the only concrete effect of the mail stoppage on small businessmen was the increasing likelihood that they would have to lay workers off.

In similar vein to small businessmen, welfare state dependents are another group who are 'obviously' affected adversely by the cessation of mail service. Here, too, the theme of unemployment figured prominently as it was the unemployed, of the various groups that make up the welfare state clientele, who received explicit mention. The *Star*, in fact, openly associated the unemployed and small businessmen by noting that "The disruptions have been making small businessmen and the unemployed suffer alike" (September 12th). By making small businessmen lay workers off, the strike was seen to create further unemployment; by suspending mail delivery of subsistence payments to welfare state dependents, the strike was seen to worsen the plight of the already unemployed. Implicit in both was the message that it was fellow workers (or potential fellow workers) who became the main casualties of the strike and its effects.

The disruption framework was not confined exclusively to the mail stoppage. Both papers interpreted the unofficial character of the strike as indicative of a division between the strikers and their union (the Public Service Alliance of Canada: P.S.A.C.). This was brought out earlier and more forcefully in the *Star*. The strikers were described as "rebellious" and "defiant"; the union was said to be in a position to enable the mail service to resume "if (it)...succeeds in gaining control over its Toronto members", and to have been "influenced" by "growing dissent in its ranks". In the *Globe and Mail*, the strike was initially described as a sign of "disenchant(ment)" with the union by the strikers; the latter was said to "resist (their) union plea to return to work"; and after the strikers did vote to return to work some were said to be "dissatisfied" with the decision.

Framing the Participants

Three patterns emerge when we examine how the participants in the narrative were identified. Firstly, both papers relied primarily upon those with formal identities of some kind, usually bureaucratic, for citations and acknowledged sources of information, particularly in those cases where the source was named. They were identified either as "spokesmen" or in terms of some more specific office such as union vice-president. This reliance upon formal news sources was more evident in the *Star* which did not cite at all from a named source who was not also identified as a spokesman or other office holder. In the *Globe and Mail*, four named sources were cited who were not identified as representative of others. One of these was cited in the breaking report of September 9th, and the other three in the background story on the strikers carried on the 11th. All four were C.R.s. Like the *Star*, the *Globe and Mail*

relied, in the case of the mail disruption, on union officials for explanation of the mail delivery truck drivers' support action.

Secondly, the relationship between the C.R.s and their employer, the federal government or, more specifically, the Treasury Board, which was the original centre of the situation, was framed in a one-sided way: both papers gave greater attention to the actions, views and motives of the C.R.s, through their local and national union spokesmen and officers, than to the employer and its representatives. For example, the *Globe and Mail* cited from seven named union spokesmen or officials (three national and four local), and the *Star* from six (three national and three local). By contrast, the *Globe and Mail* cited only one named representative of the Treasury Board (and he was acknowledged by name only once), and the *Star* from none. Indeed, the Treasury Board was seen in the narrative not for its actions so much as for its inaction. Both papers reported that it had rejected the majority conciliation board report for a contract settlement, but had expressed willingness to negotiate with the P.S.A.C. on the basis of the minority conciliation report that the union had rejected. By not altering this stance throughout the period of the strike, the Treasury Board ceased, from a news perspective, to be much of an active participant.

Thirdly, the disproportionate attention given to the striking C.R.s and their union was qualitative as well as quantitative. In line with the findings of the Glasgow Media Group (1980) and Hartmann (1975/6), we find that the strikers were more likely to be labelled adjectivally and in ways that connoted emotionality. In the *Globe and Mail*, the strikers were most commonly described as "militant" (five references, three via citations from union representatives), followed by "frustrated" and "dissatisfied" (two

references each), with a single reference each to "angry", "unhappy", "critical", "timid", "edgy", "sick of", "awakening", "disenchanted", and "eager to hit the bricks" (this list includes references in the editorial and background articles as well as regular news event reports). In the *Star*, the most common references were to "protest" (four times), "angry" (three), "militant" (two), and "frustrated", "rebellious", "defiant", and "not satisfied" (one each). In the *Globe and Mail*, these terms were more likely to be articulated via citations from sources than in the *Star*. The contrast for both papers with characterisation of the Treasury Board is marked: the *Globe and Mail* carried one adjectival qualification --the Board's rejection of the majority conciliation board report was described as "firm" --and the *Star* none at all.

Conclusion

The analysis above generally confirms the two conclusions drawn from recent British studies of industrial relations news. Firstly, the strike was framed primarily in terms of its disruptive impact elsewhere, the principal feature that endowed it with newsworthy value. Second, in both a quantitative and qualitative sense, news of the strike was primarily news of the strikers. Although the circumstances and character of the strike are not typical of strikes in general, the similarity of findings with these other studies does provide strong grounds for a more extensive examination of industrial relations news in general and strike news in particular to establish how common this pattern of coverage is.

While we can conclude that there was a general consensus between the two papers about the newsworthy quality of the strike, it is also evident that there was an important difference

in the accentuation, both quantitatively and qualitatively, of the dominant news frame. The *Star* gave the disruptiveness of the strike greater prominence and discussed it in more openly negative ways than the *Globe and Mail*. In part, this reflects the clearer separation of types of news format --the inclusion of an editorial comment and background feature on the strikers --in the *Globe and Mail* than the *Star* where only news event reports were carried.

The theoretical backdrop to this analysis, however, was not the question of news bias and balance, but the parameters in terms of which bias and balance are defined and bounded. Thus, for example, the focus upon the strike's socially disruptive impact meant less attention not only to non-effects aspects of the situation (such as the strike's causes and dimensions), but also to non-disruptive consequences of the walkout, such as the way it fostered worker solidarity and cohesiveness. Similarly, the reliance of both papers on officials or formal spokesmen as sources confirms the tendency noted in other studies for news accounts to assume, largely uncritically, the pertinence, accuracy, and representativeness of legal-bureaucratic data and categories (Fishman, 1978, 1980; Gans, 1979; Hall et al., 1978; Tuchman, 1978).³ The importance of these points lies in the way in which they influence the structuring of the news narrative in the direction of a "dominant" or "preferred" reading of its contents. In this respect, in addition to pointing to the need for more extensive research on the subject, the analysis does raise an important question that needs to be addressed by study of the way in which news texts are read; namely the extent to which the strikers came to be seen as the agents of social harm given that the news text associated the strike primarily with the actions and motives of the strikers on the one hand, and with social disruption and inconvenience on the other.

Footnotes

1. Although paragraph size does vary, it is the basic unit of news consisting normally of only one or two sentences addressing the same aspect or item. Compared to other types of text, the range of variation is narrow, and it therefore provides a sufficiently reliable measure of content composition.
2. This cartoon, together with an earlier reference to the striking C.R.s as "postal workers" shows how smoothly and uncritically the inter-textuality of postal disruption operated. The terms postal clerk and postal worker normally designate inside workers at the Post Office who sort mail and serve behind the counter in local post offices; they are members of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers. These workers and their union have been involved in a continuing conflict with their employer that has led, in the recent past, to several strikes and the resulting suspension of mail service. As such, they have become routinized to some extent as newsworthy subjects. In this instance, however, these workers were not on strike, nor were they the principal source of support action for the strikers. The former were clerical and regulatory employees who work as office staff in the Post Office, and belong to the P.S.A.C.; the latter were mail delivery truck drivers, members of the L.C.U.C. The *Star* did recognise this confusion of terminology, printing a correction on the editorial page of its September 16th edition.
3. In the latter respect, it is noteworthy that the description of C.R. militance and confidence portrayed in the *Globe and Mail's* news reports via citations from some

P.S.A.C. officials and spokesmen was not confirmed in its background story on the strikers, which made them out to be rather uncertain and unsure.

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