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The manufacture of 'public opinion' by reporters: informal cues for public perceptions of protest groups

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ABSTRACT. This study examines how conceptions of 'public opinion' are embedded within news-coverage of social protests at two levels: the micro-level in terms of informal characterizations of public opinion and the macro-level in terms of general conceptions of public opinion. At the micro-level, public opinion is brought into news stories in a variety of ways, including: statements about public opinion, depictions of compliance with or violation of social norms and laws, and portrayals of bystanders as symbols for public reaction. At the macro-level, coverage may have an underlying conception of public opinion as (1) aggregated individual opinion, (2) attempts of various groups to affect public policy and (3) a mechanism of social control. This case study of mainstream and alternative media coverage of three anarchist protests reveals differences at both the micro-descriptive and macro-conceptual levels.

KEY WORDS: alternative media, anarchists, media coverage, public opinion, social protest

It has been effectively argued that mass media coverage of social protest groups tends to 'marginalize' groups which challenge the prevailing power structure (Gitlin, 1981; Shoemaker, 1984; Donohue et al., 1987). Media depictions of public opinion about the protest groups may be particularly powerful marginalizing symbols. Research has demonstrated that an individual's perceptions of public opinion influences such attitudes as: acceptance of discriminatory behavior (O'Gorman, 1975; O'Gorman and Garry, 1976–7); willingness to publicly advocate a political stand (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1984); and even basic perceptual judgments (Asch, 1956). These studies underscore the potential power of public opinion and consequently motivate inquiry into how conceptions of public opinion are communicated in news-coverage of protest groups.

Most studies of the use of public opinion in news-coverage have focused on reports of public opinion polls. For instance, several studies examine the use (Gollin, 1987) and influence (Ceci and Kain, 1982; Navazio, 1977) of poll reports in the media. While the use of opinion polls is an important topic for study, public opinion is represented in other ways that have not been as thoroughly investigated.

Public opinion is embedded in news-coverage at two levels: characterizations of public opinion at the micro-descriptive level and general conceptions of public opinion at the macro-conceptual level. This investigation of mainstream and alternative media coverage of three anarchist marches examines the use of four types of micro-descriptive level characterizations of public opinion: (1) statements about public opinion, (2) depictions of violations of social norms and of (3) community laws, and (4) portrayals of bystanders as symbols for public opinion. The analysis then proceeds to the macro-conceptual level in order to extract general underlying conceptions of public opinion inherent in mainstream and alternative media coverage of the anarchist protests.

THE JOURNALISTIC PARADIGM FOR SOCIAL PROTEST

One of the keys to whether a protest group is 'isolated' or 'accepted' by the larger society is the mass media's treatment of the protesters. This treatment is to a great degree shaped by a routinized journalistic paradigm for covering social protest. Journalists are socialized to focus on the actions, conflict and especially violence of protests. Often, the emphasis on overt action obscures the issues raised by the protesters.

Journalists' tendency to seek out the 'unusual' is very much in evidence in protest coverage. Coverage gravitates toward individuals exhibiting the most extreme appearance and behaviors. In the process, protesters are often characterized as being more 'deviant' from the mainstream than they really are.

Journalists are also trained to seek out the views of 'official' institutional spokespersons (Sigal, 1973). As a result, protest coverage adopts 'official' definitions of the protest situation by focusing on questions of the 'legality of actions' as opposed to the 'morality of issues'. In the process, coverage legitimizes official authority and marginalizes radical protest groups.

Media characterizations of public opinion are a product of this journalistic protest paradigm and as such are likely to contribute to authority support. As Edelman (1977: 55) asserts: 'Rather than curbing a regime, "public opinion" as a symbol enlarges official discretion by immobilizing potential opposition.' In essence, media characterizations of public opinion toward the protest groups, their views and actions, are potentially influential guidelines which can constrain the growth of radical movements both by questioning the legitimacy of the protest group and by contributing to fear of isolation for group members and potential converts.

PUBLIC OPINION AT THE MICRO-DESCRIPTIVE LEVEL

At the micro-descriptive level, the concept of public opinion is constantly woven into news stories. In its most obvious form, public opinion is demonstrated by the ever-increasing number of public opinion poll results in the news. Reports of opinion poll results are explicit representations of public opinion. They may contribute directly to assessments of the nature of public opinion and thereby have an effect on public policy (Lang and Lang, 1980). However, opinion polls are rarely used in the coverage of social protest. Depictions of public opinion appear more frequently in protest coverage through informal representations of public opinion.

Informal characterizations of public opinion take a number of forms. First, in seeming violation of the canons of objectivity, reporters often make general statements describing the social consensus. This is exemplified by the use of such phrases as 'the national mood', 'public sentiment' or 'most people feel'.

A second form of characterization is the invocation of social norms. News stories often contain comments on the extent to which ideas, actions or appearances conform to or violate social norms, thus indicating the boundaries of mainstream public opinion. The application of social norms has been shown to be important to the identification of deviance (McKirnan, 1980).

Third, to the extent that laws represent a codified consensus, media depictions of actions upholding or violating community laws represent applications of public opinion. The distinction of legal violations, particularly in cases of civil disobedience, is often a matter of interpretation provided by journalists and their sources.

Finally, news stories often use bystanders to comment on protests. The way bystanders are typically used serves as a metaphor for public opinion similar to the 'chorus' of Greek drama described by Back (1988).

To some extent, these four types of depictions of public opinion may influence audience reactions to the issues and actions of the protest by indicating what is considered mainstream and what is considered deviant.

PUBLIC OPINION AT THE MACRO-CONCEPTUAL LEVEL

In order to isolate macro-conceptual orientations to public opinion in news-coverage, alternative conceptions of public opinion must be differentiated. Hennessy (1985) and Herbst (1991) discuss three alternative conceptions of public opinion: (1) public opinion as aggregated individual opinion much like it is measured by public opinion polls; (2) public opinion as the active attempts of groups and individuals to influence public policy; and (3) the 'general will' or 'zeitgeist' which acts as an expression of the consensus beliefs and moral values of some social group.

Historically, the most common conceptualization of public opinion in mass communication research has been the first of the three views. The

prominence of opinion polls results and considerable growth of survey research methods and technology since the 1930s contribute to a 'one person, one vote' orientation toward public opinion (Herbst, 1991). In its most simplistic form, this view ignores individual differences in opinion-holding and the impact of group affiliation.

The second view of public opinion, rooted in a pluralist political orientation, envisions public opinion as the clashing of interest groups in the political arena. Unlike the first view, this conception, outlined by Blumer (1948), does not treat every individual's opinion equally. Interest groups marshall resources to represent common interests thereby increasing group members' influence over public policy. Ultimately, this view of public opinion is concerned with the impact of such aggregations on issues of social concern.

The third view treats public opinion as a set of shared norms, values and beliefs in society. The social consensus, which is commensurate with mainstream public opinion, comprises a system of social control which serves to maintain the social order. This system has built-in incentives and sanctions which encourage conformity to social norms. In sum, this view conceives of public opinion as a set of social norms and values enforced by a system of social control.

The first two conceptions of public opinion assume that conflict is inherent in the consideration of issues. In the first view, it is expected that there will be a distribution of viewpoints, usually represented by percentages supporting and opposing a given issue position. In the second view, the very definition of public opinion assumes controversy. If there were no conflict over resources, there would be no reason for the formation of groups nor any contention over the outcomes of public policy decisions.

In the third definition, however, conflict is considered a challenge to social norms. Those who challenge these norms are often characterized by the mainstream as being 'deviant'. Such has been shown to be the case for radical protest groups, who are often delegitimized by mainstream media coverage (Gitlin, 1981; Shoemaker, 1984).

Using the perspective of public opinion as social consensus, representations of public opinion may be seen as mechanisms of social control. Reports of public opinion reinforce the boundary between the acceptable and unacceptable in society. For example, in the political arena, describing the voting electorate as being 51 percent for Bush, 42 percent for Dukakis and 7 percent undecided may convey that third-party alternatives are unacceptable or at least outside the bounds of consideration. In the case of voting, defiance of social norms is a private behavior. It stands to reason that the risks associated with the violation of norms may be much greater when the defiance is public as in the case of social protest.

One major body of research that has looked at the role of public opinion as social control is the 'Spiral of Silence' theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1984). This theory holds that individuals constantly scan their environment, including mass media, for cues to public opinion on various social and political issues, events and groups. Perception of public opinion is said

to influence willingness to express opinions particularly in situations where such opinions might lead one to feel socially isolated. 'Spiral of Silence' theory is supported by social psychological studies of conformity (Asch, 1956; Milgram, 1963, 1964) which demonstrate the power of group pressure to induce attitude conformity.

The public visibility of social protest may make protesters more susceptible to the fear of isolation. When the protest group represents a small minority, critical of the mainstream and on the periphery of the political spectrum, the pressure of social control may inhibit participation by potential converts to the protest group by stimulating fear of isolation.

METHODS

This investigation of the use of micro-descriptive and macro-conceptual forms of public opinion analyzes news-coverage of three anarchist marches in the US city of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The first two marches, which took place on 16 October 1986 and 22 June 1987, were very similar in nature. These marches, which the anarchists labeled 'War Chest Tours', consisted of a connected series of symbolic demonstrations in front of downtown Minneapolis government and business establishments. The symbolic gestures were designed to highlight the criticisms that the anarchists were leveling against the existing power structure. For example, dollar bills were burned outside a local bank to underscore the anarchists' criticisms of corporate capitalism. The anarchists distributed pamphlets which explained the symbolic significance of each of the gestures, which included smashing a television set and burning the US, Soviet and McDonald's flags. Each march included some property damage, confrontations with the Minneapolis police and a number of arrests.

The third protest, on 3 June 1988 in Minneapolis's uptown area, was labeled 'Bash the Rich'. The demonstrators were protesting the displacement of minorities and the poor by the gentrification of the area. Again, various symbolic actions were used to highlight the protest. There were several altercations with police which resulted in 12 arrests.

All accessible coverage from these protests was analyzed including news stories from two metropolitan daily newspapers (*The Minneapolis Star Tribune* and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press-Dispatch*), one college newspaper (*The Minnesota Daily* from the University of Minnesota), one regional daily newspaper (*The Fargo Forum*, which directly printed the Associated Press state newswire), three alternative newspapers (*Overthrow* and *The Guardian* from New York, and *Fifth Estate* from Detroit) and three local television stations (WCCO—CBS affiliate, KSTP—ABC affiliate, and KMSP—an independent). The coverage consisted of 13 stories in mainstream newspapers, 4 stories in the alternative newspapers and 9 stories in the television coverage.

The analysis begins by isolating the use of micro-descriptive representations of public opinion in mainstream and then alternative media. These

micro-descriptive representations provide cues for subsequent interpret-
ations of macro-conceptual orientations toward public opinion.

The four types of micro-descriptive representations of public opinion are
defined as:

1. statements about public opinion (characterizations of public opinion or
   public reactions to the demonstrations, the demonstrators or the issues
   being raised);
2. social norms (actions and appearances which uphold or violate normal
   standards of conduct);
3. legal conduct (actions which uphold or violate legal standards of con-
   duct);
4. bystander portrayals (comments and reactions of observers).

MICRO-DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATIONS IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA COVERAGE

No public opinion polls were taken to present the spectrum of public
reaction to the anarchist protesters; consequently, representations of
public opinion were the product of interpretation by reporters, editors and
their sources.

Statements about public opinion

In a few cases, reporters directly characterized public reaction to the pro-
testers. One example from the *Minnesota Daily* (MD 1987) stresses that
the anarchists are very different from the general public: 'Conflict and
controversy were as prevalent among the participants as they are between
anarchists and society at large' (MD 1987: 1).

Statements about public opinion were more commonly found in material
attributed to sources than in direct statements by the reporter. For
example, both the *Star Tribune* (ST 1986: 13A) and the *Fargo Forum* (FF
1986: A8) quoted a Minneapolis police officer who emphasized the minor-
ity status of anarchists by characterizing them as 'a bunch of punk-rockers
from the Hennepin-Lake area, led by a *small* number, and I mean a small
number of people'.

Embedded within another *Star Tribune* story (ST 1987) is the assump-
tion that if the public truly understands the anarchists, the public would
support police actions to 'control' the protests. The story reports Deputy
Police Chief Robert Lutz's statement that: 'If anybody has any questions
about how the police performed, they should look up in the dictionary the
definition of "anarchist"' (ST 1987: 2B).

Anarchist statements concerning public opinion were also found in the
coverage. As a whole, the view presented characterizes the public as duped
by the powers that be into 'militarism, capitalism, racism and sexism'.
During the 1986 KSTP coverage, a protester spoke to the screen after a
shot showing the US flag in the foreground burning, along with a hammer-
and-sickle flag and a third barely seen at the edge of the screen:

> We want to put an end to all nationalism. We also burned a Soviet flag and a McDonald's flag. We consider these three of the major institutions that have the undeserved allegiance of millions of people.

Several anarchists' statements imply that the general public is lethargic and apathetic. In a *Pioneer Press-Dispatch* (PPD 1987) story, one anarchist explained the need for tactics involving property damage by saying: 'It doesn't seem like other tactics work to wake people up' (PPD 1987: 16A). Another protester stated that: 'I support people trying to raise others' consciousness' (ST 1986: 13A). A characterization of the public as apathetic is implied in an organizer's explanation of the protest rationale (WCCO 1988):

> Maybe people will open their eyes and understand the situation in the world. And hopefully they'll realize that things have to change.

Social norms

Social norms were a far more common use of public opinion in mainstream newspaper coverage of the three demonstrations. Several references to the 'abusive' behavior, 'obscene' language and 'eccentric' appearance of the protesters clearly indicated violations of social norms. For example, the lead paragraph of a *Pioneer Press-Dispatch* reads:

> It was anarchy in downtown Minneapolis on Monday—women bared their breasts, pin-striped businessmen were spat upon, art and buildings were defaced with spray paint, glass bottles were smashed, and people were pushed and shoved. (PPD 1987: 16A)

Another example from the *Minnesota Daily* highlighted the anarchists' 'obscene' and 'abusive' language:

> Throughout the rally, protesters referred to police as 'pigs' and 'the boys in blue'. At one point, the group of more than 80 protesters chanted 'fuck you' and pointed their middle fingers at the Federal Building in Minneapolis. (MD 1986: 1)

Coverage often cast protesters as violating social norms of propriety in terms of appearance. Television coverage often singled out protesters with the most unusual appearances for close-ups. Similarly, newspaper coverage also drew attention to 'eccentric' protesters:

> The protesters drew a great deal of attention as they moved through down-town with their pounding drums, waving flags and eccentric appearance, which included purple Mohawk hairdos, black lipstick, flowing beards, pantaloons, jackets with sleeves torn out and a turban or two. (ST 1986: 1A)

Coverage of the marchers often mixed the forms of norm-breaking together in a way that said essentially, 'this is a deviant group'. For example, one television story began:

> Just their dress alone would have gotten this group of 150 people attention in downtown Minneapolis. But the group marched through downtown shouting obscenities and defacing buildings with graffiti. . . . They said

> Minneapolis is revolting, but most observers were revolted by the lan-
> guage and actions of the group. (KSTP 1986)

Another example of the use of norm-violating behaviors was television coverage's juxtaposition of the two most prominent features of the 'Bash the Rich' demonstration—rocks thrown at an expensive sports car and the apparent macing of a McDonald's customer who tried to intervene in a flag-burning. Portrayals of these events superseded any discussion of issues raised by the demonstrators.

Flag-burning, framed as an anti-social activity, was a prominent focus of coverage of the 1986 march as well. The burning of the US flag during the 1986 protest received considerable attention relative to the concurrent burning of Soviet and McDonald's Corporation flags. In television cover-age, the US flag was center-screen while the others were barely identifi-able. The *Star Tribune* story mentioned that the three flags were burned, but the accompanying three-column picture showed only the US flag. The caption read: 'A man burned an American flag in front of the Multifoods Tower in downtown Minneapolis as a crowd, including other demon-strators, looked on' (ST 1986: 1A). *Fargo Forum* coverage neglected to mention the Soviet flag in stating: 'Six were arrested in a roving downtown protest by about 75 young people dressed as punk rockers, who set fire to American and McDonald's flags, swore, burned money and wrote graffiti Thursday' (FF 1986: A8).

Mainstream coverage devoted small amounts of coverage to the anarch-ists' claim that police actions violated social norms. One article did note an anarchist's charge of police brutality:

> Damaging property is not the same thing as being violent. Nobody did
> anything to instigate the kind of reaction we got from police. We have a
> lot of people from out of town and they're very surprised about the
> repres.ion we have in this city. The only people I saw getting pushed and
> shoved were the demonstrators. (PPD 1987: 16A)

Legal conduct

The anarchists were repeatedly referred to as a group intent on violating the law. The opening lines of one television story sarcastically question the demonstrators' self-designated label and beliefs, but openly proclaim their criminal status:

> These demonstrators call themselves anarchists. They claim they're
> opposed to any and all forms of government. Their demonstration began
> quietly. Then some of the anarchists became vandals, defacing some
> downtown buildings. (KSTP 1987)

Journalists attributed most comment on law-breaking behavior to police officers. Most newspaper and television stories contained an obligatory comment from a police official depicting the protesters as criminals. The *Star Tribune* quoted Deputy Police Chief Lutz's statement that anarchists were 'people that have no intention of obeying the laws of our community' (ST 1987: 2B). Sometimes, these quotes serve the dual function of invok-

ing criminality and legitimizing police actions. For example, the same officer was shown in KSTP's coverage making the statement: 'If any of them break the law, they'll have to suffer the consequences' (KSTP 1987). A similar clip appeared in 1988:

> Anybody we see on the street breaking the law is going to jail, anarchist or not. We're not checking their religion. We're just taking them to jail. (WCCO 1988)

The use of quotes from official sources to comment on the events of the protest (as opposed to direct comment by the reporter) seems to be an observance of the journalistic norm of objectivity, even though the overall tone of these mainstream newspaper articles condemned the anarchist protesters.

There is a close relationship between legal and normative critiques of the anarchists. Of course, obeying the law is a strong social norm; violations are considered permissible only in situations governed by a higher moral purpose. Mainstream coverage never addressed the anarchists' claim to a higher moral purpose. Although some of the crimes catalogued in mainstream media—conducting a parade without a permit, failure to use established routes or to coordinate their activities with police, and sundry property damage—may not be expected to upset people greatly, the idea that anarchists are law-breakers may have an impact on audience impressions. The essence of the legalistic frame of mainstream coverage is captured by one additional statement by the Deputy Police Chief (WCCO 1987): 'This is clearly whether or not citizens of this city can break the law with impunity, and the answer is NO!'

Bystander portrayals

Perhaps the most interesting way in which public opinion was depicted in news-coverage was the use of bystanders as symbols for the reaction of the general public. There were numerous instances where newspaper coverage described the reactions of bystanders to the demonstrations. The reactions ranged from puzzlement to anger.

A reporter from the *Star Tribune* described one conversation between two onlookers: '"What are they protesting?" one woman asked. "It's hard to tell," the other woman answered, "but I think they're protesting everything"' (ST 1986: 13A). Another bystander was quoted in the *Minnesota Daily* calling the anarchists: 'A pretty seedy-looking group' (MD 1987: 3).

The use of bystanders was much more common and more dramatic in the television coverage of the demonstrations. This distinction is illustrated by the contrast in the use of bystanders to describe flag-burning at the first protest. The *Star Tribune* article commented: 'Another woman ran from the sight of a U.S. flag being burned' (ST 1986: 13A). The event was much more dramatic in KSTP's (1986) coverage. The video, a close-up of a sobbing woman answering a reporter's questions, was accompanied by the

reporter's statement: 'The burning of the American flag was just too much for one woman who was just a bystander watching'. The reporter then asks the sobbing woman if the flag-burning bothered her. 'Yes, yes. People died for the freedom that they have. They don't seem to understand that' (KSTP 1986).

KSTP also used bystanders in the coverage of the second protest. The reporter said: 'Some vendors who saw the protesters say they were not impressed with their message or their tactics.' This was followed by a comment from an indignant vendor: 'I just don't appreciate it as a citizen of such a wonderful free country' (KSTP 1987).

In the conclusion of KSTP's coverage of the first march, the portrayal of bystander reaction clearly indicates public hostility to the anarchist movement:

> We didn't see anyone along this demonstration through the city who actually showed this group any support. And most of the people were actually disgusted with it. And one woman said, 'It's easy for them to be against everything because they themselves are not involved in anything'. (KSTP 1986)

Bemusement was another commonly depicted bystander reaction. In several stories, reporters stated that onlookers were uncertain what to make of the group. In one case (KSTP 1986), reporters' comments were backed by an emotion-evincing shot of two uncertain young girls. In other cases, bystanders were shown to pay little attention to the protesters. After outlining the police–anarchist confrontations, one story continued: 'In the midst of the melee, life in Uptown continued—drinks at a cafe, a walk with the baby' (KSTP 1988).

The depiction of public opinion in the coverage of protest seems to be brought in to anchor the story as the reporter tries to provide meaning to this series of events. Bystanders are often used as a thermometer to demonstrate public reaction. The use of bystanders by reporters might be seen as the rough equivalent of taking a haphazard survey of public opinion using a very small sample. While the viewer of the news story may realize that the bystander represents only one person's opinion, there is evidence to show that this opinion may have a disproportionately large impact on the viewer's assessment of public opinion (Tversky and Kahneman 1971, 1974).

When asked about the use of bystanders in covering social protest, one *Pioneer Press-Dispatch* reporter said that in covering a protest: 'You want to find out what *all* the participants think and what the effect of the story on others is. I want to get as wide a range of opinions as possible.' But for the most part, the reactions of bystanders tend to be negative toward the protest. Those who are positive toward the protest tend to be considered part of the protest.

Whether the use of bystanders hostile to the protest group is a conscious choice by the reporter is unclear, but the bottom line seems to be that coverage serves as a social control reinforcing the social order.

MICRO-DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATIONS IN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA COVERAGE

Articles covering the 1986 anarchist protests were found in *The Guardian* and *Overthrow* alternative newspapers. Two issues of *Fifth Estate* included extensive articles along with several letters written to the publication concerning the 1987 demonstration/conference.

Statements about public opinion

Explicit references to public opinion were rare in these publications. A couple of examples were found in letters printed in *Fifth Estate*. In contrast to mainstream newspaper coverage, public receptivity to the anarchists was portrayed by this Detroit-based alternative newspaper as being very high:

> There is a socialist-populist working class culture that has created, among other things, a lot of co-ops and co-op restaurants, and local restaurants and pizzerias even placed coupons in our conference brochure welcoming the anarchists to town. (FE 1987: 1)

The theme of community acceptance was echoed in another letter which noted that public receptivity to anarchist ideas is increasing in society as a whole.

> A generalized anti-authoritarian orientation is playing a role in the wider radicalization that has begun to sweep this country since 1980, particularly though not exclusively among young people. (FE 1987: 22)

Social norms

Mainstream and alternative media had different moral interpretations of the same events. For instance, several male and female demonstrators removed their shirts during the 1987 march. Mainstream media labeled this as 'licentious' behavior. By contrast, the alternative press coverage treated this as a symbolic political act against pornography. *Fifth Estate* explains:

> Look at this action as condemning a group that is maliciously exploiting others. A number of sisters and brothers at this point took off their shirts. Some had previously painted the words 'Not for Sale' across their chests. (FE 1987: 23)

The object of moral criticism in the alternative press was not the protesters, but the objects of the protest—government and business institutions. Specific charges of the protesters were much more explicit. For example, *Overthrow* (1986) included a list of specific oppressors:

> The victims included WCCO-TV, who ignore the aerial war in El Salvador and slant the news towards sensationalism; Pillsbury, whose ownership of Burger King and other fast food enterprises contributes to the destruction of the world's largest remaining rain forests in Central and South America; the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, whose board of directors interlocks with Hormel, and who constantly misrepresented the P-9 strike in Austin; Sen. Durenburger's office, whose vote on Contra aid switched when he realized it would pass without him, as a face saving gesture to the groups that repeatedly occupied his office. (OT 1986: 2)

Legal conduct

Law-breaking was not considered nearly as newsworthy in the alternative press as it was in mainstream media. *The Guardian* (G 1986) briefly mentioned that: 'Eight people were arrested for various actions along the tour.' The article concluded with the statement: 'The tour ended with a lively dance in the streets and one last arrest after everyone had dispersed (G 1986: 4).

When issues of legal violations were addressed more thoroughly, the alternative press framed them quite differently than mainstream media. *Fifth Estate* (FE 1987) approached the law-breaking issue in the context of discussing the tactics of protest, how to avoid arrest and how to make bail quickly. Rather than criticizing law violations, the alternative media questioned law enforcement. Police brutality was framed as being symbolic of state oppression. A photo accompanying the *Fifth Estate* article showed a marcher grimacing in pain as police force his arms behind his back. The caption reads: '"Liberal" Minneapolis cops torturing an arrested demonstrator during the War Chest Tour on the final day of the 1987 Anarchist Gathering' (FE 1987: 1). It should be noted that reference to the police was not so harsh elsewhere in the article:

> Thursday night there was a welcoming party at the Back Room Books, an anarchist bookstore and the sponsors of the gathering, which after some drinking and noise got flushed out by some zealous, and obnoxious, cops. Given the mild nature of the town, there was none of the brutality one would have expected, say, from Los Angeles, New York, or Chicago cops. A couple of people were arrested and later released. (FE 1987: 1)

One *Fifth Estate* letter criticized the actions of both police and anarchists:

> 'Legally' speaking, the police had a reason for breaking up the party. There were many minors drinking, and there were many people drinking on the street. Although it is quite likely that they (cops) could have found another reason, or no reason at all to break up the gathering, I don't see why we should give them the reason they need—and play right into their hands. Yes, we are anarchists and we do not believe in laws, but we should realize we are currently living in this repressive state of affairs, and if we are going to have some sort of confrontation with the authorities, let us at least make it over something significant. I feel neither the desire nor the inclination to go to jail (or to be beaten by cops) over beer! (FE 1987: 22)

Bystander portrayals

Reactions of bystanders were rare in alternative press coverage. The only direct discussion, found in the *Overthrow* (OT 1986: 2) coverage of the first march, said: 'Another participant mentioned that although the Tour started out with 85 people, by the end it had nearly doubled with people joining in out of curiosity and interest.' The tour was said to be a 'revela-

tion' for both participants and onlookers. Most of the reactions described in the alternative press were those of participants.

<div align="center">MACRO-CONCEPTUAL ORIENTATIONS OF MEDIA COVERAGE</div>

There are aspects of each of the three macro-conceptual public opinion orientations found within mainstream media coverage of the anarchist protests. The text of mainstream accounts of the protests reveals that the journalists themselves may conceive of public opinion in a manner consistent with the first two views. First, a conception of public opinion as 'aggregated individual opinion' is implied by references to the small size of the anarchist group relative to the larger population. Second, the view of public opinion as 'organized attempts of groups to influence public policy' is demonstrated by depictions of the goals and outcomes of the protests. The goals, depicted as the overthrow of government and corporate power, are never realized. Thus, the media characterize the protests as failures.

While journalists may conceptualize public opinion as 'aggregated individual opinion' or as 'attempts by groups to influence public policy', the vast majority of micro-descriptive depictions of public opinion in mainstream media contribute to a dominant news frame consistent with the third view, 'public opinion as social control'. These micro-descriptive depictions demonstrate the anarchists' deviance from social norms. In the process, mainstream coverage may marginalize and stigmatize anarchist protesters.

It is clear that the differences between mainstream and alternative media coverage go beyond different approaches to objectivity and also beyond the simple ideological differences between their respective reporters. Mainstream newspapers and the alternative press seem to serve entirely different functions. For mainstream media, dynamic protests clearly rank high on many newsworthiness criteria. While newspaper and television coverage of such routine news events may at one level impart knowledge about happenings within the social system, at another level that coverage tends to provide support and legitimation of the major institutions in society. Providing cues to public opinion about this event is part of the process by which the newspaper coverage serves this social control function.

Alternative media coverage, on the other hand, seemed to work very differently. On the basis of the analysis of micro-descriptive representations of public opinion, it seems that alternative media are aimed at providing a 'haven from fear of isolation' for the anarchists. The articles share the common theme of 'we are not alone'.

The creation of a sense of shared unpopular opinion, the expression of which might cause one to fear isolation in the general population, might actually be a binding force in a subpopulation such as the anarchists. Based on the logic of Coser's (1956) assertion that conflict with an external group leads to internal solidarity, a conflictual stance might increase solidarity

among the anarchists. Thus, like hairstyles and clothing which confront social norms, shared opinions which run counter to the assumed consensus of mainstream society may help to integrate subgroup members. This might be true provided that there are some outlets which publicize group activities and issues, legitimate anarchist organizations and coordinate group members, thereby reducing the fear of isolation. This function may be provided by alternative media. In addition, the alternative media may reinforce the anarchists' willingness to express their views and, by providing discussion of anarchist issues and positions, may better equip members to articulate these positions themselves.

The alternative media coverage may reduce the fear of isolation not only by creating a sense of community and by increasing the body of knowledge shared by the anarchist group, but also by linking anarchist and other 'radical' movements nationally and internationally. It also provides 'mobilizing information' about future anarchist events.

In sum, the alternative press coverage contains elements of both the second and third type of conception of public opinion. It tends to be oriented toward building the anarchist movement as a viable power group in accordance with the second conception of public opinion. It does so by recognizing the social control function of mainstream public opinion and tries to provide a haven from its influence by establishing a distinct subgroup with its own set of norms.

CONCLUSION

Micro-descriptive representations of public opinion are important ideological indicators in media coverage of social protest. They may provide potentially influential cues for audience interpretations as well. This analysis revealed marked differences between mainstream and alternative media coverage for each of the four types of micro-descriptive representations. In the mainstream media, statements about public opinion were normally expressed through quotes from police officials and anarchists. Official statements emphasized the deviance of the protesters, whereas the anarchists contrasted themselves with an apathetic society. Statements about public opinion were relatively infrequent in the alternative press, appearing only in letters-to-the-editor. Violations of social norms of appearance and behavior by protesters were commonly discussed in the mainstream press. The alternative press, on the other hand, pointed accusations of norm violations at government and business agencies. Mainstream media made legal violations by protesters a prominent topic of most stories; the alternative press focused instead on issues of police brutality. Finally, the reactions of bystanders were often described in mainstream coverage, but virtually ignored by the alternative press.

Differences in micro-descriptive applications of public opinion by mainstream and alternative media were linked to differences at the macro-descriptive level. Analysis of the mainstream coverage indicates that jour-

nalists tended to view protests as attempts by anarchist groups to influence public policy. The fact that the protests did not lead to fundamental policy changes was treated by mainstream media as evidence of failure. In other words, the anarchists' failure was taken as further evidence of their deviance from mainstream public opinion. In the process, mainstream media's use of micro-descriptive representations of public opinion may ultimately contribute to social control by communicating that deviance. Thus, there is an inherent distinction between how journalists conceptualize public opinion (type 1—proportions of the population on opposite sides of social issues; and type 2—organized groups seeking to influence public policy) and the role that their product serves in public opinion processes (type 3—social control).

A different pattern emerged from the alternative press coverage. First of all, the protests were not strictly seen as attempts to change public policy. Instead, they were framed as being successful by providing opportunities for group members to express their opinions and emotions. The demonstrations were viewed as expressive activities, not necessarily dependent upon the conversion of bystanders for success. This is supported by the fact that, unlike the mainstream accounts, alternative press reports virtually ignored bystander reactions. In essence, the alternative media did not adopt mainstream media's conception of public opinion as organized attempts to influence public policy. Instead, public opinion was recognized as a form of social control. Much of the alternative press coverage represents attempts to provide a haven from isolation by celebrating the participation, comradeship and unity of the anarchists. In the process, alternative press coverage may help support the emergence of the anarchists as a mobilized power group.

Mainstream media's rather consistent use of informal representations of public opinion to marginalize the anarchists may have powerful effects. In the process, the protesters are isolated from the 'general public' even though they may share some views and concerns with significant portions of the population. In essence, the media coverage may discourage interest and participation in such protest activities and thereby inhibit the growth of critical social movements.

This raises questions for future research. What effect do informal portrayals of public opinion have on public attitudes toward protest groups such as the anarchists? Does mainstream media coverage discourage participation in such movements? In addition, to what extent can these findings be generalized to other protest groups and social movements?

The value of looking at informal representations of public opinion extends beyond merely examining coverage of protest groups. For instance, it may be useful in looking at other news phenomena, such as the coverage of political election campaigns. Informal references to public opinion provide a way to examine discourse between the two major parties and subsequent political analyses by the media. Indeed, these types of cues might have a powerful effect in shaping voting patterns. They might also shed some light on the maintenance of two-party dominance in the United

States. The application of micro-descriptive depictions of public opinion may draw boundaries between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' political contenders by pointing out how the positions of third parties deviate from social norms and mainstream public opinion.

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