

1991

Newspaper coverage of anti-nuclear protests : 1979 vs. 1986

Patricia L. Harney
San Jose State University

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Newspaper coverage of anti-nuclear protests: 1979 vs. 1986

Harney, Patricia Lillian, M.S.

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NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF ANTI-NUCLEAR PROTESTS:
1979 vs. 1986

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of
Journalism and Mass Communications
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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science

By

Patricia L. Harney

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF
JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATIONS

David Grey

Dr. David Grey

Dennis Brown

Dr. Dennis Brown

W. Briggs

Dr. William Briggs

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

Serena N. Stanford

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1945, the United States dropped the atom bomb on Japan, an event that helped secure a U.S. victory and an end to World War II. The same event also marked the beginning of the nuclear age, an era that years later would be surrounded by controversy. As world superpowers began to stake their claim in the nuclear arms race, citizens of Europe and North America began to speak out in public opposition to nuclear weapons, which later formed the beginnings of the anti-nuclear movement.

The anti-nuclear movement consisted of two elements: the anti-nuclear-weapons movement and the anti-nuclear-energy movement, which date back to the 1950s and 1960s, respectively. As the arms race continued, the anti-nuclear movement gained momentum. During the 1970s, the opposition had swelled; more than 150,000 protesters participated in a single rally in 1978.

Media coverage of the protests was important to the movement's success, but it was sparse during the early years of the movement. Only after the Vietnam War ended in 1975 were the protests no longer overshadowed by the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations; and only until the disaster at Three Mile

Island occurred in 1979 did the media begin to take a closer look at the movement and its goals and philosophies.

But at the same time the media were beginning to give the movement more coverage, they continued to treat the demonstrations and rallies accompanying the movement with the similar trivialization and insignificance that they treated the anti-Vietnam War and anti-nuclear demonstrations of the previous decade. It was clear that while the accident at Three Mile Island confirmed the dangers that the movement had warned against, the anti-nuclear protesters were not given the legitimacy and extensive coverage that their pro-nuclear counterparts were accorded in the press. The media did, however, begin to balance their reports by using anti-nuclear-power groups for sources on the issue of reactor safety.

In 1982, a New York Times poll showed that 87% of the population supported a nuclear freeze. By the mid-1980s, the anti-nuclear movement as a whole had evolved into a powerful force. Anti-nuclear-weapons demonstrations became a regular occurrence, and by 1984, the movement had reached its peak of organization and success in political influence during the 1984 elections. During 1986 and 1987, the number of anti-nuclear-energy demonstrations also increased significantly after the accident at Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986.

As the movement gained momentum during the 1980s, it won widespread public support as a mainstream movement, with groups such as the Physicians for Social Responsibility forming to join the ranks of those opposed to nuclear energy and weapons. Part of the movement's strength was due to its organization and planning, and its well-packaged publicity campaigns. As one observer put it, today's anti-nuclear protests are "marketed with a promotional flair befitting Madison Avenue" (Ondaatje, 1989, p.6).

How successful the movement was at receiving favorable and in-depth coverage by the print media has yet to be fully addressed, however, and is the focus of this study.

This study examined and compared newspaper coverage of anti-nuclear demonstrations during two years: 1979 and 1986. It analyzed whether the tone and amount of background information of the coverage had changed over time--from 1979, as the movement had begun to gain acceptance by the press, especially after the Three Mile Island accident, to 1986, as the movement continued to gain support and strength after the apparent success of the nuclear Freeze campaign and after the Chernobyl accident in the Soviet Ukraine.

Content analysis was the method used for this study.

The content of three metropolitan daily newspapers, the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Chicago Tribune, was examined. A comparison of the coverage of these two

years provided an insight into the media's evolving treatment of anti-nuclear protests as the movement itself evolved over time.

For purposes of this study, both elements of the anti-nuclear movement--anti-nuclear weapons and anti-nuclear energy--were analyzed together as one anti-nuclear effort, except when distinguishing the two was necessary.

The study addressed the question of how the press reported on protests that occurred during both the early and late stages of the anti-nuclear movement, and whether this coverage had changed over a seven-year period of protest activity.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review discusses mass communications theory in regard to influences and constraints on the news media, specifically the print media. It focuses specifically on how these constraints affect news treatment of protests, from the early 1960s to the present. The literature also addresses how the media have changed in their treatment of protests over time.

Protests have played an important role in the political process in America even before the First Amendment of the Constitution was written, guaranteeing citizens not only freedom of speech and of the press, but also of "the right of the people peaceably to assemble and petition the Government for a redress of grievances" (Summers, 1970, p.196).

Webster's Dictionary defines a protest as "a formal declaration of dissent by a member to an act of resolution of a legislation." According to Etzioni (1970), demonstrations provide an interim election tool, especially for those groups with no special representation and for the public at large. Protests became a major political tool during the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s. They have been instrumental not only in raising the consciousness

of Americans but also in advocating changes in government policies.

The social stigma that is often attached to protests is that, like any form of opposition, they usually involve some form of conflict, and, therefore, have been viewed as a controversial form of expression; thus, the public's perception of protests has not been all favorable. Etzioni identified three kinds of demonstrations: non-violent, or peaceful, which are planned and legally permitted and often take the form of an organized march; obstructionist, which are often characterized by blocking traffic or an entry way; and violent, which involve the throwing of objects, fist fights, beatings, shootings, etc. He asserted that the violent nature of some protests that occurred in the past, particularly during the anti-Vietnam War movement, may have projected a negative image for all protests, peaceful or not.

Although peaceful demonstrations have the same legal and constitutional status as writing to a congressman or speaking up at a town meeting, a poll taken in California in 1964 showed that wide segments of the public have not distinguished between peaceful and violent demonstrations. Instead, they have condemned them indiscriminately (Skolnick, 1969). Etzioni noted that the majority of the population tends to focus on the communicative acts of the demonstrations themselves rather than paying attention to the

causes communicated by the demonstrators. An article in Life magazine summed up this public perception of protests during the 1960s best:

Certainly it is a matter of concern when Americans find the ordinary channels of discussion and decision so unresponsive that they feel forced to take their grievances to the street (Skolnick, p.22).

Etzioni suggested that protests have not been fully accepted as a legitimate form of political expression because many protesters have abused their First Amendment right to free speech; they have literally crossed legal boundaries and caused injury to others in the process of furthering their cause. The intended impact of protests can backfire too, he added; protesters who use outrageous tactics (wearing bizarre clothing or carrying offensive objects) tend to reduce their message to highly simplified statements and, therefore, may unintentionally flatten the effect of their message, rather than stir up support from the public (p.21).

Relationship Between Protesters and the Press

The relationship between protesters and the press is a critical one in terms of how this message is relayed to the public. Clutterbuck (1981), Goldenberg (1975), and Wolfsfeld (1984) suggested that a mutually dependent relationship exists between the press and protesters: Demonstrators depend upon the press to get their message across, and the press depends upon demonstrators for information. In her study of the access of four community groups to Boston newspapers,

Goldenberg found that "the reporter is the key media person for resource-poor groups, the major filter in the access process" (p.189). Clutterbuck emphasized the importance of a demonstration obtaining publicity and contended that a demonstration achieves nothing if it is not reported. Without the media, these groups would not be able to communicate their grievances and raise the consciousness of the public on a large scale. Similarly, Wolfsfeld identified the existence of an adaptive relationship between reporters and protest leaders who share a mutual interest in obtaining access to the other's resources. But the two have different goals, he added: "Whereas protest leaders are primarily interested in persuasion, the press is more interested in sensation" (p.551).

According to Boorstin's (1973) definition, a protest would meet all the criteria of what he characterizes as the pseudo-event: an activity that is not spontaneous--it occurs because someone has planned, planted, or incited it for the immediate purpose of being reported (p.11).

It is, therefore, important to look at how well or how poorly this relationship works. Ideally, the press functions as a publicity channel for protesters, while protests function as a news resource for the press. Graber (1989) noted that the media can sway public opinion by regularly promoting selected groups that are working for public causes.

But, as Clutterbuck pointed out, both reporters and protesters can create a dangerous cycle of cause and effect if either side abuses its privileges (p.167).

Influences on Treatment

There are a number of personal, organizational, political, and sociological constraints on media treatment of protests. How those in the media perceive an event may reflect how it is reported. Graber (1989) found that a large number of journalists were opposed to nuclear energy, and the attitudes of journalists toward nuclear energy matched the tone of their stories (p.290). Her observation supported White's (1950) theory that selection of news is highly subjective and reflects the gatekeeper's personal experiences and viewpoints.

McDonald (1978) suggested that one of the conventions of American journalism is that reader interest can only be attracted by conflict, novelty, or recency. Based on the traditional assumptions in news treatment, Gitlin (1980) noted that news concerns the event, not the underlying condition. In attempting to attract the reader, reporters may neglect that which can make their report meaningful, the context. Murdock (1970) suggested that the media concentrate only on the immediate form of contemporary events, on what happened and who was involved, and ignore the underlying content of the situation, bypassing any consideration of the

demonstrators' political perspective. He added that events are presented as natural forces and that these events are not linked at the level of underlying structures and processes, but at the level of immediate forms and images. "Situations are identified as the same if they look the same. In this way news rewrites history for immediate popular consumption" (p.215).

Murdock claimed that this "event orientation" has a detrimental effect on news treatment of a situation, which may tend to distort it.

As a consequence of the 'event orientation' therefore, the definitions and explanations of situations offered by news presentation coincide with those provided by the political elite. Thus, radical political activity appears as essentially ephemeral, and confined to a small group of outsiders rather than as the product of historically structured and continuing inequalities in the distribution of wealth and power (p.214).

Several studies support the theory that the press is not independent of political and/or ideological influences. Rivers, Schramm, and Christians (1980) would agree, stating that although the First and Fourteenth Amendments serve to guarantee the freedom of speech and of the press, the media are shaped and controlled by society. "Each society controls its mass media in accordance with its policies and needs. The controls may be legal and political, economic, or social" (pp.30-31).

Altschull (1984), too, argued that the press is not independent, but that "it operates as an agent of power.

Whatever form power takes--government, party, corporation--it may well wish to conceal its relationship with the press" (p.115).

Similarly, Davison, Boylan, and Yu (1982) acknowledged a number of social and political influences on the media that help to shape news content. Although they suggested that most media content reflects what those in power would like to reveal, they maintained, however, that the American press is essentially free from government interference as far as content is concerned.

Murdock argued that both economic and political constraints influence how newspapers report on demonstrations.

Certainly, newspapers are enmeshed in the present economic and political system both directly through interlocking directorships and reciprocal shareholdings, and indirectly through their dependence upon advertising. They therefore have a vested interest in the stability and continuing existence of the present system (p.208).

Murdock admitted, however, that the links between the general framework and process of gathering news are more oblique than direct. He added that journalists define themselves in terms of their autonomy and independence of vested political and economic interests. Despite this element of autonomy, he argued, "the basic definition of the situation which underpins the news reporting of political

events very largely coincides with the definition provided by the legitimate power holders" (p.208).

Gans (1979) suggested that the news contains values, or preference statements. Generally, the press tends to look negatively on people and activities that do not fit into the media's values, he argued. "This in turn makes it possible to suggest that there is, underlying the news, a picture of nation and society as it ought to be" (p.40).

Gans identified the values through impressionistic methods, examining the way people and activities are described, the tones in which stories are written or broadcast, and the connotations of commonly used verbs, nouns, and adjectives, especially if neutral terms are available but not used. Blumberg (1968) also found these impressionistic accounts of the protests in news reports. In his study of the coverage of the 1968 anti-war march on the Pentagon, he found that the press tended to report with hostility toward the demonstration and the demonstrators, focusing on the negative aspects rather than the underlying motives and issues behind the demonstration. While the media published photographs of the more bizarrely dressed, ignoring the more ordinary citizens, descriptions of images such as "shaggy doves and the sweet smell of pot" and "a great many colorful sheep" saturated the accounts of the event (p.6).

Epstein (1978) suggested that political events and issues are less likely to be reported accurately and impartially because they are not definite and measurable.

Epstein wrote:

In the more complex and ambiguous recesses of political life, where the outcome is almost always in doubt or dispute, news reports could not be expected to exhaust or perhaps even indicate the truth of the matter (p.161).

In addition, the media tend to stereotype events when they do not fully understand them, according to Murdock, who cited Hall's observation that "the role of the media in the labelling process is at its maximum in situations which are unfamiliar or ambiguous" (p.210).

The media's distortion of the image of protests and protesters may also result from a motive to reduce the significance of the political content of their actions as well as to reduce the significance of the conflict itself, according to Paletz and Dunn (1969). In their case study of the 1967 race riots in Winston-Salem, which broke out after a black man was killed by a white policeman, they noted that certain voluntary codes and guidelines devised by the police, city administrations, and the media themselves often determined how civil disturbances were covered. They found that the stories of the Winston-Salem Journal were written in the perspective of the authority (i.e., city officials and police), rather than of the protesters, and that the

reporter's treatment of the stories were slanted in such a way as to reduce conflict. "In so depicting the riot, the Journal's staff seem to have been motivated to contribute to curbing violence and reducing racial tensions" (p.335). This was done by selection and placement: avoiding words that convey an exaggerated account of the event, making information as precise and specific as possible, "fixing the limits of the affected area, and indicating surrounding tranquility" (p.335).

Gans (1980) asserted that during the 1960s the media tended to view protests as "disorder" stories because not only the official rules of political order, but also the informal rules of social order were being disobeyed. In addition to the anti-war demonstrations, the participants themselves were also newsworthy because they rejected the traditional social norms. Gans argued that social disorder news monitors the respect citizens have for authority, and that the target of a demonstration is the most important criterion of protests being labeled and reported as disorder stories. He suggested that the anti-war demonstrations of the 1960s were covered as disorder stories because they opposed the government's policy.

This relates to Gans' theory that the news values the leadership of the president of the United States because he is viewed as the ultimate protector of order; "...he is the

person who states and represents the national values and he is the agent of the national will" (p.45). McDonald found that the media's national loyalty influences the content of news reports of events concerned with or directed at the nation. He pointed out that reports of the American activity in the Vietnam War were far more critical in Associated Press (AP) news prepared for a French newspaper than AP news for American newspapers. Epstein criticized the Warren Commission investigation of the Kennedy assassination, suggesting that a national loyalty seemed to get in the way of journalists' reporting. "They produced a version of the truth...to reassure the nation and protect the national interest" (p.148).

This national loyalty is a characteristic of what Blumberg termed the "orthodox" press and describes the attitude of the media toward civil disturbances. The orthodox press, according to Blumberg, relies heavily on official sources, focuses on action and violence, and ignores the underlying issues of a situation. It is a press that is generally satisfied with the government as well as generally satisfactory to the government.

So long as the mass media are dealing with political parties, groups, movements, or individuals seeking reform or change within the explicit structure of the current society, they generally perform with fairness and objectivity. But let someone or something advocate a fundamental change in the status quo--opposition to a war or a contemplated war...--and the press moves over to join those in political or economic power who also

have a stake in the continuation of things the way they are (p.3).

Blumberg conceded that the press is not consciously plotting to deceive the American people, but, rather, that the press, "as an important part of the established system, has been reluctant to report on the growth of dissent, especially when the expressions of dissent have moved beyond traditional political advocacy" (p.160).

Ideology of the Press

Altschull has argued that the political Left in the United States has condemned the press as conservative and even reactionary. He referred to the fact that the overwhelming majority of U.S. newspapers support the Republican Party.

Gans suggested that the news distinguishes between seven ideological positions in its treatment of people and activities: far left "radicals," left-leaning liberals, liberals, moderates, conservatives, ultraconservatives, and far right "right wing" extremists.

Positions on the (ideological) spectrum are not always described in neutral terms, however. All the major news media approve the moderate core, which includes liberals, moderates, and conservatives; adherents to other positions are treated less favorably, but generally, those on the Right are labeled more politely than those on the Left. Ultraliberals may be called left-wingers, but ultraconservatives are rarely described as right-wingers, and never as reactionaries. Radicals, being 'extremists,' are labeled as if they were nearly equivalent to Nazis (pp.30-31).

Gans' assertion may be applied to anti-war protesters, who often tend to consist of ultraliberals, if not radicals (i.e., protesters of the 1960s were described as the New Left). In terms of its own ideology, Gans contended that the news is reformist and therefore does not easily fit into the conventional ideological spectrum, but if it had to be labeled it would either be right-liberal or left-conservative. He further argued that the news values moderatism, in groups or activities, which discourages excess or extremism. "Individualism that violates the law, the dominant mores, and enduring values is suspect; equally important, what is valued in individuals is discouraged in groups" (p.43). He added that groups exhibiting extreme behavior are criticized by the press through inflammatory adjectives or a satirical tone.

Not everyone agrees that the press is conservative, however. Derick Daniels, executive editor of the Detroit Free Press, argued: "...the press in America was born of advocacy and protest--that opinion and activism were the cornerstones which the Constitution is designed to protect" (Altschull, p.134). Whelan (1983) criticized the majority of the media for being "left-wing bleeding hearts" who write stories about birds with broken wings. He described them as "...a media which seemingly forever attacks the most cherished institutions and values of the society" (p.26).

The media in general may treat violent protests less favorably than nonviolent ones, but there may still be a difference between how a conservative newspaper covers a violent demonstration and how a moderate newspaper covers it. Both ideological camps may look upon a violent demonstration as a disorder story, but a conservative newspaper may see it as more of a threat and therefore focus more on the violence of the demonstration than other aspects of it, thereby concentrating more on the negative aspects of the demonstration.

Nonetheless, the authors tended to agree that, although the media were built on the ideal of being independent of governmental influence, the media are affected by social and political constraints. The press, as Altc hull described it, is an agent of power.

Newsworthiness of Protests and Protesters

Gans observed that the "unknowns," a term he used to describe ordinary people, appear in the news most often when they act in opposition, especially against government policy. Protesters, rioters, and strikers were the most often reported of the "unknowns" in Gans' study. In terms of the newsworthiness of activities, both violent and nonviolent protests were the fourth most likely activities to appear in the news, just behind government news and just ahead of crime news.

While the purpose of a demonstration is to gain attention from the press, demonstrators will often go to great lengths to get that attention. But Altschull noted that even if a dissident group defies the law by acting so outrageous that the press cannot ignore it, "the group may not be granted the comfortable cloak of legitimacy....In short, any group that threatens the social order or the politico-economic system is rejected....Thus do the mass media serve as significant instruments of social control, operating as agents of the system itself" (p.132-133).

Gans supported this view. He asserted that events that receive priority news play do not necessarily receive positive news play, however. Events that involve conflict or controversy are more likely to be reported because they often upset the social order.

Treatment of Deviant Groups and Events

In her study of media treatment of deviant political groups, Shoemaker (1984) found that the media cover various political groups in drastically and dramatically different ways. She suggested that the media vary their coverage of political groups according to how different the groups are from the status quo, and that the more deviant a political group is perceived as being, the more newspeople will ridicule it. She argued that views that do not support the political consensus are "brought into ideological line by

ridiculing them as irrelevant eccentricities which serious and reasonable people may dismiss as of no consequence" (p.66).

Halloran, Elliot, and Murdock (1970) concluded that the press reported aspects of an anti-Vietnam War protest march in October 1967 in London out of context, thus reducing the significance of the political issues behind the protest. By presenting demonstrators as performers within a spectacle, they found that the press trivialized the political content of their actions from the report. Thus, the demonstrations were viewed as play-acting and, therefore, not for real. Halloran et al. revealed one newspaper's description of the event as a "Hollywood mock-up" and the protesters as "leading performers" (p.11).

Similarly, Altschull argued that an event's newsworthiness depends upon whether the press perceives the issues behind the protests as being legitimate.

According to the logic of democratic pluralism, visibility for groups depends on the willingness of the press to accord them a place on the plateau. In deciding whether or not to grant this privilege, the press is not behaving independently, however. In this activity, the press is operating under the rigid rules of its unwritten network of conventions. Let there be authoritative voices speaking for the dissident group and it will be allowed on the plateau; let its objectives be perceived as operating within the boundaries of the accepted belief system and the plateau will be open to it. But let there be no authoritative voices speaking for it and let its goals be outside those boundaries, then access to the plateau is denied (p.133).

Gitlin supported this view. He emphasized that only when the specific opinions of the anti-nuclear movement made sense as "auxiliary supports to the detente elite, they were reported, but the movement's more deeply oppositional point of view, its critique of the institutional and ideological underpinnings and premises of the arms race, remained outside the spotlight" (pp. 290-291). Tuchman (1978) contended that access to the news media as a resource are stratified--that the news media are more accessible to some social movements, interest groups, and political leaders than to others. "Those holding recognized reins of legitimated or institutionalized power clearly have more access to the media than those who do not," she wrote (p.189).

The literature suggests that the press not only treats demonstrations differently depending upon how deviant the protests are, but that its treatment is also affected by its own ideological outlook. Shoemaker's study, which showed that deviant groups were more likely to be reported unfavorably because they were a threat to the status quo, suggests that a violent protest would be treated more negatively by the press because it is a threat to the social order. Etzioni supported this point: "The use of deliberate acts of violence--violence as a political strategy--is very likely to draw the full venom of public rejection, a radical right backlash, and powerful government retaliation" (p.42). He

argued that while obstructionist and violent tactics gain more attention than peaceful ones, peaceful demonstrations are the most effective communicative acts of protest.

Demonstrations: The 1980s

Many of these studies focus on the media's treatment of civil disturbances during the 1960s and early 1970s, a more volatile era of opposition to war and government. Today, public demonstrations for or against a cause have been and will continue to be a prevailing form of free speech. Gitlin, Graber, Molander and Molander (1990), and Ondaatje, focused on the media's treatment of demonstrations that have occurred during the post-Vietnam War 1970s and 1980s. While some authors have discussed the changing nature of protests, a few touch on how the media have changed in their portrayal of these demonstrations as the social climate has changed since the late 1960s and early 1970s.

McCormack (1981) suggested that "the media are often objects of social change by social movements, events in the process of change in the same way that banks, railroads, churches, and the military are" (p.168). McQuail (1976) noted that the press interprets events that cause change and often proposes directions or models that ought to be followed. Gitlin stated that the prevailing news frames, which are set within the economic and political interests of the news organization, are what have, in the past, spurred reporters

to seek out the "scruffy-looking, flag-waving" demonstrators and counterpose them to the calm and rational authority figure. But these conventional media frames change over time, he noted, citing the Three Mile Island accident in 1979 as one of the major events that did change this prevailing frame. "After Three Mile Island came so close to home, the movement against nuclear power was now on the legitimate map" (p.289). He added that the participants of this movement, along with others, had learned to make the journalistic code work for them, while journalists have extended them the privilege of legitimacy.

The anti-nuclear movement, Gitlin argued, was more or less assimilated into the political world view, not only as a result of the accident at Three Mile Island, but also because it had become an organized and effective movement; the movement's organizers had borrowed the philosophies and methods of mobilization of the anti-Vietnam War movement and used them to direct their effort toward the nuclear issue. But unlike the protests of the 1960s, the anti-nuclear demonstrations were meticulously planned and had a strong commitment to nonviolence. In their study of the anti-nuclear movement from 1977 to 1982, Daubert and Moran (1985) emphasized that there have been virtually no spontaneous anti-nuclear protests of any kind. They added that anti-nuclear protest organizers not only informed the participants

of what was expected of them, but they also informed local officials of what forms of civil disobedience would take place and had organizers on hand to maintain order and cooperation. "As a result, the massive confusion, uncontrollable outbursts, and lack of cohesion characteristic of many of the Vietnam-era protests have been avoided...." (p.7). A brief article in Newsweek noting the difference between the demonstrators of the 1980s and those of the 1960s supported this view ("Days of Rage," 1985). The author contended that the demonstrators of today do not want to upset the status quo, unlike their earlier counterparts whose actions were anti-establishment in nature.

The nature of the protests, however, was not the only factor that legitimized the movement and its issues, according to Graber. She attributed the increased public opposition to nuclear energy to the extensive media coverage of the issue.

Brandon also acknowledged the peace movement's success in opting against the dramatic tactics of the 1960s in favor of the methods of established political lobbyists. She argued that the Freeze campaign had been successful at organizing sufficiently enough to ensure that politicians were forced to take a stand on the nuclear issue.

But while the anti-nuclear movement had gained acceptance as a mainstream movement, the media continued to

portray the demonstrators as those outside the realm of the mainstream, despite their commitment to nonviolence, according to Gitlin.

As the 1980s progressed, so did the movement and its strength in numbers. Daubert and Moran found that, while there had been an increase in anti-nuclear protest activity in the United States immediately after the Three Mile Island accident in 1979, there was a shift in the focus of anti-nuclear protests from energy to weapons in 1982; and by 1983, the anti-nuclear war protest activity had peaked, while the anti-nuclear-energy protest had fallen off. Molander and Molander stated that by 1983 and 1984, the peace movement had mobilized at the national and local level to promote the passage of a Freeze initiative in the Congress. "The movement built a broad base of support in the public at large (public opinion polls supported the Freeze at levels as high as 2:1), among social justice, professional and civic groups, in the media, and in the Congress" (p.49).

The anti-nuclear-energy movement gained momentum again after the explosion at the Chernobyl power plant in the Soviet Ukraine in 1986, according to Ondaatje. This event served as a haunting reminder of the disaster at Three Mile Island seven years earlier. Anti-nuclear groups mobilized in opposition, using the event to support their argument about the dangers of nuclear power (Graber, p.313).

Summary

The literature has provided a discussion of the relationship of protest groups to the media and the constraints on the press' treatment of demonstrations. It has supported the view that as a protest movement gains acceptance into the political mainstream, the more the press is likely to treat it as legitimate. The question of how the press has changed in its coverage of protest movements, which have surely changed during the 1970s and 1980s, has not been addressed in depth by the literature and is the focus of this study.

Research Questions

Did the press coverage of anti-nuclear protests change from 1979 to 1986, and if so, how did it change?

Hypotheses

1. The overall coverage of the anti-nuclear protests will contain significantly more neutral units of content (paragraphs) than favorable or unfavorable units of content.

Because protests have become an everyday occurrence and the movement has gained public and political support, especially after the Three Mile Island accident in March of 1979, they are not treated as "disorder" stories and, therefore, receive neutral treatment by the press. "Indeed, the very concept of a movement has been certified....Many movements...have become regular, recognizable, even stock

characters in newspapers and news broadcasts" (Gitlin, p.284).

2. There will be a significantly higher percentage of favorable units of content (paragraphs) in the coverage of anti-nuclear protests in 1986 than in 1979.

While the overall coverage is hypothesized to be significantly more neutral than non-neutral, a comparison of the number of favorable units of content of 1979 vs. that of 1986 may indicate a pattern of change in the tone of coverage during this seven-year time period. It is hypothesized that the tone will become more favorable as a result of the anti-nuclear movement assimilating into the political mainstream. It is also argued that because protests in general have become more common occurrences and appear regularly in the press, the coverage will become more favorable over time because the media have, over time, become more sensitized, and therefore more sympathetic, to the issues put forth by protesters.

3. There will be a significantly higher percentage of background/issue-oriented units of content (paragraphs) in the coverage of anti-nuclear protests in 1986 than in 1979.

As Murdock and McDonald pointed out, ignoring the underlying issues of a protest has a detrimental effect on the news treatment, because it bypasses the demonstrators' political perspective. "Thus, radical political activity

appears as essentially ephemeral, and confined to a small group of outsiders rather than as the product of historically structured and continuing inequalities in the distribution of wealth and power" (Murdock, p.214). Thus, the inclusion of such background/issue-oriented information in a report may indicate a newspaper's attempt to explain the underlying issues behind a protest, thereby providing a more well-rounded picture of the protest than if the report contained only information of the actual event. Coverage of anti-nuclear protests would be more issue oriented in 1986 than in 1979. Graber, Molander and Molander, and Ondaatje supported the argument that the media's view of nuclear issues had changed by the mid-1980s. Thus, by 1986, it is argued that the media were more informed of the issues of the anti-nuclear movement and, thus, tended to view and treat the protests as more justifiable and legitimate events than in 1979. They, therefore, provided more background information explaining the concerns of the protesters and the issues behind the protests. Although it is not argued that the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident in 1986, which was followed by a rise in anti-nuclear protest activity, was a factor in the media's tendency to include more background/issue-oriented information on the dangers of nuclear energy in its protest stories, it can be argued that that event was a contributing factor.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

This study examined three newspapers' coverage of anti-nuclear protests from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s in order to determine whether the media's treatment of such protests has changed along with the evolution of the movement itself. Specifically, the study looked at whether the tone of such reports had become more favorable toward the movement over time while providing more issue-oriented information, and therefore more depth and interpretation, in their accounts of the protests.

Content analysis is an appropriate research method for this study. Budd, Thorp, and Donohew (1967) describe it as "a systematic technique for analyzing message content and message handling--it is a tool for observing and analyzing the overt communication behavior of selected communicators" (p.2).

Newspapers

Anti-nuclear protest articles from the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Chicago Tribune were analyzed. These papers were chosen because they are widely read, major metropolitan newspapers and because they are locations in which large protests take place. In his study of the conditions of protest behavior in American cities, Eisinger

(1973) found that larger cities had a greater tendency to experience protest than smaller ones. It is also assumed that a large metropolitan daily newspaper is more likely to provide national, as well local, coverage of protests.

Sampling

Newspaper coverage of anti-nuclear protests during two different time periods, 1979 and 1986, was examined. Although the anti-nuclear movement began with the protests against atmospheric testing during the 1950s, the movement only began to grow rapidly during the early to mid 1970s, according to Daubert and Moran. Other sources, such as the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, the Los Angeles Times Newspaper Index, and the New York Times Newspaper Index indicate the first visible rise of coverage of anti-nuclear protest activity during 1973, two years before the Vietnam War ended. However, during this time, attention was focused on the anti-Vietnam War protests, which tended to overshadow the anti-nuclear movement. The first period, 1979, was chosen because of the increase in protest activity and of newspaper coverage after the Three Mile Island accident happened early in the year. The second year, 1986, was chosen to represent an increase in the movement's protest activity, especially after the accident at the Chernobyl power station in 1986. After 1987, anti-nuclear protest activity decreased, according to Ondaatje.

Because there are only approximately one or two stories written about a single protest, the sample included an entire year of coverage of anti-nuclear protests. Thus, for the purposes of this study, the opposition to nuclear power and nuclear war, reflecting one ongoing movement, was viewed collectively as one continuous protest.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was the paragraph, one of the most common coding units, according to Budd et al. The paragraph was chosen over the article because a preliminary examination of protests articles revealed that some contained neutral as well as favorable and/or unfavorable descriptions of the protest, making it difficult to fit the articles neatly into one of the three categories. By breaking the articles down into paragraphs and coding each paragraph separately, one could account for the possible variations in tone of an entire article.

Measurement

Each paragraph of the protest articles was examined by the researcher and a coder to assess the tone (unfavorable, neutral, or favorable) and the ratio of background/issue-oriented information to event-oriented information included in the reports. The number of units for each category was counted to determine each one's totals. According to Budd et al., "...research has indicated that merely counting items

produces results that correlate highly with the more laborious measuring of column inches" (p.35).

Operational Definitions

Tone. "Content analysis can be most productive when it is able to show direction--or lack of it," Budd et al. wrote. The tone, or news direction, of each paragraph was determined by the following operational definitions of unfavorable, neutral, and favorable. While the use of a three-category model of directional analysis is based on Budd et al., the criteria for judging news was developed by the researcher to fit the study.

1. Unfavorable: Unfavorable descriptions included portrayals (including quotes and paraphrases of individuals) of an official point of view that opposes the movement or a particular protest, or that does not support the movement's point of view. Negative descriptions, such as those that delegitimize or trivialize a protest or the movement as a whole (for example, descriptions using quotation marks around terms such as "peace march") were coded as unfavorable. The following is an example of an unfavorable statement: "As a thick rank of demonstrators looked on, a kind of battle between the police and what seemed like several dozen militants erupted." A paragraph that contained both favorable and unfavorable statements was coded as unfavorable if the majority of statements within the paragraph were

unfavorable (two unfavorable statements and one favorable, for example).

2. Neutral: Any description or statement (quoted or not) that cannot be clearly defined as either favorable or unfavorable in tone. Statements such as "some 600 demonstrators paraded past the construction site of a nuclear power plant" fell into the neutral category. Statements that may have appeared to be negative or unfavorable, such as "protesters were arrested" or "violence occurred" were also coded as neutral. A paragraph that contained a relatively equal number of favorable and unfavorable assessments (two favorable and two unfavorable statements, for example) was coded as neutral.

3. Favorable: A paragraph with a favorable assessment of anti-nuclear protests included statements that depicted protesters in a positive light and/or that the movement is succeeding; quotes from individuals (including protesters) supporting the protest or the anti-nuclear movement as a whole; statements that supported the movement's point of view; or statements (i.e., scientific studies) describing the negative effects of a nuclear accident or an atomic bomb explosion. For example, a quote such as "I thought it was a beautiful, beautiful action," in reference to a protest, would be coded as favorable. A paragraph that contained both favorable and unfavorable statements was coded as favorable

if the majority of the statements within the paragraph were favorable (two favorable statements and one unfavorable, for example).

Event- vs. Background/issue-Oriented News. These two categories were developed by the researcher and were based on Murdock and Gitlin's observations that news is event oriented, and that reports of past protests have often neglected the underlying content of the situation. Coding paragraphs as either event oriented or background/issue oriented was determined by the following definitions:

1. Event-Oriented News: Any description pertaining solely to the event itself, not the underlying issue at hand, was coded as event-oriented news.

2. Background/Issue-Oriented News: Information other than the actual news of the event: i.e, discussion of the issues behind the protest, the purpose of the protest, quotes from others concerning the protest or from those supporting either a pro- or anti-nuclear point of view, information concerning the danger or safety of nuclear power and/or nuclear weapons, and any other information not pertaining solely to the event itself were coded as background/issue-oriented news.

From the total number of articles on the protests, the number of paragraphs devoted to either event-oriented or background/issue-oriented news were tallied to determine the

percentage of each type of news within the total protest news.

Statistical Tests

Chi square was used to test all three hypotheses.

Intercoder Reliability

A pretest was conducted with the researcher and one coder who coded the same anti-nuclear protest articles from 1980, a year not included in the study, for tone and event-vs. background/issue-oriented news in order to determine percentage of agreement. Holsti's formula, which is discussed in Budd et al., for determining reliability was used:

$$R = \frac{2(C_{1,2})}{C_1 + C_2}$$

$C_{1,2}$ is the number of category assignments both coders agree on, and $C_1 + C_2$ is the total of category assignments made by both coders. (Budd et al., p.68)

Intercoder reliability of .93 was established for tone and .98 for background/issue-oriented news.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This study examined the newspaper coverage of anti-nuclear protests during 1979 and 1986. The tone and occurrence of event- and background/issue-oriented news in articles reported by the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, and the Los Angeles Times were analyzed and compared between the two years.

In all, a total of 1,649 paragraphs from a total of 138 articles were coded for tone and event- vs. background/issue-oriented news. The total paragraphs for each year represented the sum of the total paragraphs for the three newspapers.

Hypothesis 1 was supported. A chi-square test showed that there were significantly more neutral paragraphs of anti-nuclear protests than either favorable or unfavorable paragraphs. (See Table 1.)

Hypothesis 2 was not supported. A chi-square test comparing the percentage of favorable paragraphs in 1986 vs. the percentage in 1979 showed that there was not a significantly higher percentage of favorable paragraphs of anti-nuclear protests in 1986 than in 1979. There was, however, a significantly higher percentage of favorable paragraphs in 1979 than in 1986. (See Table 2.)

Hypothesis 3 was not supported. Although both years show a higher percentage of event-oriented paragraphs than background/issue-oriented paragraphs overall, a chi-square test comparing the percentage of background/issue-oriented paragraphs in the 1979 coverage of anti-nuclear protests vs. the percentage of paragraphs in the 1986 coverage showed that there was not a significantly higher percentage of paragraphs in 1986 than in 1979. Similarly, there was not a significantly higher percentage of event-oriented paragraphs in the 1979 coverage of anti-nuclear protests than in 1986. There was, however, a significantly higher percentage of background/issue-oriented paragraphs in 1979 than in 1986 and, conversely, a significantly higher percentage of event-oriented paragraphs in 1986 than in 1979. (See Table 3.)

(For a breakdown of total paragraphs for each newspaper, see Tables 4 and 5.)

Table 1

Tone of Anti-Nuclear Protest Coverage by Number of Paragraphs

| Year | Unfavorable | Neutral | Favorable | Total Paragraphs |
|-------|-------------|---------|-----------|---------------------|
| 1979 | 31 | 703 | 125 | 859 |
| 1986 | 19 | 694 | 77 | 790 |
| Total | 50 | 1,397 | 202 | 1,649 |

$\chi^2(2, N = 1,649) = 1980.3, p < .005$

Table 2

Tone of Anti-Nuclear Protest Coverage: 1979 vs. 1986 by
Percentage

| Year | Unfavorable | Neutral | Favorable | Total Paragraphs |
|-------|-------------|---------|-----------|---------------------|
| 1979 | 4% | 82% | 14% | 859 |
| 1986 | 2% | 88% | 10% | 790 |
| Total | 3% | 85% | 12% | 1,649 |

$\chi^2 (1, N = 1,649) = 7.36, p < .01$

Table 3

Percentage of Event- and Issue-Oriented Anti-Nuclear Protest
Coverage: 1979 vs. 1986

| Year | Event-Oriented News | Issue-Oriented News | Total Paragraphs |
|-------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1979 | 62% | 38% | 859 |
| 1986 | 72% | 28% | 790 |
| Total | 66% | 34% | 1,649 |

$\chi^2 (1, N = 1,649) = 5.62, p < .025$

Table 4

Tone of Anti-Nuclear Protest Coverage of the New York Times,
the Chicago Tribune, and the Los Angeles Times: 1979 and 1986

| | Unfavorable | Neutral | Favorable | Total Paragraphs |
|--------------------------|-------------|---------|-----------|---------------------|
| <u>1979</u> | | | | |
| <u>New York Times</u> | 16 | 152 | 21 | 189 |
| <u>Chicago Tribune</u> | 11 | 274 | 35 | 320 |
| <u>Los Angeles Times</u> | 4 | 277 | 69 | 350 |
| <u>1986</u> | | | | |
| <u>New York Times</u> | 6 | 71 | 5 | 82 |
| <u>Chicago Tribune</u> | 9 | 191 | 29 | 229 |
| <u>Los Angeles Times</u> | 4 | 432 | 43 | 479 |
| <u>Total</u> | 50 | 1,397 | 202 | 1,649 |

Table 5

Event- and Issue-Oriented Coverage of Anti-Nuclear Protests:
1979 and 1986

| | Event-Oriented News | Issue-Oriented News | Total Paragraphs |
|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| <u>1979</u> | | | |
| <u>New York Times</u> | 125 | 64 | 189 |
| <u>Chicago Tribune</u> | 225 | 95 | 320 |
| <u>Los Angeles Times</u> | 181 | 169 | 350 |
| <u>1986</u> | | | |
| <u>New York Times</u> | 48 | 34 | 82 |
| <u>Chicago Tribune</u> | 150 | 79 | 229 |
| <u>Los Angeles Times</u> | 367 | 112 | 479 |
| Total | 1,096 | 553 | 1,649 |

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the overall coverage of anti-nuclear protests during 1979 and 1986 was more neutral in tone than either favorable or unfavorable, and whether the tone and depth of this coverage had changed significantly from 1979 to 1986.

Testing these hypotheses was important because it may reveal whether the press tended to report more favorably about anti-nuclear demonstrations as the anti-nuclear movement evolved and built up public support and awareness by 1979 and continued to gain acceptance as a mainstream movement by 1986.

It was also important to look at whether the press included more background/issue-oriented information in its reports of the demonstrations because the inclusion of background and issue-oriented information may indicate the press' attempt to explain the underlying issues behind the demonstrations, as well as the arguments supporting the pro-nuclear viewpoint, and, therefore, provide more thorough and balanced coverage. Similarly, coverage that devotes more attention to just the event itself suggests, as the authors have pointed out earlier, that the press, whether consciously or unconsciously, has reduced the significance of the

political content of their actions and, therefore, presented a limited view of the demonstrations.

The first hypothesis of this study was supported. The total coverage by the three newspapers, the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Chicago Tribune during both years revealed that the reports of the anti-nuclear protests were significantly more neutral than either favorable or unfavorable in tone. This finding was important because, while it appears to be a predictable one, it suggests that the press was unbiased in its portrayal of anti-nuclear protests during and after 1979. This may also indicate that the media have evolved and become more neutral in their coverage of protests on the whole than during the 1960s or early 1970s. Although this study does not compare the coverage of protests during the 1960s or early 1970s, the literature does address the tone of the coverage during those earlier times and suggests that the media's portrayal of the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and early anti-nuclear demonstrations tended to be unfavorable on the whole.

The second hypothesis was not supported. The tone of the 1986 coverage of anti-nuclear protests was not significantly more favorable than that of the 1979 coverage. However, the results yielded a reverse finding: The 1979 coverage had a significantly higher percentage of favorable paragraphs than did the 1986 coverage. In addition, the data

also showed that both years had a higher percentage of favorable paragraphs than unfavorable paragraphs.

The third hypothesis was also not supported. While the overall coverage of the two years combined had significantly more event-oriented paragraphs than background/issue-oriented paragraphs, the 1986 coverage of anti-nuclear protests did not have a significantly higher percentage of background/issue-oriented paragraphs than did the 1979 coverage. But the findings for this test were also reversed: The 1979 coverage had a significantly higher percentage of issue-oriented paragraphs than did the 1986 coverage. Similarly, the 1986 coverage had a significantly higher percentage of event-oriented paragraphs than did the 1979 coverage.

While the data do not support the second and third hypotheses, the results cannot prove that the premises for these tests were false simply because the findings were reversed. What can be inferred from this analysis, however, is that the newspapers tended to provide more favorable and background information in their coverage of anti-nuclear protests during the earlier years of the movement than during the later years. This finding suggests that the press has not treated anti-nuclear protests with the same sense of urgency and importance during 1986 as it did during 1979, a time immediately following the Three Mile Island accident.

And while it has been argued that the press would treat the protests more favorably and devote more attention to the issues behind the protests during the later year, the reverse findings indicate that is not the case.

Instead the findings point to another possible theory: that the anti-nuclear movement received more favorable and issue-oriented coverage during 1979 than in 1986 because immediately after the Three Mile Island accident, the issue of safety was a major concern, and the public's need for information was great. By 1986, the movement may have been viewed as old news; the protests became everyday occurrences, and the media found no need to provide the public with a rehashing of the issue. The mid-1980s also marked an era of arms reduction between the two world superpowers, thereby reducing public fear of a nuclear war.

The results of this study indicate that the majority of the newspaper coverage of anti-nuclear protests was neutral overall, and although there was significantly more background news in 1979 than in 1986, the overall coverage remains significantly more event oriented. These findings support the view that the media treat protests with the customary event-oriented coverage and neutrality regardless of how legitimate their causes are perceived by the media and/or the public. But the findings also suggest that recency and novelty, or

lack thereof, are factors that may affect how the media report on protests.

This study was originally conceived by the researcher's observation of a pattern of the media's treatment of movements and the demonstrations that accompany these movements during the 1980s. The researcher noted a trend in which the media have more than ever during the 1980s become more sensitive to issues of interest groups than during the previous decades, opting to provide a more balanced picture of both sides to these issues. Every day the media report on groups mobilizing to further their causes: environmentalists, pacifists, animal rights organizations, etc. By publicizing and providing information on the issues behind the activities of these groups, the media were setting the agenda of the importance of these issues. The media, it seemed, had begun to regard these events not as disorder stories, but as legitimate events organized by concerned citizens.

But as the findings indicated, this trend toward more favorable treatment of protests was not apparent in the media coverage of anti-nuclear protests over the course of seven years. An observation of the coverage of protests against the Persian Gulf War of early 1991 suggests that the trend of protest coverage during the last decade has been moving toward less favorable treatment and possibly less coverage overall. One significant aspect of the Gulf War that seems to

echo of past protest coverage is that the opposition to the war appeared to receive scant attention. The protests took place on a nationwide scale, but the media appeared to devote a smaller portion of the time and space to these events than to those supporting the war.

Limitations of the Study

One of the most significant limitations of this study is that it addressed a visually oriented subject with a text-oriented analysis. The study would have benefited greatly from a content analysis of television news broadcasts of anti-nuclear protests, but the limited access to this medium made studying it difficult. Thus, for practical purposes, the study was limited to a content analysis of newspaper coverage of protests.

In addition, while the study was limited to addressing the tone and existence of background/issue-oriented information within the text, an analysis of the size, placement, headlines, and photographs accompanying these articles would have provided additional insight as to the tone of the coverage and the importance the press has assigned to the event.

Finally, while it was important to look at the amount of space the newspapers gave to the protests during each year, it was not possible to make a valid comparison because the study analyzed two different years in which a number of

different protests took place. Thus, the number of articles corresponding to the protests would differ.

Directions for Future Research

This study originated out of the researcher's earlier attempt to analyze the tone of media coverage of protests, particularly anti-Vietnam War protests of the 1960s, and compare it to the coverage of anti-war protests during the 1980s and 1990s to see whether the media have become more objective in the way they report on dissent and civil disobedience. But a quantitative study did not permit this comparison, as the two eras of protest were deemed incomparable. A qualitative analysis, or a combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses, of these two eras of protest could reveal how the political climate as well as the nature of protests have changed since the 1960s, and how the media have responded to this change in their coverage of these protests. More specifically, a comparison of anti-war protest coverage during the Vietnam War vs. that of the Persian Gulf War may offer insight as to whether and how media coverage of dissent has changed over the course of two decades. Such an analysis is important because it would contribute to the knowledge of the patterns of social change and how the media adapt to the ever-changing social climate.

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