LOCAL PRESS COVERAGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT

By Claire E. Taylor, Jung-Sook Lee, and William R. Davie

An examination of 600 items in the local press coverage of environmental conflict during a ten-year period showed that a community daily in a small, but heterogeneous system (1) did indeed favor government/industry sources rather than activists/citizens through all five stages of the conflict; (2) supported local industry in editorials and staff opinion columns in only two stages (Mobilization and Confrontation); and (3) legitimized local industry and marginalized its opponents through all five stages.

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There is a rich tradition of research on the mass media and community conflict in small, homogenous and large, pluralistic communities, but far less attention has been paid to environmental issues in "fragmented" communities.[1] In the rural south where such groupings are situated between small-homogenous and large-pluralistic metropolitan areas, the existence of such "fragmented" communities poses an important yet unanswered question about how news media function in covering the conflict of protracted environmental struggles.

American environmentalism in the 1990s has been credited with precipitating "a collision with long-dominant political and economic values."[2] Whenever there are angry citizens in debate, whether it is about a nuclear power plant, an urban renewal project, or location of a chemical waste disposal site, it often becomes a question of whose ox is being gored.[3] In a community conflict case involving a meat packing plant, for example, residents with little to lose if the plant were to close were most supportive of efforts to stop that town's largest employer from dumping raw sewage into a river.[4]

Residents of small communities experiencing high unemployment tend to welcome new industry that promises to create hundreds of jobs and pour millions of dollars into the stagnant economy. When it involves hazardous waste, however, community reaction often divides residents into two groups: those who applaud the windfall of new employment opportunities and those who point ominously at the potential health and safety risks. The size and fabric of such a community, the level of local journalists' interest, and the parent company's attempts to mold public opinion also influence the development and outcome of such conflicts.[5]

By tracing the evolution of one "fragmented" community's experience during a ten-year period, it is possible to discern how coverage of an environmental dispute over a planned hazardous waste incinerator was framed in terms of the powers involved at different stages during the community conflict. By doing so, we attempt to assess how the local press

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framed the conflict and sought to influence the outcome of this potential health and environmental hazard.

Brief Background of the Controversy

Several stakeholders were identified in this study, but the primary conflict pitted Marine Shale Processors (MSP), the fourth largest employer of a south Louisiana Parish, against environmental activists, including Greenpeace, who voiced angry opposition to this hazardous waste treatment plant. The following account reveals how the fear of carcinogens provoked citizen wrath and produced mediated expressions of opinion based on health and environmental regulations directed at the incinerator's firm.

Shortly after installing a nonhazardous oil field waste incinerator in 1985, MSP began accepting and burning hazardous materials in St. Mary Parish, Louisiana. Company officials explained that the toxic waste was to be recycled into nonhazardous materials and used as fill for roads and properties. News of the hazardous waste burning galvanized residents of east St. Mary Parish (Amelia, Morgan City, Berwick, and Patterson), and polarized those concerned with environmental and health safety against those supporting MSP's infusion of capital and jobs into an area suffering from a slowdown in the oil and gas industry.

Opponents claimed that MSP repeatedly violated federal environmental regulations, and was a sham recycler exempt from stringent hazardous waste incinerator laws. They argued that the company was responsible for a handful of childhood cancer cases.[6] Company officials and supporters countered with evidence that MSP was not a polluter, and that it used innovative technology to recycle hazardous waste into safe materials.

Government agencies appeared at first to be unable to reliably assess whether the company was in fact a hazardous recycler legitimately qualified to operate under less stringent rules, or whether it should be subject to stricter, and consequently more expensive, environmental regulations. In 1995, the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) denied the company's request for a permit to operate its industrial furnace.

Related Studies

Issues related to news coverage and community conflicts have intrigued researchers since Chicago sociologists first examined the press in urban settings at the turn of this century.[7] The literature has established that the news media occupy a subsystem within the total community system, affecting and being affected by other subsystems, including the business community. In both small, homogenous communities and larger, pluralistic ones, news stories generally reflect the viewpoints of power elites.[8] Likewise, residents in small-homogenous communities tend to support their local institutions, including media outlets, perceiving those local media to be fairer than the external media in the news coverage of community conflicts.[9]

Media reports help define a conflict and frame it for their activists. The media, through selection of sources and placement of their statements in stories, can legitimize one perspective while withholding legitimacy from another—in essence restricting the flow of information to the community—and thereby influencing the outcome of the conflict.[10]

There is a substantial body of research concerning frames and the news media. In 1972, Bateson introduced the concept of framing. He asserted that

psychological frames included some messages and excluded others. Bateson believed that the frame of a message was intended to organize the perceptions of the audience and consequently tells individuals, "attend to what is within and do not attend to what is outside."[11] This concept leaves potential audience members with a distorted view of reality.

Media frames are used to select, emphasize, and present information about what exists. These frames organize issues for journalists who report on events and audience members who rely on mediated messages for information. According to Gitlin, "Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual."[12]

Research continues to examine the effect that media frames have on public discourse. When issues are framed by the media, elements of an issue are either highlighted or excluded in order to make the issue more noticeable and understandable to an audience.[13] Inclusion or exclusion of various elements of an issue is the basis of journalistic discretion and framing.

A community's reaction to the location or expansion of a hazardous waste facility will largely affect the future of the plant and its relationship with the community. High levels of toxins may lead to lawsuits embroiling the industry and community in court battles for years, producing negative publicity, and dividing the community.[14] The industry, in turn, vies to restore its reputation by engaging support from media and civic leaders in a battle to win public opinion in the community where it operates.

The concept of community has been defined in various ways by social scientists, including communication researchers. Some describe it "as a locality—people grouped by geographic location."[15] Others define it as, not just a geographic locale, but also the governmental structure encompassing social and political relationships.[16] Community is "a territorially organized system coextensive with a settlement pattern" that includes an effective, operating communication network, people sharing facilities and services in the settlement, and a psychological identification with a local symbol, the community name.[17]

In a study of eighty-eight Minnesota editors' influence in community conflict, Olien, Donohue, and Tichenor[18] described a dichotomous structure, distinguishing between small communities with populations under 3,499 and large communities with 3,500 or more residents. They also measured community pluralism by summarizing the rank position based on five characteristics: municipal populations, number of businesses, number of voluntary groups, number of churches, and number of schools and educational centers.[19]

Researchers discovered that the degree to which a community is homogenous or pluralistic has a bearing on the likelihood that conflict will disrupt the community, the manner in which the local media cover the conflict, and the type of community relations programs an organization implements. Most organizations recognize the importance of maintaining an employable work force, customers, suppliers, and incentives to attract personnel, as well as constraining its activities if citizens become angered by them.[20]

Communities today find themselves with decidedly less ability to control outside entities who thread themselves with financial incentives into a community's social fabric, whether welcome or not. Plans to enter a community create the potential for conflict as some citizens embrace in-

creased economic opportunities, while others resist the sudden shift of power and influence.[21]

Local economics influence local news coverage, particularly stories of controversial issues such as the environment.[22] A local newspaper's profits depend upon advertising revenue and readership, therefore, the larger the community's population and the healthier the local economy, the greater the potential revenue of the local newspaper.[23] Smaller circulation newspapers like the *Daily Review* of Morgan City, Louisiana, appear more vulnerable to economic pressure than larger ones which have a broader base of economic support. The type of system or structure in which the media operate affects the size of the local newspaper and its coverage. In many cases, the media content is determined partly by those who finance it: publishers, advertisers, and business elites.[24]

There is even evidence of publishers assuming an active role in directing newsroom activity on issues that conceivably might affect the newspaper's revenue, particularly dailies and weeklies with a circulation of under 15,000.[25] Bowers attributed intrusive publisher activity at smaller newspapers to the publisher's familiarity with the community and staff, and to the newspaper's smaller and less stable economic base.

Conflict generally can be described as a struggle over scarce resources, and the size of a community affects conflicts in terms of frequency and intensity. Conflict will occur with greater frequency in larger communities, but conflict arising in smaller communities will be more intense.[26] Media in larger communities are more likely to provide coverage of community conflicts than media in smaller communities, which often see their role as that of a community booster, maintaining the status quo and avoiding coverage viewed as adverse to the civic peace of the area.

Purpose of this Study

Building on earlier research of news coverage of controversial issues, this research analyzes an environmental controversy during a ten-year time span. It identifies stages of this conflict in order to determine whether the local press used government and industry sources more often than activists in stories; supported local industry in its editorials and staff opinion columns; and legitimized local industry and business elites through the use of positive framing of news items.

By analyzing a small, privately-owned daily, this study gives an added dimension to prior research on newsmaking. Soloski[27] noted that most studies of the newsmaking process have focused on major metropolitan dailies dissimilar demographically to small daily newspapers. The median circulation for all U.S. dailies is under 25,000. The newspaper examined in this study, the *Daily Review* of Morgan City, Louisiana, is privately owned, has a circulation of 6,000, and is the only daily published in the "fragmented" community area.

The study also expands the model used in a Minnesota study, with communities varying in size from under 2,000 to 100,000 residents. That is the range applied to "fragmented" communities —those that are small, hetero-geneous and served by daily newspapers as opposed to weeklies—outside the Minnesota area.

Research Questions

The entry of the news media into a community problem may determine how an issue evolves into a conflict, or if a conflict emerges at all. The literature suggests that a newspaper's entry into a community controversy has a decided impact on the outcome. It can define the issues, legitimize the

arguments and parties involved, and reinforce the positions taken by the community's business and civic leaders or the opposing activist groups. Will the anticipated reporting patterns of the press, in "fragmented" communities—small, heterogeneous communities—served by daily newspapers, be as predictive as those found in large, heterogeneous and small, homogenous communities?

Prior research indicates that the media rely heavily upon government and industry as sources both in routine and crisis reporting. Whether or not an issue or group is accepted as legitimate and reasonable based upon community norms is viewed as a factor of its portrayal in the local media. Research suggests media outlets tend to reinforce the position of the community's upper echelon—business, industry, community leaders—and rely heavily upon well-established organizations as sources of information. By doing so, the media give salience to one side of an issue while denying opposing viewpoints equal importance.

This study is thus guided by three basic questions:

(1) Did the local press use government and industry sources more often than other sources, including activists, through stages in the conflict?

(2) Did the local press support local industry through its editorials and staff opinion columns in all stages of the conflict?

(3) Did the local press legitimize local industry through the use of positive framing in news stories in all stages of the conflict?

Methods

The Data. The content universe for this study consists of all published items[28] about MSP Inc. in the *Daily Review* of Morgan City between January 1985 and December 1994. The data set covered a total of 602 cases consisting of 442 news items and 158 non-news items (two cases were not coded for this measure). Non-news items include advertisements, editorials, letters to the editor, and staff opinion columns.

All data were collected at the Morgan City Archives using microfilm machines and actual newspapers. Each edition was analyzed based on a pre-constructed, pre-printed coding scheme.[29] Overall inter-coder reliability[30] achieved 80% agreement for the key variables, and overall intra-coder reliability was 84%. Statistical tests were used to indicate the strength of differences between groups of content, not to demonstrate predictive probabilities as in sampling procedures.

The Community. For the purposes of this study, East St. Mary Parish was considered as a single unit, a single "community," sharing both small and large community characteristics. The population of East St. Mary Parish, according to U.S. Census reports, was 30,462, which fits neither the defined population of a small, rural community nor an urban area. It has been defined as "fragmented" based on elements of diversity and population dispersion.

In their research, Donohue, Olien, and Tichenor[31] observed that as a community's population increases, so does its diversity. Is it conceivable to assume that a decrease in population can result in a decrease in pluralism? The population of East St. Mary Parish fell by more than 4,000 between 1980

and 1990; however, there was an influx of workers from across the nation in these years when the oil industry expanded, which added to the community's ethnic, religious, and social traditions. East St. Mary Parish is thus a "fragmented" community,[32] one which is small in size (population) but has a heterogeneous population and social system.

Conflict Stages. The present study identified the five conflict stages during the ten-year period of investigation—*Initiation, Mobilization, Bureaucratic, Confrontation,* and *Trial*— prior studies have concluded are common to most conflicts.[33] The *Initiation* stage is conceptually defined as the beginning of a community controversy, when sides of an issue are formed and the conflict is first defined. The *Mobilization* stage occurs when a visible number of residents begin to organize in opposition to an issue or controversy. A conflict moves into the *Bureaucratic* stage when much of the debate occurs in government proceedings and public hearings. The *Confrontation* stage occurs when the involved parties resort to confrontation, either face-to-face such as protests, or through lawsuits. Finally, the *Trial* stage occurs when the controversy moves into the courts for resolution.

Dependent Measures. Dependent measures include: (1) news story sources; (2) number of pro-MSP versus anti-MSP/neutral editorials and opinion columns; and (3) positive framing of MSP versus activists defined by position in story, sources, and slant.

For measuring the sources (appearing in the subset of news stories only), a maximum of eight sources were recorded for each category per story (range 0-8). "Government sources" referred to the local, state, and federal government officials as well as judges. "MSP sources" meant anyone, excluding industry scientists, speaking on behalf of, or as representative of, the company. "Activists" referred to anyone speaking on behalf of, or as a representative of, any organized, official activist, advocacy, or protest groups. This could include members of or representatives of South Louisianians Against Pollution (SLAP) and the Atchafalaya Delta Society (ADS), both based in Morgan City; the Hazardous Waste Treatment Council (HWTC) based in Washington, D.C.; Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (CCHW) in Arlington, Virginia; the international Greenpeace group; and the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN). "Residents" referred to those from the St. Mary Parish area speaking either for or against MSP. "Scientists" referred to anyone employed by or speaking voluntarily on behalf of the industry, government, and activist groups.

Editorials and opinion columns were coded using binary discretion, either 1 or 0. If the story appeared to endorse MSP's position, it was coded as 1 (pro-MSP); otherwise it was coded as 0 (anti-MSP or neutral). Only activists and MSP sources are included in the framing analysis because they represent polar opposites in the conflict: industry and the jobs created versus health and environmental safety factors.

Framing scores were created by summing five measures: MSP and activists' positions per story, MSP and activist use as sources, and slant. MSP and activists were scored on where they appeared in each story. If MSP or activists were mentioned throughout the story, they were assigned a 3; first half of the story only, a 2; second half only, 1; and no mention, zero. Pro-MSP items were scored as 1 point; anti-MSP/neutral items as 0. Source totals for each group were added with slant (pro-MSP is rated 1; anti-MSP or neutral rates 0) and position score. The higher the total framing score, the more positively that group was framed by the press.

TABLE 1

Percent Distribution of Printed Items by Conflict Stage, 1985-1994

Conflict Stages

Year	INIT	MOB	BUR	CONF	TRIAL	Total
1985	44.6					4.8
1986	38.5					4.2
1987	16.9	67.9				11.3
1988		32.1	40.4			21.6
1989			42.0			17.8
1990			16.0	11.3		8.5
1991			1.6	73.0		11.5
1992				15.7	23.0	6.5
1993					11.9	2.2
1994					65.1	11.8
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	65	84	255	89	109	602

Findings

Data Characteristics. Table 1 shows the separate, but overlapping phases of the conflict development in this environmental problem. All items published in 1985 and 1986 appeared in the *Initiation* stage. Items published in 1987 overlap the *Initiation* stage and enter into the *Mobilization* stage, since that marks the point when citizens began mobilizing against MSP, motivated by the company's offer to accept the infamous New York garbage barge.[34] The *Mobilization* stage proceeded into 1988, then emerged as the *Bureaucratic* stage, which progressed through 1989 and into 1990. In 1990, the conflict evolved into a *Confrontation* stage, which gained momentum through 1991 and into 1992. The *Trial* stage appeared in 1992 and slowly migrated through to the end of 1994, when the study concluded.

Table 1 shows how the coverage of the MSP conflict began slowly in 1985 and 1986 with fewer than 30 items published per year. It peaked in 1988 when 21.6% of the published items appeared, and then dropped to 17.8% in 1989. Citizens began mobilizing against MSP in the Fall of 1987, but then a suspected link with childhood cancer surfaced in 1988, which contributed to the increased coverage. Coverage again peaked in 1994 when 11.8% of the items were published, largely covering the trial of a lawsuit between the EPA and MSP over the legitimacy of the company as a hazardous waste recycler.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of news items and non-news items over the five conflict stages. In the *Initiation* phase, 80% of the 65 published pieces were news, and 20% non-news. It was in this phase that MSP received its permit to burn non-hazardous waste; the state allowed MSP to burn creosote

FIGURE 1
Percentage of News vs. Non-News Items by Conflict Stage
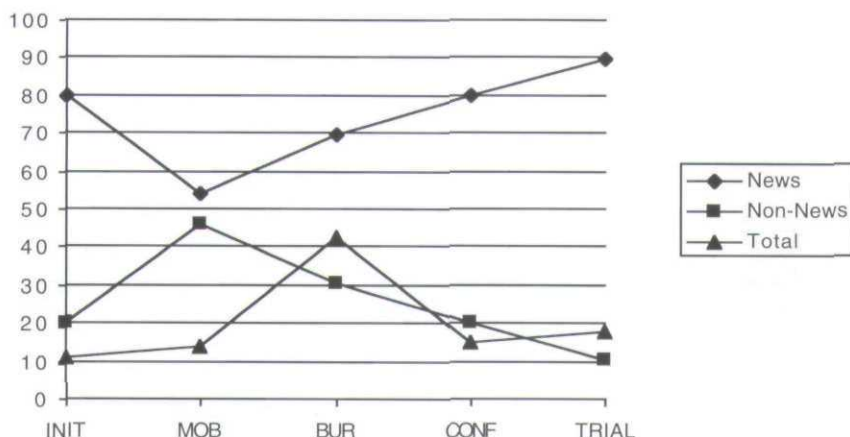
sludge as a fuel; DEQ confirmed water pollution at MSP; and the Department of Natural Resources issued a compliance order to MSP.

The difference between the number of news versus non-news items was the least during the *Mobilization* stage, when news comprised 54.2% of the 84 items published, and non-news comprised 45.8%. The news reports covered residents who spoke against MSP at parish council meetings, and the citizens action group, SLAP, was formed.

The *Bureaucratic* stage garnered the largest number of items (*n*=255) with 69.3% news vs. 30.7% non-news. During that phase, Morgan City restricted the use of aggregate from MSP, and EPA issued its self-imposed deadline to report findings from 1986 site visit.

The proportion of news coverage increased in the *Confrontation* stage, when 79.8% of the 89 items was news versus 20.2% non-news. That was when coverage was about Greenpeace's protests at the MSP plant, and environmentalists petitioned the EPA to crack down on MSP.

The largest spread between news and non-news items, however, occurred in the *Trial* stage, when 89.9% of the 109 items was coded as news and only 10.1% non-news. The newspaper reported on EPA moves to deny MSP final permit; and a seven-hour public hearing was held by the EPA in Morgan City. There was also coverage of DEQ joining EPA in suit against MSP, and the court order of $8 million in MSP fines.

The ratio between news/non-news and conflict stages was substantive, and the difference according to stages was significant by statistical means (x^2=36.5, df=4, $p < .001$) indicating not only the correct delineation of news stages but a correspondence in terms of reporting and commentary.

Overall, 67.7% (or 406) of the 600 valid cases were judged as anti-MSP or neutral, and 32.3% (or 194) were found to favor MSP. Of 442 news items,

FIGURE 2
MSP vs. Activist Groups Mentioned in News Items, 1985-1994
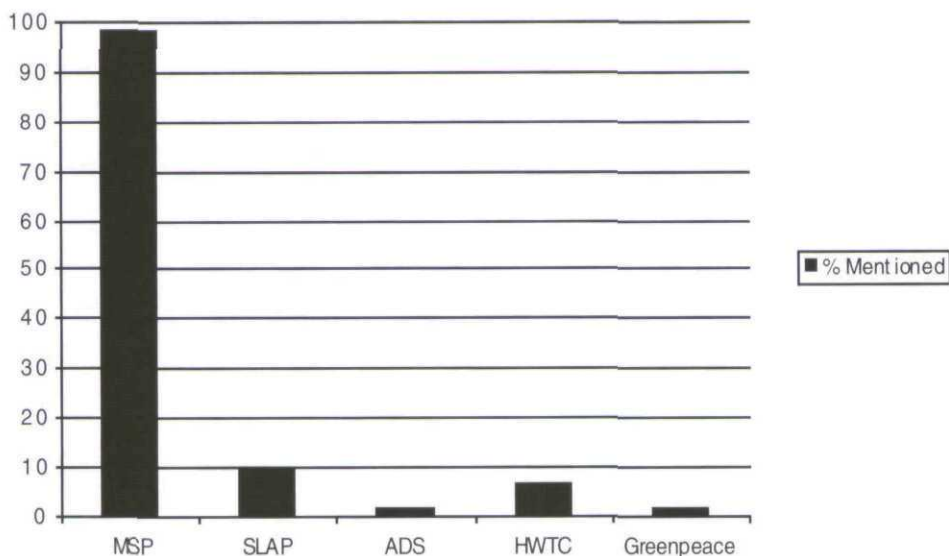
Note: N = 438, the number of news items excluding 4 cases with missing information. MSP=Marine Shale Processors Inc.; SLAP=South Louisianians Against Pollution; ADS=Achafalaya Delta Society; HWTC=Hazardous Waste Treatment Council; Greenpeace=International Greenpeace group.

78.7% (or 348) were judged as anti-MSP or neutral, 21.3% (or 94) as pro-MSP.

Figure 2 shows the marked contrast between coverage of MSP versus coverage of four activist groups involved in this debate. MSP was mentioned in 98.6% of 438 news items, while activist groups were mentioned in only 19.8%, with South Louisianians Against Pollution (SLAP) in 10.1%, Hazardous Waste Treatment Council (HWTC) in 6.9%, and Atchafalaya Delta Society (ADS) and Greenpeace in 1.4% each.

Of 600 valid cases, 8.2% (or 49 items) were editorials and staff opinion columns. The largest coverage appeared in the *Initiation* stage of the conflict, accounting for 16.9% of the 65 published items. The smallest percentage was published in the *Trial* stage, 4.6%. It appears that as the conflict progressed through the five stages, the local press published fewer staff editorials and opinion columns about the topic.

News Sources and Conflict Stages. The first research question asked whether the local press cited government and industry sources more often than other sources, including activists, through all stages in this community conflict. The data answered in the affirmative and revealed marked differences across the five sources. Overall mean scores showed that government sources, including local, state, and federal elected officials, employees, and judges, were cited an average of 2.1 times per story, and MSP sources, 1.4 times per story (n = 442). Mean scores for the remaining sources were noticeably lower: residents, .3; activists, .2; and scientists, .2.

Government sources were cited more often than any other sources for each conflict stage, except the *Confrontation* stage, when mean scores for MSP

FIGURE 3
Percentage of Source Citations in News Stories by Conflict Stage
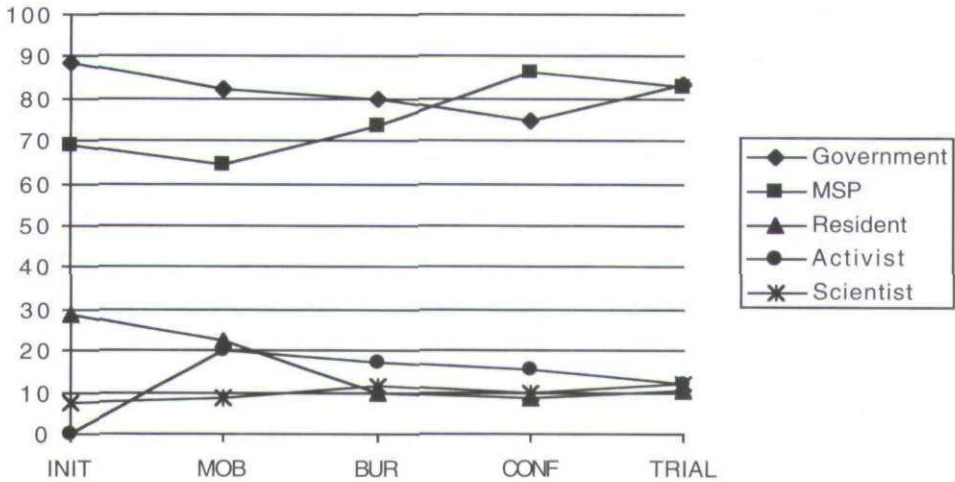
Note: N=442, the total number of all news items identified and analyzed. INIT=Initiation Stage; MOB=Mobilization Stage; BUR=Bureaucratic Stage; CONF=Confrontation Stage; TRIAL=Trial Stage.

(1.7) and government sources (1.6) were comparable. The largest gap between MSP and government sources was in the *Initiation* stage (government, 2.7 and MSP, .94). Local and state government agencies were highly involved in this stage of the conflict, which included debates over which state agency had jurisdiction over MSP and whether the federal EPA should oversee the company. Local government, especially the St. Mary Parish Council and Councilman R. C. "Bob" McHugh were highly involved in the *Initiation* stage.

Mean scores showed that organized activists were not involved in the *Initiation* stage of the conflict, although residents were. Individual citizens raised objections to MSP in the *Initiation* stage, but did not organize until the *Mobilization* stage. Some of the sources cited as residents in the *Initiation* stage became activist sources in the *Mobilization* stage and thereafter.

Overall, government sources were cited at least once in the majority of news items (81.2% of 442 news stories), MSP sources were cited in 76%, activists in 14%, residents in 13.1%, and scientists in 10.6%. Government sources were the most-often quoted individuals in the *Initiation* stage, with 88.5% of news stories citing at least one government representative, compared with 69.2% referring to MSP representatives, 28.8% citing residents, 7.7% scientists, with no activists sourced in the reports.

Figure 3 shows that government sources were most often cited in all but one conflict stage. During the *Confrontation* stage, 86% of the stories had at least one MSP source, compared with 74.6% with at least one government source. This may be attributed to the sequence of events, since MSP was involved in confrontations and lawsuits filed by individuals—issues that did not directly involve government agents—and thus it was cited more often during this stage.

During the *Confrontation* period, MSP purposely defied DEQ orders, and moved aggregate from its site.

In the *Mobilization* stage, government sources again were most quoted, with 82.2% of the stories citing at least one government source. MSP sources were cited in 64.4% of the *Mobilization* stage stories, followed by residents, 22.2%; activists, 20%; and scientists, 8.8%. Activists were cited in a larger percentage of stories in the *Mobilization* stage than in any of the other four conflict stages. Conversely, MSP sources in the *Mobilization* stage were cited in a smaller percentage of stories than in any of the other four stages.

Government and MSP sources were most cited in the *Bureaucratic* stage, with 80.1% of stories having at least one government source, and 73.3% referring to at least one MSP source ($n=176$). Activists were found in 17% of the *Bureaucratic* stories, scientists in 11.4%, and residents in 9.7%. During the *Bureaucratic* stage, MSP was fined $12.8 million for water pollution violations, and the firm agreed to pay a $1 million dollar federal fine in a plea bargain ending the federal investigation. In addition, MSP's aggregate failed Department of Transportation tests, and MSP failed emissions tests administered by the DEQ.

MSP spokespersons were used more than any other sources in the *Confrontation* stage, with 86% of the stories ($n=71$) citing at least one company source. Government officials followed, with 74.6% of the stories citing at least one. Activists were counted in 15.5% of the stories, scientists in 9.8%, and residents in 8.5%. Residents in the *Confrontation* stage occupied a smaller percentage of stories than in any of the other four stages. It should be noted that the confrontations were largely between MSP and organized opposition such as Greenpeace, or between MSP and residents involved in lawsuits, in which case court documents were usually cited instead of the individuals.

During the *Trial* stage, government and company sources were cited about equally: government sources in 83.6% of the stories, and MSP in 82.7%. Activists and scientists were cited equally, in 12.2% of the stories, with varying interpretations. Except for the *Initiation* stage before they organized, activists appeared in the smallest percentage of stories during the *Trial* stage. Conversely, scientists were cited in a larger percentage of stories during this stage than earlier or latter ones. Residents were cited in 10.2% of the stories during the *Trial* stage.

Government and MSP source means differed significantly for the *Initiation* and *Confrontation* stages, while resident sources differed for the *Initiation* and *Trial* stages. Findings suggest that government and MSP sources were cited significantly more often throughout the conflict than any other sources. Mean scores for the five source categories were not equal across the five conflict stages. Three source categories were significant at $p < .05$: government, ($F = 3.2$, $df(4, 437)$, $p = .01$); MSP, ($F = 4.1$, $df(4, 437)$, $p = .003$); and residents, ($F = 2.8$, $df(4, 437)$, $p = .03$).

Editorial Endorsement and Conflict Stages: The second research question dealt with whether the local press supported local industry through its editorials and staff opinion columns in various stages of the conflict. Figure 4 depicts the finding that the local newspaper editorialized in support of local industry during two conflict stages—*Mobilization* and *Confrontation*—but not during the other three stages of the conflict.

Overall, the division between pro-MSP versus anti/neutral stances was approximately 41% to 59%, respectively. During the *Mobilization* stage, however, all of the editorial items ($n = 7$) were slanted in favor of MSP. In the *Confrontation* stage, 60% of the editorials favored MSP, while 40% were either

FIGURE 4

FIGURE 4

Percentage of Editorial Supports by Conflict Stage
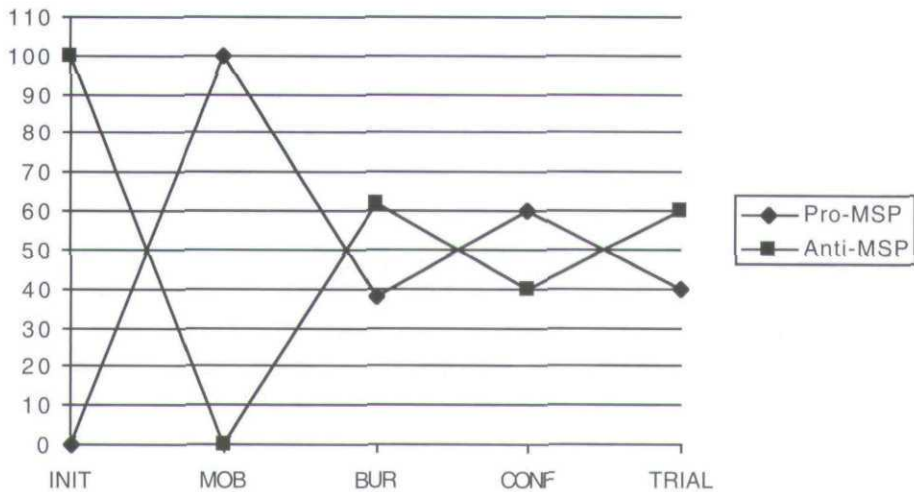
Note: Based on *N*=49, the total number of editorials and opinion items identified and analyzed in this study. INIT=Initiation Stage; MOB=Mobilization Stage; BUR=Bureaucratic Stage; CONF=Confrontation Stage; TRIAL=Trial Stage.

anti-MSP or neutral (*n* = 5). This finding suggests that, during the two most confrontational stages of the conflict—when citizens began mobilizing against MSP and when confrontations occurred between activists and MSP—the local newspaper's editorials and staff opinion columns appeared to support MSP's position in the community conflict.

One of the first staff opinion columns appearing in the *Initiation* stage predicted that "the battle will be a heated one and the parish is facing some powerful opposition" in MSP.[35] An editorial published late in the *Initiation* stage discussed community reaction to a fire at the company and encouraged it to be "a good corporate citizen."[36]

A few months later the conflict had moved into the *Mobilization* stage, after citizens organized following the floating garbage barge and child cancer stories. A staff opinion column in November 1987 urged authorities to consider air pollution in general before considering MSP as a possible cause for childhood cancer.[37] By 1989, as the conflict moved into the Bureaucratic stage, a staff opinion column titled "Kettle Calling the Pot Black?" blasted the Hazardous Waste Treatment Council—reportedly a conglomerate of waste incinerators—for "crowing about the latest regulatory misfortunes" of MSP.[38]

Framing, Legitimization, and Conflict Stages: Data in Table 2 showed in all stages of the conflict, the local press legitimized local industry and marginalized opponents through the use of positive framing in its reporting. The cell means for MSP framing are markedly higher than that of activists for all five conflict stages. Means for the MSP framing scores across the five conflict stages were large, 4.5 (SD=1.3), compared with the activist framing,

TABLE 2
Framing Scores for MSP vs. Activist Sources by Conflict Stage

Sources	INIT	MOB	BUR	CONF	Trial	Total
			Conflict Stages			
MSP	4.1	4.7	4.4	5.0	4.6	4.5
	(1.0)	(1.9)	(1.4)	(1.1)	(.9)	(1.3)
Activists	.4	1.9	1.6	1.5	1.5	1.5
	(.2)	(1.0)	(.9)	(1.0)	(.6)	(.8)
Total (in items)	52	46	176	71	97	442

Note: Framing scores are presented along with standard deviations in parentheses (N=442, the total number of news items identified and analyzed). INIT=Initiation Stage; MOB=Mobilization Stage; BUR=Bureaucratic Stage; CONF=Confrontation Stage; TRIAL=Trial Stage.

1.5 (SD≈.8), suggesting that the local newspaper consistently favored MSP in its coverage.

Summary and Discussion

The local press coverage of the community conflict covered five stages, including sources used, editorial coverage, and framing of the issues based on the content of all published items. From an analysis of 600 (442 news and 158 non-news) items, we may conclude that: (1) The local press did indeed favor government INIT and industry sources by citing them more often than activists and community residents through all stages of the conflict; (2) The local press supported local industry in editorials and staff opinion columns through only two stages of the conflict; and (3) The local press did indeed legitimize local industry and not its opponents through positive framing throughout the conflict.

There was ample evidence that *The Daily Review's* support of MSP did not correspond with the harsh reality of the company's environmental record. In the *Initiation* stage, for example, the DEQ cited the marine shale processor for 25 pollution violations, and the DEQ secretary drafted a compliance order listing 37 violations at MSP of state air, water, groundwater, and hazardous waste regulations. During the *Trial* stage, DEQ joined EPA in a suit against MSP, and a judge ordered $8 million in MSP fines. Following the completion of this study, MSP lost its prolonged court battle with the EPA, and was shut down almost ten years after its inception. As a result of the lawsuit, a consent decree was reached which allowed a Lafayette company, GTX Inc., to acquire the plant pending state permits. MSP founder Jack Kent was allowed to maintain a financial interest in GTX, but forbidden from personal involvement in its daily operations. The court authorized GTX to operate a hazardous waste landfill for disposing its aggregate, but at this writing, a federal judge has sealed the three possible locations.

This study adds in a new context further support to the existing literature that public officials and industry spokespersons are the predominant sources relied upon by the news media.[39] Even during the two most

controversial stages of the conflict—*Mobilization* and *Confrontation*—the local press cited industry spokespersons more often that activists. If the local industry and government are cited more often than activist opponents by the margins documented here, it is reasonable to conclude that the newspaper's readers are receiving a skewed view of the conflict. This finding is consistent with prior studies concluding that the local media tend to support the dominant position of business and civic leaders, thereby reinforcing the status quo.[40]

Second, the question of whether or not the local press, through editorials and staff opinion columns, would support local industry in all stages of a community conflict yielded interesting results. In only two stages of conflict, *Mobilization* and *Confrontation*, the local newspaper editorialized more heavily in favor of MSP than against it. Adding to the importance of this issue were allegations by some local activists that the *Daily Review* favored MSP, and claims by MSP that the newspaper was biased against them— allegations that led to an editorial pronouncing the newspaper's objectivity. Accusations, the editorial stated, will not "persuade us to prostitute the editorial columns of this newspaper for the sake of MSP or anti-MSP proponents at the expense of our readers."[41]

During the *Initiation* stage, the *Daily Review*'s editorials and opinion columns were all anti-MSP or neutral. None supported the company's position. An example of the newspaper's early editorial position was published on 23 August 1985: "We do not want a toxic waste dump here. We do not want increased cancer rates. Our economic situation is not yet that desperate."[42]

During this early stage, the dominant forces involved in the conflict included a single parish councilman and a handful of concerned citizens versus MSP and a handful of businessmen. During the *Mobilization* stage, when organized opposition emerged, the newspaper shifted its editorial stance in favor of the company. A 19 June 1987 editorial proclaimed, "There is no determination of any long-range effects of hazardous waste disposal activities, just as there are not determinants for long-range effects on computer terminal operators—another relatively new business—or for eating blackened redfish.[43]

The newspaper again supported MSP editorially during the *Confrontation* stage, when the company faced lawsuits and protests by the international environmental group Greenpeace, which drew extensive media coverage. By this stage, some local business organizations and officials began supporting MSP with resolutions, petitions to state government, and public statements. (The local Chamber of Commerce named MSP Business of the Year in February 1993.) This support of MSP by the civic leaders seems to echo the literature that newspapers which, early in a conflict, oppose the industry, ultimately turn to support that industry position which reflects the stance of the community's power elite, despite the opposition from citizen groups.[44]

In one column, for example, Ted McManus wrote that protesters at a public hearing were "a small but vocal group" of "so-called agitators" paid by the HWTC which included members of SLAP and "others of that ilk."[45] Editor Steve Shirley, in an 11 January 1989 column, wrote that MSP owner Jack Kent, a self-taught engineer, "dazzles all the college-educated people he hires." The editor also wrote, "MSP has the answer," but it "can get no respect."[46] The local newspaper seems to have legitimized MSP and withheld legitimacy from the activist groups involved, namely SLAP and the HWTC.

Finally, the local press legitimized the local industry, and not its activist opponents, through positive framing in news stories during all stages of the "fragmented" community conflict. Results suggest that the local press did frame MSP and activists differently and drew more attention to its position than the activists by citing more company sources. By framing MSP more positively than activists, the local press limited the information reaching its readers, information necessary to make informed decisions and state reasoned opinions in a community debate.

In some instances, the framing of this environmental conflict in favor of the industry was rather obvious. In others, it was more insidious. For instance, during the data collection it became apparent that MSP was usually mentioned in the lead or first few paragraphs of a story, while opponents like SLAP and the HWTC appeared later in the story, an observation supported by descriptive data analyses. Sometimes, after opponents' positions were presented, the newspaper returned to MSP's position with quotes and explanations from MSP sources, giving them the dominant position in the piece.

Future research should attempt to replicate the present study in other states and communities—homogenous, pluralistic, and, like the present one, fragmented in order to further test these findings, and compare coverage of activists and community leaders. We also recommend incorporating survey and interview data to expand upon the scope of the findings, while content analyzing other types of media coverage of such conflicts to determine what role, if any, they played in the conflict's development.

Other regional media covered the MSP controversy, and appeared to be more balanced in their coverage. They included the *Daily Advocate* (Baton Rouge), *Times Picayune* (New Orleans), *Houma Daily Courier*, and Associated Press. TV stations in Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and Lafayette also covered points in the controversy, while daily newspapers in Dallas and St. Petersburg, Florida, published related feature stories on area children with cancer.

What this study suggests is that the forces of business and industry leaders have powerful ways in the face of environmental hazard, and that the press in "fragmented" communities may succumb to the corporate line and become oblivious to the cause of environmental activists and the concerns they represent.

NOTES

1. The term "fragmented" community here refers to a community small in size, but high in pluralism.

2. C. J. Bosso, "After the Movement: Environmental Activism in the 1990s," in *Environmental Policy in the 1990s*, 2d ed., ed. N. J. Vig and M. E. Kraft (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1994), 31.

3. Phillip J. Tichenor, George A. Donohue, and Clarice N. Olien, *Community Conflict and the* Press (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980), 139.

4. N. C. Sharma, J. E. Kivlin, and F. C. Fliegel, "Environmental Pollution: Is There Enough Concern to Lead to Action?" *Environment and Behavior* 7 (1975): 455-71.

5. Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, *Community Conflict*.

6. Information sought on cancer incidences appeared since 10 November 1987; link alleged between childhood cancer and MSP in June 1988.

7. Robert E. Park is considered to be a "founder of the sociological study of mass communication and public opinion and the field's first theorist." See P. Jean Frazier and Cecilie Gaziano, *Robert Ezra Park's Theory of News, Public Opinion and Social Control*, Journalism Monographs, no. 64 (Columbia, SC: AEJMC, November 1979), 1; Morris Janowitz, *The Community Press in an Urban Setting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

8. Alex S. Edelstein and J. Blaine Schulz, "The Weekly Newspaper's Leadership Role as Seen by Community Leaders: A Sociological Perspective," in *People, Society, and Mass Communications*, ed. Lewis Anthony Dexter and David Manning White (New York: The Free Press, 1963), 221-38; A. Viddich and J. Bensman, *Small Town in Mass Society: Class Power and Religion in a Rural Community* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968).

9. David L. Paletz, P. Reichert, and B. McIntyre, "How the Media Support Local Governmental Authority," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 35 (spring 1971): 80-92; G. Stone and P. Mazza, "Impact of Consensus Theory on Community Newspaper Organization," *Journalism Quarterly* 54 (summer 1977): 313-19; Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, *Community Conflict*; Charles T. Salmon and Jung-Sook Lee, "Perceptions of Newspaper Fairness: A Structural Approach," *Journalism Quarterly* 60 (winter 1983): 663-70.

10. Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, *Community Conflict*.

11. Gregory Bateson, *Steps Towards an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 187.

12. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1980), 7.

13. Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43 (autumn 1993): 51-58.

14. Larissa Grunig, "Activism: How It Limits the Effectiveness of Organizations and How Excellent Public Relations Departments Respond," in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, ed. James E. Grunig (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992), 503-530.

15. James E. Grunig and T. Hunt, *Managing Public Relations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984), 266.

16. P. J. Trounstine and T. Christensen, *Movers and Shakers: The Study of Community Power* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

17. I. Sanders, *The Community: An Introduction to a Social System*, 2d ed. (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1966), 26.

18. Clarice N. Olien, George A. Donohue, and Phillip J. Tichenor, "The Community Editor's Power and the Reporting of Conflict," *Journalism Quarterly* 45 (summer 1968): 243-52.

19. See Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, *Community Conflict*.

20. Grunig and Hunt, *Managing Public Relations*.

21. James Coleman, *Community Conflict* (New York: The Free Press, 1957); Everett E. Dennis, "In Context: Environmentalism in the System of News," in *Media & the Environment*, ed. C. L. LaMay and Everett E. Dennis (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1991), 55-64; George A. Donohue, Clarice N. Olien, and Phillip J. Tichenor, "Communities, Pollution, and Fight for Survival," *The Journal of Environmental Education* 6 (1974): 29-37; William F. Griswold and Jill D. Swenson, "Not in Whose Backyard? The Ethics of Reporting Environmental Issues," *Mass Comm Review* 20 (1993): 62-75; Phillip J. Tichenor, George A. Donohue, and Clarice N. Olien, "Community Research and Evaluating Community Relations," *Public Relations Review* 3 (winter 1977): 96-109.

22. A. Hansen, "The Media and the Social Construction of the Environment," *Media, Culture and Society* 13 (1991): 443-58; P. Kaniss, *Making Local*

News (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

23. Kaniss, *Making Local News*, 59.

24. Pamela J. Shoemaker and Elizabeth Kay Mayfield, *Building a Theory of News Content: A Synthesis of Current Approaches*, Journalism Monographs, no. 103 (Columbia, SC: AEJMC, June 1987), 1.

25. David R. Bowers, "A Report on Activity by Publishers in Directing Newsroom Decisions," *Journalism Quarterly* 44 (spring 1967): 43-52.

26. Larissa Grunig, "Activism: How It Limits the Effectiveness of Organizations and How Excellent Public Relations Departments Respond," in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, ed. James E. Grunig (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992), 503-530.

27. John Soloski, "Sources and Channels of Local News," *Journalism Quarterly* 66 (winter 1989): 864-70.

28. Two reasons guided a census study instead of a representative sample. First, there was no complete and accurate index of stories, editorials, opinion columns, letters to the editor, and advertisements involving MSP, available from which to draw a sample. The index available indicated about 386 items, primarily news, but mixed with some editorials and other items. We suspected that any sample drawn from this index might not be representative, since it appeared that items indexed may have concentrated on the more controversial aspects of coverage. This condition, paired with a desire to conduct an inclusive, extensive case study of press coverage of this controversy, led us to conduct a census study. The U.S. Census Bureau has historically utilized a census or universe study in counting the population of the United States. Although not as common as sampling, other researchers have used universe or census in content analysis studies. Items about MSP appearing in the *Daily Review* for 1985 were not indexed; therefore it was necessary to review all editions of the newspaper for 1985 to locate and analyze the stories.

29. The coding scheme was tested in a pilot study with a random sample of 32 news items found in the *New Orleans Times Picayune* index of MSP stories. The New Orleans newspaper was analyzed because it was indexed and available locally.

30. Twenty cases (3%) were re-analyzed by the original coder, and another 3% by an independent coder, provided with written coding instructions and a brief training session. Both coders were graduate students in communication. A formula used by Paletz, Fozzard, and Ayanian and reported by Holsti was utilized to check reliability: $R = 2Pab$ divided by $Pa + Pb$, where R is reliability, Pa is the number of observations by the first coder, Pb is the number of observations by the second coder, and Pab is the number of agreed-upon observations. See David L. Paletz, Peter A. Fozzard, and John Z. Ayanian, "The I.R.A., the Red Brigades, and the F.A.L.N. in the *New York Times*," *Journal of Communication* 32 (spring 1982): 162-71; O. Holsti, *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969).

31. Donohue, Olien, and Tichenor, *Community Conflict*.

32. G. Black, "Conflict in the Community: A Theory of the Effects of Community Size," *The American Political Science Review* 68 (1974): 1245-1261.

33 . Many researchers in sociology and communication identified stages in the development of conflict. Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, in *Community Press*, identified four primary stages of conflict which seem to be common to most community conflict: the initiation stage, the conflict definition stage, the public stage, and the legitimization stage. They acknowledged that other

stages may occur depending upon the conflict. In a later study, the same research team identified three related but overlapping phases specific to the powerline controversy in Minnesota. They included the problem definition phase, the bureaucratic confrontation phase, and the demonstration confrontation phase. The present study utilized a combination of these conflict stages.

34. MSP offered to accept the floating garbage barge, 29 April 1987.

35. Claire E. Taylor, "Waste Burn Stand Needed," the *Daily Review*, 28 August 1985, 2.

36. "Hazardous Waste Fire Scare Prompts Questions," the *Daily Review*, 8 April 1987, 2.

37. Larry Wall, "Objectivity in Cancer Debate Hard to Maintain," the *Daily Review*, 11 November 1987, 2.

38. Gerald Hambleton, "Kettle Calling the Pot Black?" the *Daily Review*, 1 February 1989, 2.

39. M. Fishman, *Manufacturing the News* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1980); Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979); E. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988); A. Mazur, "Media Coverage and Public Opinion on Scientific Controversies," *Journal of Communication* 31 (spring 1981): 106-115; H. Molotch and M. Lester, "Accidental News: The Great Oil Spill as Local Occurrence and National Event," *American Journal of Sociology* 81 (1975): 235-60; H. Molotch, D. L. Protess, and M. T. Gordon, "The Media-Policy Connection: Ecologies of News," in *Political Communication Research: Approaches, Studies, Assessments*, ed. David L. Paletz (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1987), 26-48; Clarice N. Olien, Phillip J. Tichenor, and George A. Donohue, "Media Coverage and Social Movements," in *Information Campaigns: Balancing Social Values and Social Change*, ed. Charles T. Salmon (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989), 139-63; David L. Paletz, and Robert M. Entman, *Media, Power, Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1981); Leon Sigal, *Reporters and Officials: The Organization of Newsmaking* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1973); Eleanor Singer, and Phyllis Endreny, *Reporting on Risk* (New York: Plenum Press, 1993); Conrad Smith, "News Sources and Power Elites in News Coverage of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill," *Journalism Quarterly* 70 (summer 1993): 393-403; Soloski, "Sources and Channels," 864-70.

40. Gans, *Deciding What's News*; Kaniss, *Making Local News*; Roloff; Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, *Community Conflict*.

41. "Place for MSP is in Federal Court," the *Daily Review*, 16 June 1991, 2.

42. "Toxic Waste Could Use a Better Push," the *Daily Review*, 23 August 1985, 2.

43. "Work Together to Solve Hazardous Waste Problem," the *Daily Review*, 19 June 1987, 2.

44. Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, *Community Conflict*.

45. Ted McManus, "Another MSP Hearing Done," the *Daily Review*, 10 January 1992, 2.

46. Steve Shirley, "Kent's Story Consistent," the *Daily Review*, 11 January 1989, 2.