

Conscientious dissident or radical eccentric: Negotiation of mediated protest images in New Zealand

Linda Jean Kenix

Introduction

It is suggested that media contribute to the adoption of attitudes (Chung & Fink 2008) and behavioral expectations (Muturi 2005) by showing symbolic rewards and punishments (Bandura 1977). This finding has additional significance to social movements who are in a constant struggle for meaning within mainstream media (Gitlin 1980). Media have been shown to be absolutely instrumental to the growth and survival of social movements (Kielbowicz & Sherer 1986). Research has shown that the public receives their information concerning social groups primarily from the media and that relatively few in our society form their opinions of social movements through personal contact (Koopmans 2004). It is essential that scholarship endeavor to understand the meanings constructed by the media as they inevitably help to inform related societal expectations and norms.

This research examines how predominant media frames of protest images influence audience perceptions of protesters. Previous research, which has largely examined textual representations, have found that the media reflect elite interests (Chong & Druckman 2007). Much research has found repeated cases of slanting, trivialization and outright omission of those who deviate from the norms of an elite media and participate in political protest (McLeod & Detenber 1999; McLeod & Hertog 1992; Olien, Tichenor, & Donohue 1989). However, there has been remarkably little investigation into how individuals might assimilate these messages.

Research that has found negative framing of protest, has largely been built upon dominant readings of media texts (Gitlin 1980; Hertog & McLeod 1995; Jenness 1995). This avenue of inquiry has not fully explored the potential of possible alternative readings, which is important, given that frames have been found to bestow a powerful singular identity that often translates to transformations in public opinion (Carragee & Roefs 2004; Entman 2004). Research in the area has also largely neglected the impact of visual messages. Utilizing images, rather than text, is

particularly important as visual imagery is fundamental in reproducing informational cues that individuals use to construct their perception of social reality (Graber 1990). While largely overlooked in mass communication research, visual images are central to how individuals represent, make meaning, and communicate with the rest of the world (Messaris 1994).

This research relied on focus groups in Christchurch, Auckland and Wellington. As a methodological approach, focus groups were used to gauge perceptions of protest rather than to describe or explain in any definitive sense. Images were pooled into eight categories and individual statements were coded according to a four-stage constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Lincoln & Guba 1985).

Media and Social Movements

News has become a political resource for social movements — an essential political resource. “The modern mass media have become central to the life and death of social movements” (Kielbowicz & Sherer 1986). News provides information to others, which can play a fundamental structural role in their decision-making (Gandy Jr 1982). News is also an “authoritative version of reality, a way of knowing associated with high levels of cultural legitimacy” (Barker-Plummer 1995: 3). Thus, news offers a type of membership of knowledge that participants engage in.

Gitlin writes that, “of all the institutions of daily life, the media specialize in orchestrating everyday consciousness - by virtue of their pervasiveness, their accessibility, their centralized symbolic capacity” (Gitlin 1980: 2). Media have evolved into a highly skilled system of networks that distribute ideology throughout the masses. Social movements must understand media structures and work within these confines if they hope to disseminate their beliefs. As Olson noted, social movements are already fighting the almost insurmountable task of presenting movement initiation in an appealing way for the potential recruit (Olson 1965). Many individuals rationalize their lack of involvement through what is called the logic of collective action. Potential recruits often reason that one person could not possibly make a difference. Believing that others will solve an issue, the logic of collective action has the potential to crush a movement before it even begins. Thus, the very nature of a social movement’s existence is inherently fragile. Unfavorable media coverage can halt the growth of a movement - effectively slowing the process of social change. Therefore, it is increasingly important that media serve to create public awareness, confer status

upon a movement, recruit new members and offer psychological support to members of the movement.

Without media coverage, many members of the public would not even be aware of a movement's existence (Gitlin 1980). The public receives their information concerning social groups primarily from the media. Relatively few in our society form their opinions of social movements through personal contact. Gitlin states that the media image, "tends to become 'the movement' for wider publics and institutions who have few alternative sources of information, or none at all, about it" (Gitlin 1980: 3). News serves as a symbolic form of power for a social movement because with it, the movement has the possibility for achieving the social change they are striving for. However, researchers have long argued that the media reflect the elite interests of the political, cultural and social power structure (Altschull 1984; Herman & Chomsky 1988; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien 1973). The reasons for this elitist coverage have been attributed to several underlying causes. Possible influences on content are the power of journalism practices and norms (Kenix 2005); organizational demands (Bagdikian 2000); individual journalists; economic pressures (Schoenbach & Bergen 1998); and a pervasive hegemonic ideology (Herman & Chomsky 1988; Hertog & McLeod 1995; Shoemaker & Reese 1996; Tichenor et al 1973). Hegemonic forces have been labeled as a principal cause of coverage that favors elites. From his study of the Student's for a Democratic Society, Gitlin concluded that the further an issue is from the elite group's core interests and values, the more likely it will be overlooked by the media (1980). Some research argues that this oversight is generally a subconscious process on the part of the journalist (Shoemaker & Reese 1996), while others (Entman & Rojecki 1993) have suggested that in regards to protesters, it is the hegemonic processes within journalism's reliance on elite sources that possess an "underlying professional ideology ambivalent toward public participation" (155).

Whatever the cause, researchers have found repeated cases of slanting, trivialization and outright omission of those who deviate from the norms of an elite media and form a political movement to combat injustice (McLeod & Detenber 1999; McLeod & Hertog 1992; Olien, Tichenor, & Donohue 1989). Negative media frames have been discovered in the anti-nuclear movement (Entman & Rojecki 1993), the women's movement (Barker-Plummer 1995), the gay and lesbian movement (Jenness 1995) the National Environmental Policy Act faced a media blackout (Schoenfeld, 1979). In fact, mass communication scholarship has provided innumerable examples concluding that mass media 'deligitimize' or 'marginalize' protest groups that

challenge mainstream society (Cohen 1980; McLeod & Hertog 1992; Shoemaker 1984).

Typically, coverage may emphasize lawlessness or police confrontations; focus on the small or the relatively decreased size of the protest (Swank 1997); question the mental ability of demonstrators (Hackett & Zhao 1994); or critique the physical appearance of protesters, such as piercings, clothing, tattoos, with an emphasis on physical oddities (McLeod & Hertog 1999). Coverage may also focus on the 'show' of a protest, centering on the carnivalesque atmosphere (McLeod & Hertog 1999) and utilizing a 'romper room' framing device (McLeod & Hertog 1999) that emphasizes immature behavior on the part of protesters. Other research (McFarlane & Hay 2003) has suggested that news coverage of protest also relies on an 'idiot at large' frame that suggests protesters simply do not understand the complexity of the debate at hand. News coverage has also been found to rely heavily on official sources, such as police, governmental officials and business leaders (Ryan et al 2001) that generally reiterate acceptable behaviors and social norms during protest (McFarlane & Hay 2003; Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, & Augustyn 2001).

As this review illustrates, the overwhelming majority of studies concerning the media and social movements has centered on how the media trivializes protest in its coverage. However, very little research has examined how individuals negotiate and assimilate these representations into their personal view of protest and civic participation. Three exceptions that have looked at effects of protest news coverage have been largely in experimental settings. Shoemaker (1982) was first to argue that the representation of protest groups by newspapers had a demonstrable effect on how individuals perceived the legitimacy of those groups. In a related experiment, McLeod (1995) found that when news stories favored those opposing the protestors, participants were more critical of protest actions. Another notable exception is the quantitative research done by McLeod and Detenber (1999), which examined audience response to television news coverage of protest. Their study serves as a foundation for the framework of this research. Through their quantitative experiments, they found that television shows supportive of the status quo produced an increased level of cynicism in the viewer. This study hopes to build upon their work to further elucidate a more contextual, qualitative understanding of how New Zealand audiences respond to images of protest, rather than text, and how they subsequently negotiate conceptions of protest into their own level of political engagement.

Framing Protest Images

Visual communication can transcend textual limitations and convey emotions in addition to factual evidence (Lester 2003). Because news photos are often scanned first (Miller 1975) and can contain highly vivid images that can form long-lasting impressions on memory (Lester 2003), it is important to examine the content of news photographs to determine how protesters are represented in visual imagery. This representation is the frame used by the photojournalist to retell the story. Entman (1993) writes that journalists “select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (52). News, like any other system of communication, can be understood as a narrative that has implied meanings, which are transmitted through media frames. Indeed, frames are integral to understanding how issues of relevance and importance are constructed in the media.

Devitt (1998) suggested that it is not the sources that dictate visual coverage, but the editorial selection process that creates visual imagery that accompanies a news story. Visual framing, a specific type of frame, refers to the salient imagery frameworks used to construct meaning. Visual frames can activate certain constructs at the expense of others, thereby directly influencing what enters the minds of news consumers. A photographer sent on assignment gathers tens, if not hundreds, of images that must be examined individually for inclusion in the news product. Rarely is this selection instantaneous. Rather, it is more often a deductive process undertaken by the photographer, journalist and editor. The social construction of reality

This purposeful construction of reality remains an elusively ‘invisible’ process to the viewer, who relies upon media-generated images to form or construct meaning about political and social issues (1992). Photographs subtly form meaning that is embedded within a larger system or frame. Visual imagery must not only be understood as evidentiary but also contextualized within their own ideological position and the larger story-level schematic. For example, Campbell (1991) suggested that camera angles provide varying levels of credibility for the subject and source. Other researchers have explored visual stereotyping of images focusing on physical appearance and style of dress (Beasley & Standley 2002; Entman 1992; Fink & Kensicki 2002; Signorielli, McLeod, & Healy 1994), illustrating the shift to more subtle forms of meaning construction in the production of images.

As journalists, editors and reporters select (or frame) the news, they are also emphasizing certain aspects of a story, which then cues corresponding specific thoughts within the audience (Iyengar 1991). The audience then applies these specific thoughts, conjured up from media frames associated with a particular story, when considering the broader issues at hand (Price & Tewksbury 1997). This process, called the 'accessibility bias' (Iyengar 1990) or the 'availability heuristic' (Shrum & O'Guinn 1993), enables for automatic, subconscious judgments to be made. Measuring these automatic, subconscious judgments has largely been in experimental settings. Episodic frames have been shown to have a different impact than thematic frames on how audience members assign responsibility of a social problem (Iyengar 1991). Readers' thoughts on specific issues has been shown to vacillate depending on whether the media utilizes a human interest frame, a conflict frame or a personal consequences frame (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers 1997).

McLeod and Detenber (1999) convincingly argue on behalf of Chan & Lee (1984) that common characteristics of news coverage have been codified into the concept of a 'protest paradigm'. This protest paradigm results in media coverage that frames protestors as violent (Cohen, 1980; McLeod & Hertog 1992); as objects of discussion originating from official sources (Soley 1992); as the subject of often negative public opinion (McLeod & Hertog 1992). The frames within the protest paradigm form an "implicit model that journalists apply to the coverage of protests" (McLeod & Detenber 1999: 6). The more radical the group and the more the group challenges the status quo, the more these framing techniques are employed by the media (Carragee 1991). Given that research has found the utilization of such marginalizing frames throughout media coverage of protest, the most important next step is examining the effects of these frames on audiences.

Research Questions

Based upon previous research concerning the representation of protest in the media, this study proposes the following research questions:

R1: If protesters are negatively framed in images, will respondents be more or less critical of protesters?

R2: If protesters are positively framed in images, will respondents be more or less critical of protesters?

R3: Do viewing images of protesters affect general perceptions of protest and the participants' own conception of political participation?

Methodology

Four focus groups were held in New Zealand. One took place in Auckland at The University of Auckland, the second at Victoria University in Wellington and two were held in Christchurch at the University of Canterbury. Focus groups were used given that this is an exploratory study meant to gauge perceptions rather than to describe or explain in any definitive sense. Using theoretical saturation as a goal, new focus group meetings were added until little new information is obtained (Krueger 1988).

The Auckland focus group meeting had three participants, the Wellington gathering had 6 participants and the Christchurch meetings had fifteen in total (seven at the first and eight at the second meeting). While the total number of 24 participants, is relatively low, it became apparent as the study went on that little new information was gained and that a reasonable level of theoretical saturation has taken place (Morgan 1997). The focus groups were extremely lively and discussion never appeared to wane during the sessions. This was attributed to the passionate response participants appeared to have toward representations of protest.

The cities of Wellington, Auckland and Christchurch were selected because they are dispersed geographically across the country and they are the three largest cities in New Zealand (*New Zealand: Largest cities and towns and statistics of their population* 2007) with three of the country's major universities. Given the relatively small population of New Zealand, cities were used in the hopes of attracting a larger pool of participants from a wider demographic and economic dispersion. The author served as the moderator and one assistant was present. Participants were solicited through an email sent out to all Media Studies or Mass Communication students at each respective university.

In keeping with recent focus group research (Goodman 2002), individual statements were coded according to a four-stage constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Lincoln & Guba 1985). Each statement from participants was coded into as

many categories as possible (Krueger 1988; Lindlof 1995). Following the four-stage comparison method, statements were repeatedly compared with the attributes of each category to integrate categories as much as possible. This process allowed for further unification and the ability to “make some related theoretical sense of each comparison” (Glaser & Strauss 1967: 109).

Focus group interviews followed a loose structure that was often dictated by the direction of discussion. Participants were shown a series of photographs and asked to comment about what they had seen. Depending upon the direction of conversation, participants were asked questions such as: Could you see yourself supporting a protest such as this? How effective do you think these protesters are at creating social change? Are these protesters important to democracy or do they inhibit meaningful discourse? Do they have a right to protest? Do you take them ‘seriously’? Do you see these protesters as deviant/counter-societal or essential to the democratic process? The moderator relied on questions such as these, but the qualitative, open-ended framework used in this study allowed participants to articulate their own perceptions of protest, which could then be compared to researchers’ conceptualizations. Given that the results reported here are from meetings that took place over four months, and that consciousness of such issues is a clearly continually changing, conclusions should be viewed as a representation of one particular moment in time.

Images were pooled into categories derived from previous research concerning the representation of protest in mainstream media. The categories were:

- Positive: Image that frames a large group of protesters peacefully gathered and apparently supporting a common theme.
- Immature: Image that frames an individual or group in a childish costume or an infantile posture.
- Carnival: Image that frames protesters in action in either a dress, costume or acting out a character.
- Conflict: Image that frames two clearly separate groups in opposition (demonstrated by dress or posture) with one group representing the mainstream or status quo.
- Marginalized in number: Image that frames an individual or group in very few numbers with few onlookers around.

- Violence: Image that frames individuals in physical conflict with another or holding a weapon of assault.
- Idiot/Mentally Unstable: Image that frames an individual or group ideologically isolated in their position outside the mainstream acting in ways that are managed by others in the mainstream or status quo.
- Physical Oddities: Image that frames an individual or group with physical traits not commonly seen in the mainstream (tattoos, piercings, long beards, etc).

Two notes should be made at this stage. The first is that these categories are not mutually exclusive. An argument can clearly be made that an image could be categorized as both marginalized in number and idiot/mentally unstable or any other possible combination. This research attempted to select the most dominant frame of the image, and then pool those images accordingly, to share with focus group participants. The second important caveat is that some of the images inevitably had some written messages on them that exposed the purpose of the protest featured in that image. Participants were asked to try and evaluate the image outside of the stated objective of the protest.

Results

Immature

Participants were shown an image of a man wearing a Santa Claus outfit; another group of people appearing to reenact a scene from Frosty the Snowman; a third image of man in a child's pirate outfit and a fourth showing a group of individuals dressed as cheerleaders and posing in the middle of a cheer (Figure 1). All were images of people protesting through the framework of 'immaturity', as defined earlier. Participants were supportive of these images principally for the lack of anger demonstrated on the faces of the protesters and the inventiveness of the costumes. While one participant in Auckland said that it all 'seemed a bit overly dramatic' others made comments like 'I like this' or 'its fun'. One participant went so far as to say that 'I'd be far more inclined to follow the guy in a pirate hat than some somber, angry protester'.

One participant attempted to reason through her support by saying that 'on face value, it's very easy to be dismissive, but it is possible they are doing something quite inventive or intriguing. There could be much more to it than meets the eye'. At this,

many participants responded in the affirmative and focused on the level of cheerfulness portrayed. 'It's all about a lack of anger. It all seems very reasonable in its own way'. Another said that 'I like this. They look friendly and happy'. A Wellington respondent said 'Really. Who would you rather spend your time with? These guys seem great'. Taking a related but more political approach to the image, one Christchurch participant said "Yeah, this is cool. That really shows them. They can't put us all in a brand-name box'. This statement elicited one of the most positive responses from the focus group. When the participant was asked who 'They' are, two other participants quickly responded by saying 'They is everyone' and 'They are big business and government...and...yeah...everyone'.

Carnival

Participants were shown an image of a man in a loincloth with fruit in his hair; a group of people wrapped in red body suits and acting out the death of seals; a woman dressed as the statue of liberty holding an umbrella; protesters with dressed in large caricatures of world leaders (Figure 2); and a group of people dressed up in money placards. Comments on this group of images were overwhelmingly supportive of the protesters. Rather than being critical of what has been traditionally labeled as 'trivializing representation' in scholarly literature, participants found these images to be very effective.

In Auckland, one participant remarked that the images were 'presenting a much more sophisticated visual display'. Another in Christchurch said that 'You get the idea that the people behind these have put a lot of thought into it'. On a direct and personal level, respondents said that they 'Loved the satirical bent' and many felt that the images were 'funny'.

When asked if these images trivialized the cause at hand, respondents countered with almost uniformity that it actually enhanced the political message. The only exception out of all the participants involved in this study, was one participant who recently arrived in New Zealand from China. This participant found images within the "carnival" frame to be "disorganized" and she confessed she would be less likely to support such a group. 'In China', she said, 'we just don't make fun of our leaders like this. Not in this way'.

Conversely, the rest of the participants said they would be more likely to support such a group because they 'Don't look quite as intense', or they 'Look a lot more relaxed', or that they simply 'Look like a better use of my time'. Three participants separately contrasted these images against other 'mass' protest images that were shown during the focus group. These images showed hundreds, if not thousands, of protesters marching peacefully. These three participants found the "carnival" images to be much more appealing and much more worthy of their support. 'I'd be much more likely to support these people earlier on, rather than the mass (protest)'. Asked why that was the case, one particular respondent said that 'It looks more professional. It looks more serious. It doesn't look flippant and trivial like the other ones (The pictures of mass protesters) did'. Others in the focus group nodded their heads in agreement making comments such as 'It adds to it' or 'It definitely enhances their message'. To explain this participation further, one Auckland participant said 'I'd be a bit more relaxed in myself if I looked around and saw people dressed up and what have you. They're willing to be there and protest, but they are not too intense about it. There is always the possibility of authoritative interaction. So, it looks like they are not going to get themselves into any major trouble'.

At this point, the moderator asked whether this is the kind of protest that could actually create change. All but the one Chinese participant said that they felt such a protest movement would be effective in gaining attention. With a clear understanding of the power of media, one respondent said that 'These images create a better media story. And, that helps the movement'. Another countered that 'These images are very effective in creating awareness. But, actually, I'm not quite sure how effective (these images) are in creating change'. The previous respondent answered 'Well, it sure got my attention'.

Conflict

Images of conflict included an image of police officers facing a row of protesters (Figure 3); two lone protesters staring at a long row of police officers; one solitary man showing the peace sign with both of his hands and walking away from a group of police in riot gear; and an image of a single police officer holding his hands out in front of a crowd, presumably to urge them to step back. Discussion about these images was more evenly split, but with more emphasis on critiquing the protesters position rather than empathizing with them.

One respondent stated bluntly that these images represented 'The lunatic fringe'. Asked why, she responded that 'If the authorities deem it necessary to get the riot police out, then it is definitely a bit more fringe from the mainstream'. Another replied that 'You need to be a bit weary of these people'. However, as time went on, some of the harsher critiques of the protesters displayed a bit more empathy. As one respondent said later on during the session, 'But, then you look at this one and there are women and children, and old women, and you think 'hang on a minute''. This frame offered the most discussion and contentiousness among the participants. To illustrate, one discussion between two participants:

Participant 1: 'The body image in the male officer is very dominant and aggressive, which casts the protesters in the moral high ground'.

Participant 2: 'I would have said the opposite thing. He looks to be in charge, which makes me think 'He's right. They're wrong''.

Participant 1: 'How could you think that? (The protesters) are just expressing themselves'.

Participant 2: 'Whatever the police are doing, should be right. I instantly think that'.

When asked if their thoughts change when there are more police than protesters within an image, more critique was given to the protesters. One respondent argued that 'When protesters are in conflict with the police, they don't look as professional'. However, this same respondent said that the image of a protester walking away from the police showed that the protester was 'Either really defiant or really cowardly. He doesn't appear to be open-minded. He looks like he is walking away'. One Auckland participant said, in reference to that same picture, 'There is also the possibility that this man is using this event as a photo opportunity. For his own ends'.

Another example of the contested meanings within these conflict images came from the focus group in Christchurch. One participant said that 'The police look very sinister ... that implied threat of violence'. To that, another replied that 'If there are two guys with banners and you need that many police to take them on, then it makes me side more with the police ... I find it easier to put myself in the shoes of the police officer than the protester'. A participant quickly asserted that 'Police are prepared for conflict. It doesn't really matter what you say. If you just step out of line one little bit'.

Marginalized in Numbers

Two images were shown to focus group participants in the 'marginalized in numbers' category. The first was of a relatively small group of protesters carrying signs on a quiet city sidewalk (Figure 4), and the second was of a solitary man holding up two signs on an empty street. The solitary man was uniformly seen less positive than the group on the corner. One respondent said that 'The guy on his own seems like a lunatic'. However, put in context against the individual protester, respondents talked of this image as if there were 'a lot' of people there.

When asked if numbers help the credibility of their cause, respondents said yes, but that it depends on the issue. Every single focus group participant saw solitary protest as weak. Participants were highly critical of protests that did not involve a lot of people. As one respondent said, 'The smaller the group, the more lunatic they are'. Another stated that 'If you are one person that really wants to get your point across, I wouldn't think that protest would be the best way, the best vehicle. There are other ways to get your point across more effectively'.

Violence

Images of violence ranged from a man in open physical aggression with a police officer (Figure 5); a protester on the floor with police hitting him with a baton; a masked man holding a machine gun; and masked men throwing items. Initial responses were very critical. 'This to me, is where it has gone too far. Once, it's like, the democracy, the process, has been exhausted and now the protesters have actually gotten to a point where nothings happened, nothings changed, and they've moved on to the next stage of violent conflict ... this is beyond what I would support'. Another participant said 'I instantly lose respect for this. This looks like a cliché anarchist revolutionary'.

Like the 'conflict' images, responses changed as more time was spent examining the photographs. Participants started to report that they felt a lot of empathy for these protesters. 'It makes me think, what on earth has gone so wrong that it has come to this. What is driving this protester?' Another said, 'You've gotta feel bad for these people that nobody has listened and that it has come to this'. Another replied that 'This is just another example of the police keeping good people down'. However, that empathy shifted to despondency. As one participant summed up, 'I feel sorry for

them. They might have to lose their lives. But nothing will change. The dominant power will not change. They will just lose their lives for nothing’.

Idiot/Mentally Unstable

Participants were shown an image of a woman being carried away by two police (Figure 6); another woman being escorted away from a protest area with a vacant look upon her face; a third image of a man standing alone staring off into space and wearing a costume of some sort; and a fourth image of a man laughing while being escorted away from police. These images were viewed with a high level of criticism. As one respondent said, ‘These don’t look like serious issues. I wouldn’t necessarily want to sit and talk with them’. To contextualize their answer, one Auckland respondent said that ‘This looks like a one-off issue. Not like they are trying to change the world’. In Christchurch, another said that these individuals look as if they have ‘Done something wrong’. As another respondent said, ‘These guys don’t look very professional. Not professional enough for me to connect with it’.

Physical Oddity

Three ‘physical oddity’ images were shown to participants. One was a fully tattooed man; a second had a group of men with very long beards protesting; and a third was an image of a man with a Mohawk haircut (Figure 7). Respondents found it very difficult to empathize with these individuals. ‘They represent extreme, marginalized views that mainstream society have too many preconceived conceptions about’. Across the two focus groups, all agreed that these were not people worthy of support. Some sample responses: ‘I’d be skeptical of all of them’; ‘They just don’t fit within our social norms’; ‘They fit quite nicely as a stereotype’; and ‘I couldn’t support them’. Asked if it would matter if they deeply supported a cause, all respondents said the cause would not be enough to warrant a liaison with those pictured.

Positive

Participants were shown several images of ‘positive’ protest portrayals defined as images that frame a large group of protesters peacefully gathered and apparently supporting a common theme. One image was of thousands of protesters marching peacefully down a street (Figure 8); one image showed a close-up of roughly 50 protesters marching with placards; another image showed two jubilant men in the

forefront of thousands of protesters celebrating with signs; and a final image showed about 50 individuals locked arm in arm appearing to be chanting a slogan or song. Response was overwhelmingly negative.

Initial responses from both focus groups were highly critical. One participant said this was 'Not reflective of normal society'. In another location, a respondent argued 'When I look at this protest, I think that this is one small subset of society that has a different perspective than most people do'. To rationalize this position, another protester said that 'It looks to be quite dominated by young people. You see a few older people in some of the shots but it seems to fit within stereotypes of protest'. This comment was in reference to an image where the faces of protesters were clearly indistinguishable.

When questioned further, many focused their criticism on the seriousness of those pictured. 'Everybody looks grumpy', said one participant. But, then another answered, 'They don't look like they are taking it very seriously. I would not support them'. When pushed to choose if there was any image among those offered that could be seen as positive, one respondent said that "I guess I'd be more likely to support the march. They're moving. The others (of a smaller group of individuals locked arm in arm) support some sort of fanaticism'.

Overall Perspectives on Protest

Just under half of the students had participated in a protest before. Those who had not participated in at least one protest were asked if they could ever see themselves participating in one in the future. Without exception, all said that they could not envision themselves participating in any protest, regardless of the cause. When asked about their conceptions of protesters before images were shown, focus group participants were decidedly negative. One participant said that protesters were 'anachronistic', suggesting that their purpose in society had passed with the politically turbulent sixties. Another, in a different location, said that 'The whole tie-dyed, pot smoking antics of people ... it just outweighs what the protest is all about'. From here, discussion went on to examining stereotypes of protesters. None were seen to be positive. Rather, protesters were seen as 'Crazy people marching around with signs', or 'Bearded, sandal-wearing hippie with alternative lifestyle ideas'. After the focus group, every individual said that their ideas of protesters had not changed and that they would be unlikely to participate in protest in the future.

Discussion

Much of the previous research has found that mainstream media often marginalize protesters through specific framing techniques. However, participants did not see all of these techniques as negative. Indeed, participants found that the 'immature' and 'carnival' frames were generally positive. By appealing to the participants' sense of fun, these protest images actually engendered a certain level of empathy and support from those questioned in this study. This suggests that 'immature' and 'carnival' frames may actually be helpful to political causes - at least to this cohort of New Zealanders. Participants in this study appeared transferred their positive perceptions of the protesters costumes and antics to the projected cause. Participants were much more likely to be supportive of their projected cause if they felt positively about the person, and engendering positively about that person depended largely on affective, emotional responses to a sense of playful fun.

The oppositional readings of these images may be emblematic of a generational shift in media reception. Without connecting these images to any particular cause, the participants in this study intuitively appeared to support the notion that these protesters were opposing a monolithic, conformist, corporate force that was largely supported by mass media. The freedom and fun expressed in these 'immature' and 'carnival' images appeared to exploit the participants' belief of how the originating text was constructed and in whose interests. There appeared to be a high level of media literacy, albeit generalized, on the part of these respondents. This was demonstrated by repeated supportive statements regarding protesters who were against the omnipresent 'them' (government and big business, of which media appeared to play a dominant facilitating role).

The participants viewed the 'immature' and 'carnival' protesters as engaged in playful representations simply necessary for media coverage. Yet, rather than demonstrating any frustration at such a sacrifice for media attention, the participants in this study reveled in the fun of what has traditionally been viewed as negative immaturity. This might suggest that participants don't take either themselves or their causes too seriously. However, this position may also allude to a sense of powerlessness on the part of potential protesters. The participants' sense of engagement with the frivolity of individual play, rather than the seriousness of mass protest, might actually be reflective of a more assimilative attitude within a mass-mediated culture. Knowing that media tend highlight visual, eye-catching activities, and sensing that they possess relatively little political efficacy, the participants in this

study seemed content to enjoy the process rather than strive for a determinist outcome.

Based on the response of elite, political forces to immature, carnivalesque protests in the past (Hertog & McLeod 1995), it remains doubtful whether these oppositional readings will multiply into that of a 'minor preferred.' One would guess that if this were to happen, a 'modestly plural' (Barthes 1972) range of expression would occur whereby dominant readings would be reinforced more vigorously with textual redundancy. Yet, this wholehearted support on the part of focus group participants is certainly worthy of further study and calls into question the efficacy of using such images as demonstrative of a weak, silly or ineffectual protest movement.

Other, traditionally, marginalizing portrayals of protest were indeed met with conflicting opinions from the participants. Images of protesters in conflict with police led many to question the intent and purpose of the protesters. However, others questioned the force of police in response to protest activities. Images of violence were met with similar contradiction and debate with some empathizing with protesters who were left with no other action but violence while others maintaining that this showed an unruly crowd that did not respect authority. Participants were wary of conflict but empathetic toward acts of violence. However, as this study made clear, this sample did not immediately see these images as trivializing or marginalizing. Rather, there was a clear process of internal and external negotiation that these participants went through to elucidate their own feelings. A comparison between textual and visual images of violence in relation to social movement protest would be helpful in illustrating any variances in empathic response.

Still other traditionally marginalized portrayals of protest were found to engender criticism of the protesters. Participants viewed protest images of 'marginalized in numbers,' 'physical oddities,' or 'idiot/mentally unstable' as decidedly negative. Interestingly enough, all the images in these categories were of individual people. Perhaps it is the 'marginalization of numbers' that is having the greatest influence on perception. It may be the fear of being an outlier in society that is driving such negative perceptions rather than the behavior of those photographed. Respondents did seem to demonstrate encouragement from visible camaraderie in the photos but were not supportive of a complete homogeneity - as evidenced by the reaction to the 'positive' mass protest images. That the 'positive' images of protest garnered some of the most heightened opposition and criticism, was one of the most surprising findings

in this study. However, the reasons for this finding may tie in directly with perceptions of the 'immature' and 'carnival' frames. The positive response to these frames was due to a sense of humor and fun while the negative response to the 'positive' frames was due to a lack of the very same thing. This suggests that further study should be taken examining humor and a sense of fun in protest images as well as audience conceptions of homogeneity. Perhaps, the negative responses seen here were the result of apprehension toward the sheer massiveness of this protest. Only further study will help clarify this contradiction in the research.

In relation to the final research question, this research found that participants did not change their general perception of protest or their own conception of political participation after viewing protest images. This suggests that preconceived notions of protest are very stable and difficult to shift after exposure to only a small number of photographs. Only future study could demonstrate if a larger sample size might result in any shifts in the conceptualization of protest or political participation. Yet, it is important to note that almost all participants viewed 'traditional' forms of protest as negative and ineffectual. This response might be supported by widespread research that points to political apathy in younger demographics. However, this research suggests that the lukewarm response of younger generations might be a reaction to the perceived homogeneity of traditional protest. Such homogeneity may run counter to these participants' predilection for unique and humorous acts of defiance. This is a potentially interesting finding for both the social movements striving for media attention and media outlets whose frames can have a profound impact on movement activity.

Conclusion

An obvious limitation to this study is the small sample size. However, the findings here suggest future study is warranted. Such strikingly similar 'alternative' readings suggest that a generational or even geographical shift may be occurring. Further study that examined a wider age-range of participants and compared findings with other geographical areas would be particularly illuminating. This might help clarify if this research is an anomaly or indicative of an emerging or emergent 'minor preferred' reading of protest.

Figure 1: Image of Immature Frame



Figure 2: Image of Carnival Frame



Figure 3: Image of Conflict Frame



Figure 4: Image of Marginalized in Numbers Frame



Figure 5: Image of Violence Frame



Figure 6: Image of Idiot/Mentally Unstable Frame



Figure 7: Image of Physical Oddity Frame



Figure 8: Image of Positive Frame



Note on the contributor

Linda Jean Kenix is a senior lecturer in Political Science and Communication at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch.

Bibliography

Altschull H (1984) *Agents of Power: The Role of the News Media in Human Affairs*
Longman

New York

Bagdikian B (2000) *The Media Monopoly* (6th ed) Beacon Press Boston

Bandura A (1977) *Social Learning Theory* Prentice-Hall Englewood Cliffs

Barker-Plummer B (1995) 'News as a Political Resource: Media Strategies and Political Identity in the U.S. Women's Movement' *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12 (September) 306-324

Barthes R (1972) *Myth Today* (trans Lavers A) In Lavers A (ed) *Mythologies* (1957)
Hill and Wang New York

Beasley B & Standley T (2002) 'Shirts vs. skins: clothing as an indicator of gender role stereotyping in video games' *Mass Communication and Society* 5 (3) 279-293.

Campbell R (1991) *60 Minutes and the News: A Mythology for Middle America*
University of Illinois Press Urbana

Carragee K (1991) 'News and ideology: an analysis of coverage of the West German Green Party by the New York Times' *Journalism Monographs* 128

Carragee K & Roefs W (2004) 'The neglect of power in recent framing research' *Journal of Communication* 54 (2) 214-233

Chan J & Lee C (1984) 'The journalistic paradigm on civil protests: A case study of Hong Kong' in Arno N & Dissanayake W (eds) *The News Media in National and International Conflict* 183-202 Westview Boulder

Chong D & Druckman J (2007) 'A theory of framing and opinion formation in competitive elite environments' *Journal of Communication* 57 (1) March 99-118

Chung S & Fink E (2008) 'The cognitive dynamics of beliefs: The effect of information on message processing' *Human Communication Research* 34 (3) July 477-504

Cohen S (1980) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* Blackwell Oxford

Devitt J (1998) 'Priming Reporters: A Study on how the Willie Horton Case Altered the Portrayal of Criminals' Paper presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Baltimore

Entman R (1992) 'Blacks in the News: Television, Modern Racism and Cultural Change' *Journalism Quarterly* 69 (2) 341-361

Entman R (1993) 'Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm' *Journal of Communication* 43 (4), 51-58

Entman R (2004) *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy* University of Chicago Press Chicago

Entman R & Rojecki A (1993) 'Freezing out the public: Elite and media framing of the U.S. anti nuclear movement' *Political Communication* 10 155-173.

Fink J & Kensicki L (2002) 'An imperceptible difference: Visual and contextual constructions of femininity in *Sports Illustrated* and *Sports Illustrated for Women*' *Mass Communication and Society* 5 (3) 317-339.

Gamson W et al (1992) 'Media images and the social construction of reality' *Annual Review of Sociology* 18 373-393

Gandy Jr H (1982) *Beyond Agenda Setting: Information Subsidies and Public Policy* Ablex Norwood

Gitlin T (1980) *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* University of California Press Berkeley

Glaser B & Strauss A (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* Aldine Atherton Chicago

Goodman J (2002) 'Flawless is fabulous: How Latina and Anglo women read and incorporate the excessively thin body ideal into everyday experience' *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 79 (3) 712-727

Graber D (1990) 'Seeing is remembering: How visuals contribute to learning from television news' *Journal of Communication* 3 (134-155)

Hackett R & Zhao Y (1994) 'Challenging a master narrative: Peace protest and opinion/editorial discourse in the US press during the Gulf War' *Discourse and Society* 5 509-541

Herman E & Chomsky N (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* Pantheon Books New York

Hertog J & McLeod D (1995) 'Anarchists wreak havoc in downtown Minneapolis: A multi-level study of media coverage of radical protest' *Journalism Monographs* 151 June 1-48

Iyengar S (1990) 'The accessibility bias in politics: Television news and public opinion' *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 2 (1) 1-15

Iyengar S (1991) *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* University of Chicago Press Chicago

Jenness V (1995) 'Social movement growth, domain expansion, and framing processes: The gay/lesbian movement and violence against gays and lesbians as a social problem' *Social Problems* 42 (1) February 145-170

Kenix L (2005) 'A comparison of environmental pollution coverage in the mainstream, African American, and other alternative press' *The Howard Journal of Communications* 16 (1) 49-70

Kielbowicz R & Sherer C (1986) 'The role of the press in the dynamics of social movements' in Kreisberg L (ed) *Research in Social Movements: Conflicts and Change* JAI Press New York

Koopmans R (2004) 'Movements and media: Selection processes and evolutionary dynamics in the public sphere' *Theory and Society* 33 (3-4) June 367-391

Krueger R (1988) *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* Sage Newbury Park Sage

Lester P (2003) *Visual Communication: Images with Messages* (3rd ed) Wadsworth/Thomson Learning Belmont

Lincoln Y & Guba E (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry* Sage Beverly Hills

Lindlof T (1995) *Qualitative Communication Research Methods* Sage Thousand Oaks

McFarlane T & Hay I (2003) 'The battle for Seattle: Protest and popular geopolitics in The Australian newspaper' *Political Geography* 22 211-232

McLeod D (1995) 'Communicating deviance: The effects of television news coverage of social protest' *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 39 4-19

McLeod D & Detenber B (1999) 'Framing effects of television news coverage of social protest' *Journal of Communication* 49 (3) 3-23

McLeod D & Hertog J (1999) 'Social control, social change and the mass media's role in the regulation of protest groups' in Demers D & Viswanath K (eds) *Mass Media, Social Control, and Social Change* 305-330 Iowa State University Press Ames

McLeod D & Hertog J (1992) 'The manufacture of public opinion by reporters: Informal cues for public perceptions of protest groups' *Discourse and Society* 3 259-275

Messaris P (1994) *Visual 'Literacy': Image, Mind and Reality* Westview Press Boulder

Miller S (1975) 'The content of news photos: Women's and men's roles' *Journalism Quarterly* 52 (1) 70-75

Morgan D (1997) *Focus groups as Qualitative Research* (2nd ed) Sage Thousand Oaks

Muturi N (2005) 'Communication for HIV/AIDS prevention in Kenya: Social-cultural considerations' *Journal of Health Communication* 10 (1) January/February 77-98

World Gazetteer (2007) 'New Zealand: Largest cities and towns and statistics of their population' retrieved 12 April from <http://www.worldgazetteer.com/wg.php?x=&men=gcis&lng=en&dat=32&srt=npan&col=aohdq&geo=-165>

Olien C et al (1989) 'Media coverage and social movements' in Salmon C (ed) *Information Campaigns: Balancing Social Values and Social Change* Sage Newbury Park

Olson M (1965) *The Logic of Collective Action* Harvard University Press Cambridge

Price V & Tewksbury D (1997) 'News values and public opinion: A theoretical account of media priming and framing' in Barnett G & Boster F (eds) *Progress in the Communication Sciences* 173-212 Ablex Greenwich

Price V et al (1997) 'Switching trains of thought: The impact of news frames on readers' cognitive responses' *Communication Research* 24 481-506

Ryan C et al (2001) 'Framing, the news media, and collective action' *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 45 (1) 175-182

Schoenbach K & Bergen L (1998) 'Commentary: Readership research-challenges and changes' *Newspaper Research Journal* 19 (2) 88-102

Schoenfeld A (1979) 'The press and NEPA: The case of the missing agenda' *Journalism Quarterly* 56 (3) Fall 577-585

Shoemaker P (1982) 'The perceived legitimacy of deviant political groups'
Communication Research 9 249-286

Shoemaker P (1984) 'Media treatment of deviant political groups' Journalism
Quarterly 61(1) 66-75, 82

Shoemaker P & Reese S (1996) Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on
Mass Media Content (2nd ed) Longman New York

Shrum L & O'Guinn T (1993) 'Processes and effects in the construction of social
reality: Construct accessibility as an explanatory variable' Communication Research
22 402-429

Signorielli N et al (1994) 'Gender stereotypes in MTV commercials: The beat goes on'
Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media 38 91-102

Smith J et al (2001) 'From protest to agenda building: Description bias in media
coverage of protest events in Washington, D. C.' Social Forces 79 1397-1423.

Soley L (1992) The News Shapers: The Sources who explain the News Praeger New
York

Swank E (1997) 'The ebbs and flows of Gulf war protest' The Journal of Political and
Military Sociology 25 211-229

Tichenor P et al (1973) 'Mass communication research: Evolution of a structural
model' Journalism Quarterly 50 419-425