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PROMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION AND REFLEXIVITY: CASE STUDIES IN
THE MEDIA POLITICS AND PROBLEMATIZATION OF NEO-LIBERALISM

By

JOSHUA L. GREENBERG, B.A., M.A.

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PROMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION AND REFLEXIVITY

Enlighten me now O Muses, tenants of Olympian homes
For you are goddesses, inside on everything, know everything
But we mortals hear only the news and know nothing at all.

-- *The Iliad*

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AUTHOR: Joshua L. Greenberg B.A. (Guelph), M.A. (McMaster)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Graham Knight

COMMITTEE: Dr. Pamela Sugiman
MEMBERS Dr. Donald Wells

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers a critical analysis of the media politics underlying the shift to neo-liberalism. Special attention is paid to the relationships between news media, government and corporate public relations, and social movement activism in the context of changing policy priorities that advance market-based solutions for economic and political challenges. Neo-liberalism is accounted for in terms of both its policy and ideological dimensions, and the study demonstrates that neo-liberal forms of rule contribute to, rather than alleviate, risk and uncertainty. The consequence or 'reflexive effect' of this is a re-politicization of the public sphere and the creation of a space for struggle over the allocation of blame and responsibility for the social harms such policy programmes frequently entail. Such struggles, the study argues, tend to be waged communicatively and in the arena of news media.

The research draws on a range of theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of media and politics, obtaining insight from the disciplines of sociology, political science, media studies, management communication and policy studies. Quantitative and qualitative approaches, including content and textual analysis, open-ended interviews, and various forms of observational analysis (participant and non-participant), are used in an effort to explain the various dimensions of neo-liberal rule and resistance. The research demonstrates that media production sites are less closed to the participation and contributions of marginalized sources than critical studies have previously suggested. At the same time, however, asymmetrical power relations imbue both policy and news making, and while alternative actors may be successful in having

their voices heard, this is not the same thing as arguing that the media and policy fields are necessarily open to alternative viewpoints. Indeed, in the cases examined here, a liberal market ideology was shown to be predominant, despite the strategies and activities of social movements and occasional failures of elites to control the parameters of policy debate.

Empirical evidence for these findings is provided in two case studies, each of which contains a critical news analysis and examination of the PR strategies and positions of key policy participants. The first study interrogates the issue of market-based electricity restructuring in Ontario under the Conservative governments of Mike Harris and Ernie Eves (1995-2002). The second study investigates debates that have occurred over global labour standards in relation to the rise of commodity chain production within the sports footwear and apparel industry and addresses exclusively the anti-sweatshop campaign against Nike.

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STATEMENT ON CO-AUTHORSHIP

Articles 3.1 and 3.2 are co-authored with Graham Knight. As the primary author on the first paper, "Framing Sweatshops," I was responsible for the collection, coding, and analysis of the data, and for preparing the final draft for publication. The paper has been accepted for publication in the journal, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, pending minor revisions. The publishable version will differ slightly from the version that appears here due to time constraints involved in submitting the thesis for binding. Graham prepared the initial outline of the paper. The second manuscript, "Promotionalism and Subpolitics" has previously been published in the journal, *Management Communication Quarterly* (2002, v.15, #4, pp.541-70). As second author, I was involved primarily in the data collection and analysis phases of the research, and in also preparing the final draft for publication once it had been accepted. Graham assumed primary responsibility for the majority of the writing and all aspects of the submission and review processes.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This dissertation examines the role of news media and definitional struggle in the context of the neo-liberal policy turn and the rise of what social theorists describe as the 'reflexive' age of late modernity (Beck 1992, 1997; Beck et al. 1994; Lash and Urry 1994). The two case studies that constitute the dissertation seek to address the interaction between symbolic and material processes involved in the political process, and particularly in terms of the communicative dimensions of this new form of political economy and ideology. The central aim of the research will be to examine how changes associated with the neo-liberal turn are problematized by social actors – i.e. articulated, incorporated, resisted and contested – and of how this process of problematization is shaped by and through news discourse.

The research is premised on the central theoretical argument that news coverage not only provides citizens with an account of the important issues and events of the day, but, in light of the strategic importance that discourse can have for future courses of action, it is also a field in which political actors who double as news sources struggle to influence how those issues and events will be reported. Following Luhmann (1982), the political arena is conceptualized as a field of 'contingency' in which numerous actual or potential events threaten to undermine the ability of the social system to reproduce the conditions necessary for long-term survival. Under neo-liberalism, these contingencies become acute and concentrated and thus more 'visible' as problems to be managed. This poses a challenge to the stability of the welfare state as the 'culture of contentment'

(Galbraith 1992) gives way to a culture of 'insecurity' and 'risk' (Giddens 1990; Beck 1992). The upshot of this is an even more 'eager political market for reassurance' (Galbraith 1992, p.2), and because political actors must be able to convince and persuade in order to reassure, concerns about communication and information become matters of central priority. Political communication thus entails efforts to not only reduce contingency but also to exploit contingency by opening up the field of possibilities in which both decisions and the meanings that decisions obtain are made.

On the basis of this theoretical schema, the research takes as a starting point Blumler and Gurevitch's (1996) argument that in modern liberal democracies the role of mainstream news organizations is integral to the development and performance of politics. We now live, Blumler and Gurevitch write, in a "communications dependent society" in which "media attention is a vital source of potential influence and power, creating perceptions of key events, issues and distributions of public support that policy-makers must heed" (p.127). To be sure, the media have always played an important role in the political process and the impact of publicity systems (news organizations, public relations, marketing and advertising, &c.) on both policy considerations and public opinion has been a central problematic in social science research for some time, although among sociologists it has remained on the margins of the discipline's broader field of inquiry (but see Mayhew 1997).

As I will argue in this dissertation, the role of news media and concern over the communication of politics and public policy has taken on increased relevance in the context of the neo-liberal turn and the struggle over its hegemony. Neo-liberalism has

become the dominant late modern form in which the management and exploitation of contingency is legitimated and organized. In debates involving the introduction of a policy framework that prioritizes the expansion of capital relations and aims to restrict the state's capacity to intervene in the governance of the polity and economy, "the media become important as a forum not only for mobilizing 'common sense'...but also for managing the avoidance and deflection of blame" (Knight 2001, p.74) that results from the concentrations of risk and social harms that policies associated with neo-liberalism frequently entail (also Pierson 1994).

The accumulation of risk and insecurity that are characteristic of the neo-liberal turn, and the communicational and strategic challenges this poses for governments, have precipitated the expansion of promotional communication and a growth of the "public relations state" (Gandy 1982; see also Deacon and Golding 1994). While governments have always attempted to use news media to secure popular support for their ideological perspectives and policy goals, there is growing evidence that the scale and scope of this aspect of political life have increased substantially in recent years. Writing on the case of Britain, Davis (2002) charted the rise of information and publicity professionals within the civil service and corporate sector, noting that not only did "all the main political parties [increase] their spending on promotional matters and [allocate] greater control to their professional communicators," but also, over the period in which neo-liberalism became entrenched as the dominant political framework at the national level, a "rise in in-house government communications was matched by a rise in the employment of PR consultancies to promote government policies" (p.20). And in a similar study, Miller and

Dinan (2000) demonstrated that neo-liberal policy reform and the expansion of promotional communication go hand in hand, noting how “the transformation of the British political scene by the tilt to the market...and international changes in the loosening of controls on mobile capital” was driven in large part by “the rise of the [public relations] industry...PR techniques were one important means by which these changes were accomplished” (p.6).¹ These findings are of particular relevance for the present study in light of estimates that suggest between 50 and 75 percent of political news copy has its origins in the work of official sources and their public relations staff (e.g. Altheide and Johnson 1980). The first article in this dissertation provides some prefatory empirical evidence of the centrality of communications and PR for government policy promotionalism in Ontario.

Nevertheless, while PR is a potentially valuable tool in the service of elite interests, the expansion of promotional culture and growth of the ‘public relations state’ also has the capacity to undermine institutional dominance over the policy and news making fields. As I argue in chapter 2.2, “Discursive Crisis and Blame Avoidance,” the turn to promotional politics has its own *reflexive effects* insofar as it is not only the state and corporate sector that are prioritizing and institutionalizing communications concerns into their overall PR and ‘issues management’ strategies. Importantly, groups which previously were excluded from the policymaking process in most liberal democratic polities (e.g. labour unions, citizens’ groups, environmentalists, etc.) have also begun to

¹ In contrast to the UK and United States, there is not systematic data available on the growth of the PR industry in Canada. However, ongoing research by the author reveals a likely parallel in this trend, particularly within the private sector. On the birth of the Canadian Public Relations Society and an account of its struggle to attain professional status, the reader might be interested in consulting Johansen (2001).

develop media and PR strategies in order either to secure a place at the policymaking table, and/or to contest, struggle and resist the policymaking process when the effects of policy change are likely to be felt in a negative way.² As I discuss below, and in some detail in the articles that follow, the degrees of inclusion and exclusion vary from one group or policy community to the next, and this can hold significant implications for how policy issues are reported, on the one hand, and for the kinds of strategies marginalized groups use to ensure that their voices will be heard, on the other. Following Richardson (2000), I argue that an effect of the neo-liberal turn has been an overall rise of interest and advocacy group activity and this has arguably made the policymaking process more fluid than ever before. Consequently, a new political environment of increased uncertainty has emerged since the late 1970s “as proliferating groups have claimed a stake and clamoured for a place in the policy process” (Heclo 1978, p.94). Arguably, as the field of contingency has continued to expand under the turn to neo-liberalism, and as neo-liberal policies become entrenched both horizontally (across nation-states) and vertically (within nation-states), this ‘proliferation’ of interest and advocacy group activity has intensified. Given the centrality of news media to concerns over the representation of policy issues and debates in the public sphere, we are forced, I would argue, to confront issues pertaining not only to how the policy process is represented, but also how policy advocates from all sides attempt to use the media to ensure the widest and most favourable dissemination of their interests and views.

² This observation has not been lost either on Davis (2002, pp. 109-70) or Miller and his colleagues (Miller 1993; Miller and Williams 1998; Miller and Reilly 1999; also see Deacon and Golding 1994).

Pluralist studies of politics and communication would suggest that the expansion and overall growth of promotionalism has the potential of strengthening the democratic process in significant ways. Although political news will likely always “prioritize the state and its agents, treating even minor state activities as inherently newsworthy” (Knight and Curtis 1987, p.49), it is also clear that whereas previously the social meanings of these activities derived almost exclusively from official source statements and proclamations (both ‘on’ and ‘off the record’), non-official news sources are now faced with potentially new opportunities to participate in the policymaking process, or at least in definitional debates and discussions about it. Not wanting to get lost in a pluralistic conflict (Herman 1986), it remains important to note that while elite domination of the news production and policy processes cannot be a foregone conclusion, the ability of marginal groups to participate in these processes is considerably more constrained than is the case for more ‘resource rich’ policy actors, i.e. those for whom access to material and political resources (including access to news media) is less restricted. Frequently, the ability of charity groups, unions, citizens’ groups or other ‘non-official’ sources to engage successfully in media politics is based on an ability to pay, or on the prioritization of resources for communicative purposes (Davis 2002; Deacon 1996). As chapters 2.2 and 3.2 attempt to illustrate, when we consider non-official source PR activity as well as the occasional failures of elites to successfully control the media agenda, we find that news access and the accumulation of definitional legitimacy that this normally entails are not determined by one’s ‘objective’ political or economic position,

but rather are contested phenomena in which political and economic privilege is but one (albeit important) factor.

In researching and reporting on the two case studies that constitute this dissertation, I draw from a diverse body of theoretical and empirical scholarship conducted from across a range of scholarly disciplines, including: sociology, media and communications studies, political science, policy studies, public relations, and business and management studies. The overall objective is to provide a critique of neo-liberalism by bringing together in a critical way research focusing upon the symbolic texture of media content with an emerging body of literature on the public relations activities and strategies of political actors which double as news sources, including not only power centres such as the state and transnational corporations, but also more marginal groups such as labour unions and 'new social movements.'

Locating the present comparative case study of the media politics of neo-liberalism within a 'post-disciplinary perspective' (Jessop and Sum 2001), I hope to achieve some connection between and among these diverse areas in order to advance our knowledge of and analytical skills regarding the cultural implications of the structural change taking effect at the supranational, national and sub-national levels. There remains significant scope for focused research here, and it is my hope that this analysis of the role of news discourse and definitional struggle will go at least some of the way toward achieving this goal.

In the next section of this introductory chapter, I outline the key debates within which the present study is situated and then proceed to offer some discussion of the

theoretical issues that not only guided the research but to which I also hope to have made some contribution. The final section provides a brief overview of the two comparative case studies.

Central Debates

Insofar as this dissertation focuses upon the politics, discourses, and definitional struggles circumscribing the shift to neo-liberalism and rise of reflexive modernity, the underlying concern is with the role of news media in advanced liberal democracies. Political theorists and citizens alike ascribe to the media a number of ‘ideal-typical’ roles and responsibilities that are supposed to help ensure the smooth functioning of the political system and public sphere; however the extent to which these roles and responsibilities can ever be satisfied remains the subject of considerable debate and discussion.

News Media and Liberal Democracy: Watchdog or Lapdog?

The news media, and particularly the press, have traditionally been looked upon as the ‘fourth estate’ or ‘watchdog’ of democracy, responsible for conducting surveillance over the activities of powerful interests and groups, including government and the corporate sector; providing the electorate with a source of impartial or ‘objective’ information to encourage ‘informed’ political decision-making (e.g. voting); enabling as many groups and individuals as possible with an opportunity to voice their opinions and to be heard; and attempting to act as an arena or forum for rational debate, discussion and influence on the most important issues and events of the day.

This understanding of the role and function of news media has its philosophical roots in the Enlightenment era and is articulated by the nineteenth century Victorian essayist, Thomas Carlyle:

“Burke said there were Three Estates in Parliament; but in the Reporters’ Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important than they all...Whoever can speak, speaking now to a whole nation, becomes a power, a branch of government, with inalienable weight in law-making, in all acts of authority” (1905, pp. 349-50).

For Carlyle, the cultural authority of the journalist was to be found in a power and responsibility to hold the state to account on behalf of the public and that this in itself served the latter’s interest. Not only is this a perspective that has featured prominently in the North American popular imagination (e.g. in the film, *All the President’s Men*) but it has also been incorporated into much modern liberal pluralist academic scholarship. Numerous key sociological accounts of news production demonstrate that journalists (particularly those in the United States and, to a lesser extent, Canada) are driven by an identifiable set of ‘professional values’ to seek a neutral and balanced account of the issues and events of the day, and that they tend to be resistant to having their professional ‘objectivity’ compromised by such impediments as class and party affiliation or ideology (Schudson 1978, 2001; see also Donsbach 1995).³ As Carey (2002) has recently written, with the rise of the modern era the news media, and in particular the press, were to be:

“...the eyes and ears of a public that could not see and hear for themselves or indeed speak for themselves. It went where the public could not go, acquired information that the public could not amass on its own, tore away the veil of appearances that masked the play of power and privilege, set on a brightly lit stage what would otherwise be contained off

³ This in comparison, that is, to European journalists who are said to be more oriented to opining along class and ideological lines (Alexander 1981). In challenging this thesis, Lemieux and Schmalzbauer (2000) have drawn on a sample of extensive interview data and suggest that to the extent that this variation across national contexts was true in the past, there is today considerably more overlap in professional values between journalists working in France and the United States.

stage...The press became...a true Fourth Estate that watched over the other lords of the realm in the name of those unequipped or unable to watch over it for themselves.”

However, while pluralist scholars are surely not blind to the attempts and, at times, successes of elite actors to control the policymaking process and news coverage of it, they do maintain that because journalists embrace a commitment to be objective the media continue to fulfil a vital role in democratic societies.

The main criticism of the pluralist perspective has been an inability or unwillingness on the part of its purveyors to account for the underlying structural dynamics and power relations that infuse modern liberal democracies. Pointing to either market pressures that circumscribe news production (e.g. reliance on corporate advertising revenue) or the control of media companies by interlocking associations of elites, radical scholars counter that under present political and economic conditions truly independent and balanced journalism is an unattainable ideal (Winter 1998; McChesney 1997; Schiller 1989; Herman and Chomsky 1988).⁴ Because the news is a profit-driven business operating in a capitalist economy, these scholars maintain that media organizations are forced to prioritize economies of scale by increasing advertising revenue and producing news copy that will appeal to as wide an audience base as possible and that these commercial pressures lead to a reduction in the standards of political discussion and debate (Franklin 1997). Writing on Canada, Hackett et al. (2000) argue that the activities of powerful interests and wider economic conditions conspire to

⁴ It is with some hesitation that I even employ the pluralist/radical dichotomy and in doing so, I am admittedly treating these approaches as ‘ideal types’ to be used for analytical purposes only. Whereas previously the distinction between radical scholars who were oriented toward a Marxist-based framework and pluralists whose theoretical grounding was rather more Weberian, much of media sociological research today draws from both traditions. Davis’s (2002) conceptualization of a new “radical pluralist” approach is suggestive of the overlap between these traditions.

lead commercially-motivated media companies to over-produce “infotainment” and other forms of “junk food news”: items which appeal to individuals as consumers and are “heavy on entertainment value but low on intellectual nourishment” (p.9; see also Winter 1998). This is a perspective similar to that of Eide (1997), who argues that market pressures have transformed journalism such that readers are no longer addressed in their capacity as citizens but rather as “consumers, clients, and private persons” (p.176). For Eide, although ‘quality’ political reporting has not disappeared or been replaced outright by attention to only the scandals and trivialities of everyday life, political news has been reformatted or refashioned to accentuate the impact of state policy decisions on the rights, health, and lifestyle of individuals in their capacity as consumers, and that the solutions to the problems of everyday life are to be found not by seeking change at the structural level but through the consumption of commercial goods and services (see also Eide and Knight 1999).

Radical scholars make the case that news discourse thus tends to support elite interests and viewpoints over alternative definitions of reality, and this therefore undermines the democratic process. In a widely influential study, Hall et al. (1978) write that the pressures of meeting deadlines and demands of impartiality and objectivity combine to create “a systematically structured over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions,” and that news organizations “tend faithfully to reproduce symbolically the existing structure of power in society’s institutional order...The result of this structured preference is that these ‘spokesmen’ become what we call the *primary definers* of topics” (p.58). Primary definition does not

occur, Hall et al. claim, because official news sources and those institutions and organizations closely associated with the capitalist state conspire to close the definitional field to individuals and groups outside of the state and corporate sector; rather, it is because media practitioners, working within a constrained and pressurized occupational environment, 'accredit' institutional voices and invest them with authority and legitimacy. This theoretical argument, developed now more than two decades ago, continues to influence studies of political communication and remains a central theoretical problematic for this dissertation as well. The continued relevance and importance of this perspective is attested to by the fact that empirical analyses of news texts (e.g. Grenier 1992) continue to reinforce the framework's underlying premise: because news is a socially constructed phenomenon it cannot be divorced from the dynamics of power relations that exist between and among individuals and groups, and this includes journalists and their sources.

Although this dissertation situates itself within the concerns of the critical tradition of media sociology, it nevertheless attempts to overcome some of the problems and limitations of much radical scholarship, and in particular the weaknesses of the 'primary definer' thesis. As Schlesinger (1990) has argued, the main drawbacks to Hall et al.'s framework is that there are infinitely more opportunities for non-official and marginal political groups to interrupt and disrupt the news making and policy process than the theory of primary definition recognizes (see also Schlesinger and Tumber 1994; Anderson 1993; Miller 1993; Miller and Williams 1993). Moreover, this perspective underestimates the "potential openness" of media texts and production sites (Schlesinger

1990, p.68) and assumes that elite actors are unified in their interests and communicational activity (see also Miller 1993). Following up on Schlesinger's critique, Davis concludes that "what was all too often absent in radical accounts, at least until the early 1990s, was a substantial focus on micro-level influences and individual agency" (2002, p.6). In short, radical approaches to media analysis have been criticized for assuming that both journalists and newsreaders will *ipso facto* adopt as their own views the preferred definitions of the world offered by powerful sources and articulated in news reports. Deriving considerable theoretical value from the cultural studies tradition of 'active audience research' (e.g. Morley 1992; Fiske 1989; Radway 1987), the assumptions of radical scholars about the reading, listening and viewing strategies of media audiences have been shown to be overly deterministic and functionalist. Newsreaders are not, to borrow from Garfinkel (1967), "passive cultural dopes", but rather they are capable of resisting the preferred interpretations of events and even fashioning alternative or progressive viewpoints from them. While my intention will not be to contribute to the debate over audience activity in a systematic or empirically focused way, these criticisms rightly point to an excessive attention to questions of structure over agency in most critical accounts (Davis 2002).⁵

⁵ Audience research is plagued, in my view, by numerous problems. For starters, while audiences may be 'active' in their consumption of texts, this is not the same thing as saying that they are necessarily critical or that alternative views will be necessarily constructed. More worrisome, as Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) point out, is that the emphasis in active audience research on the inherently polysemic nature of the text runs the risk of ignoring the issue of power or of allocating to power "a less central place in theoretical debate and ensuing empirical work" (p.30). Following Knight (2001), I would argue that while readers are normally able to decipher in whole or in part the dominant meaning this is not the same thing as saying that they will necessarily accept it (p.75). I return to this question again in the methodological section below.

Neo-liberalism and Communication

Among the most significant trends in the past three decades has been a general rightward shift in economic and industrial policymaking, as the central tenets of laissez-faire economics enjoy a revival among governing agencies and bodies at sub-national, national, and supranational levels. In the aftermath of the collapse of Russian Communism and the embrace of market capitalism in China and elsewhere in the developing world, capital has “appeared once more triumphant, and the nostrums of economic liberalism about the organisation of the economy [are] once more being expressed as simple common sense and encountering relatively little challenge, either politically or intellectually” (Gamble 2002, p.127).

The political and economic agenda of this new form of political economy and ideology has been to displace the values and policies associated with the post-war tripartite consensus in favour of a new perspective which prioritizes the extension of market relations into the interstices of everyday life and emphasizes the ‘values’ of entrepreneurialism and individual responsibility, and state strategies such as tax reductions and regulatory liberalization, as the preferred means for encouraging economic growth and prosperity. Although the style and substance of neo-liberal policies vary across time and space, the general results of the neo-liberal turn tend to cohere around a number of common outcomes: greater concentrations of wealth and influence into the hands of fewer people; dramatic restructuring of the labour market, characterized by a steady “assault on trade union freedoms” (Panitch and Swartz 1993), casualization of labour, and the liberalization of workplace regulations and standards; increased

reliance for public service delivery on private or voluntary associations; and extensive deregulation and privatization of public programmes, services and industries.

Although a neo-liberal policy framework has clearly become hegemonic, a close examination of the policy record in even the most vociferous neo-liberal regimes shows that this new paradigm has achieved only moderate 'success'. Drawing on empirical data from Britain and the United States, Pierson (1994) shows how even in the face of the New Right's powerful ideological offensive, Keynesianism proved to be far more resilient as a policy paradigm than even neo-liberal proponents had anticipated.⁶ On the one hand, this is likely due to the fact that "capitalism needs democratic legitimacy if it is to survive, and that welfare programmes are part of the ransom capital has to pay in order to be protected" (Gamble 2002, p.132). Post-war national governments in the UK, United States, Canada, Sweden, and elsewhere were surely aware of the value of a collectivist framework for incorporating the mass of the electorate into the state's broader social-economic-political project and for mobilizing support (political and fiscal) in exchange for services and security. On the other hand, neo-liberal reforms are a tough sell because they remain politically risky. As Weaver (1986) and Pierson (1994) argue, the benefits associated with retrenching welfare state services and programmes tend only to be diffuse and uncertain whereas the risks and harms that result from these policies are normally socially concentrated. Consequently, voters typically react more predictably and consistently to actual or perceived losses (e.g. unemployment benefits; reduced

⁶ This acknowledges, of course, the distinction between different variants of Keynesianism as well as neo-liberalism. For example, the United States particularly under Reagan and George Bush Sr. (and increasingly under Bush Jr. as well) are exemplary of a militaristic Keynesianism – massive deficits to bolster the military industrial regime – that stands in marked contrast to the social welfare Keynesianism of countries such as Sweden and Canada (pre-1987).

healthcare premiums; &c.) than to putative gains taken in their 'interests' – and as a result, as argued in more detail in chapters 2.2 and 3.2 below, neo-liberal reforms demand considerable promotional work to be made palatable to the public.

How then to explain the nominal 'success' of neo-liberalism as the new framework of choice among conservative and social democratic governments alike? For political economists such as Gamble, a possible answer is that "a number of politicians have been adroit either at combining conservative policies which do appeal to particular interests and groups, or at recasting the neo-liberal economic policies in ways that resonate as popular commonsense" (2002, p.133). This is a perspective that has featured in much critical media sociology research (e.g. Hall et al. 1978) and serves as a starting point for this project. Following the lead of Miller and Dinan (2000) and Davis (2002), I argue that to deliver a neo-liberal policy platform increasingly demands greater consideration to the questions of news and issues management.⁷ The implications for a critical analysis of the media, therefore, is to sharpen our focus to look at both the symbolic texture of news discourse as well as some of the analytically prior questions of how powerful and marginal sources develop and utilize PR strategies to influence the news- and policy-making processes.

This is not to say that consideration of these issues has not figured into previous political communications research. In fact, considerable effort has been paid to assessing the impact of promotionalism on the political system and policymaking process and, as I

⁷ For example, in Ontario the Conservative government has recently come under fire for what critics charge is an excessive investment of more than \$400 million since 1995 in partisan advertising for government policy. See R. Brennan, "Public pays for Tory propaganda, critics say." *Toronto Star* 12 May 2003, A17. On the broader implications of this expansion of policy promotionalism in Ontario, see Knight (1998), MacDermid (1997, 1999) and Fletcher (1999).

will outline in greater detail below, there is also a growing body of scholarship on media-source relations and news source strategies to attest to this trend. However, the focus of this literature has tended to only narrowly define politics as entailing formal types of political activity (e.g. election campaigns) and has focused almost exclusively on official institutional (e.g. government and party political) communications. This focus on elections and elites is limiting and thus problematic in that it risks reifying institutional power by overlooking a vast amount of political strategy and media activity on the part of such marginalized groups as ‘radical’ new social movements (Carroll and Ratner 1999), charities and voluntary sector organizations (Ryan 1991; Deacon 1996; Deacon and Monk 2001), business groups (Davis 2000), and policy think tanks (Carroll and Shaw 2001), all of which tend to operate below, beyond and/or at arms length of the apparatuses of the formal political and corporatist systems, but whose activities and actions bring themselves to bear directly upon the policy determinations of key political decision-makers.

Definitional Struggle and News Source Activity: From Policy Studies to the Political Sociology of Mass Media

The third debate that informs this dissertation addresses attempts to develop a theoretical framework for examining the impact of news source activity on the information flows entering the public sphere (for a more complete review see Manning 2001). In doing so, I draw from Schlesinger’s (1990) critique of the ‘primary definition’ framework in order to account for how marginal groups participate in and exert influence over (however limited this may sometimes be) policy and news making. It is important to

note that while Schlesinger's critique is informed by pluralist concerns, he does *not* endorse a pluralistic conceptualization of power as 'fragmented' across the societal spectrum (e.g. Dahl 1961). What he argues is that: (a) there are infinitely more opportunities for social movements, voluntary and charitable groups, youths and other non-official sources to intervene in and disrupt the policymaking process and preferred definitions of it than the 'primary definer' thesis allows for; and (b) elite control over the formation of public policy can become fragmented and, by extension, so too with opportunities on the part of the powerful to exercise primary definition. This "radical-pluralist" (Davis 2002) position incorporates a differentiated view of power in which *influence* becomes more important than *authority* (in the conventional sense of binding decision-making capacity) for controlling the definitional field. The opening up of contingency that is characteristic of late modern capitalism thus expands opportunities for influence to function, and often in a way that controverts authority.⁸

Following Schlesinger and Davis, this dissertation is oriented toward retaining a 'theory of dominance' for the study of news and politics. Such a framework would be based on the notion that certain political actors tend routinely to be marginalized from the venues in which political decision-making normally occurs and that frequently the state intervenes in the policymaking process to defend the interests of the capitalist class (e.g. Poulantzas 1975). Crucially, however, this is a *process* that can never be fully closed or guaranteed, rather only through examining the promotional activities and PR positions of

⁸ This latter point has been advanced by others (Richardson and Jordan 1979; Therborn 1980; Abercrombie et al. 1980; Grant 1990; Richardson 2000), who point out that not only does economic power not translate non-problematically into political power, but that the explosion of anti-corporate pressure groups since the late 1970s, combined with political and ideological divisions within the business community itself, problematizes elite power over the policymaking and news production processes.

competing sources can we begin to assess the extent of access enjoyed by the powerful and politically marginal in shaping and driving political communication processes.

It is helpful in this endeavour to consider the contributions to pressure group research by political scientists and policy scholars. For example, Grant (1990) argues that we can distinguish, on the one hand, between policy ‘insider groups’, who enjoy regular access to government departments and thus have a direct hand in the formation of public policy, and policy ‘outsiders’, for whom such opportunities are less available (see also Manning 2002; Davis 2002). The relative power enjoyed by *insider* groups can range from, first, those who are dependent upon government for their involvement to, second, those who prefer to participate in the policymaking process in more of a behind-the-scenes capacity, and to, third, those who prefer open engagement in the public sphere (e.g. with news media) to ensure the widest possible dissemination of their views and interests. Similarly, those groups not privy to the policymaking process may all be ‘outsiders’ but they are not left on the outside in the same way. Whereas ‘potential insiders’ may float in and out of the arenas in which policies are formulated and plans for their implementation developed, others will remain outside the policymaking arena on the basis of ‘necessity’ or for ‘ideological’ reasons. Because the policymaking process changes over time, these distinctions reveal the fluidity that exists in actor participation in the policy process. For our purposes here, the point to be made is that the opening up and closure of the policymaking process to different groups or ‘policy communities’ over time carries important implications for how sources obtain access to the media – those

who find themselves located closer to the 'centre' of decision-making will no doubt utilize a very different repertoire of strategies than those further on the margins.

This is an argument that is also taken up by Baumgartner and Jones (1991) in their case studies of US pressure group activity in the areas of smoking and nuclear energy policy. In attempting to account for instances when long-entrenched insider policy groups lose out to outsiders, Baumgartner and Jones argue that political actors can attempt to construct a new 'image' of the problems underlying the policy through the use of symbol and rhetoric, and/or they may attempt to re-problematize the issue by seeking out a more favourable venue to make their cases heard. Writing on trunk road policy in the UK, Dudley and Richardson (1996) demonstrate that while for decades the pro-road lobby dominated the key venues in which policy was debated and formulated, and thus enjoyed considerable control over how transport policy was framed, by the 1970s this control over the situation and its definitions had been 'punctuated' by the strategic actions of the environmental movement. Combining with local protest groups to disrupt several high profile public inquiries over highways expansion, the environmental lobby sparked public discussion and debate about the merits and core 'values' of transport policy. As Richardson writes,

"For the first time, roads policy became public business, rather than the private management of public policy...By selecting a more favourable venue, the environmental lobby exposed a weakness in the road lobby's historical domination of the policy process, and directed public attention to alternative transport policies. The environmental lobby was able to influence the policy system by at least changing the 'image' or 'framing' of transport policy problems..." (2000, p. 1012).

Although these studies intimate the role and import of news media to the policy process, the focus on pressure groups by policy scholars has tended to overlook the distinctions

between, for example, “protest organizations that exist beyond the bounds of vested corporate and state influence” (Deacon 1996, p.178), such as the global anti-sweatshop movement, and corporate and professional sector organizations, such as business lobby groups and other organizations that represent industrial or professional interests. Sharper distinctions need to be drawn between these various types of non-elite sources, Deacon argues, for three main reasons: first, because according to journalists “economic and industrial issues are among the most perennially newsworthy topics for the media”; second, because some non-official organizations, particularly those which occupy a critical position vis-à-vis the capitalist state, “experience dissimilar levels of media hostility” (i.e. due to their working-class affiliations); and third, because journalists tend to make distinctions between those groups they see as axe-grinders or “advocates” and those they see as neutral experts or “arbiters” (1996, pp.178-9, quoted in Manning 2001, pp.142-3; see also Deacon and Golding 1994).

Deacon’s (1996; Deacon and Golding 1994) is one of the few studies to have emerged within media research since the early 1990s to address the role of sources in news production and policymaking. Unlike earlier political communication studies, however, this later research on news source activity has tended to be empirically driven and thus incorporates elements of both the pluralist and radical traditions. In large part, this is due to the notion that while pluralists continue to advance the notion that a democracy thrives best when a range of competing interests and voices can be heard, content analyses of media discourse – from both the radical and pluralist traditions – continually show that the news still tends to be dominated by government and other elite

sources. Focusing on how sources develop PR strategies and centralize concerns over communication, a new body of scholarship has emerged comparing source activities in diverse policy areas, such as: criminal justice (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994), health (Williams and Miller 1998), food (Miller and Reilly 1999), the environment (Anderson 1993), voluntarism (Deacon 1996), and taxation (Deacon and Golding 1994). Each of these studies has documented attempts on the part of elites to control the news production process and has shown that these efforts sometimes fail either as a result of non-official source media strategies or when the powerful fail to get their message across because of competition with other elites, an under-estimation of non-official source capabilities, and/or simply an inability to 'read' the changing political context. The case studies that make up this dissertation draw from these studies and conceptualize media access and the accumulation of 'authority', 'legitimacy' and 'credibility' that comes with it as forms of *cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1993) that are continually struggled and fought over.⁹

Notes on Theory: Promotional Culture, the Public Sphere and Reflexive Modernization

There are numerous theoretical traditions and frameworks that have influenced this project. Firstly, my interest in exploring and examining the centrality of promotional communication to politics has been influenced considerably by Wernick's (1991) theory of *promotional culture*. According to Wernick, "the mutual entanglements of promotional signs in one domain with those in another has become a pervasive feature of our whole

⁹ Davis (2002) and Deacon (1996; also Deacon and Monk 2001; Deacon and Golding 1994) have also utilized Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' for studies of media access. My use of it here draws from their application of Bourdieu to political communication research.

produced symbolic world” (p.12) – politics, as an arena foremost for the performance and symbolic expression of power (Edelman 1971), has thus become infused with a logic of promotionalism. However, I hesitate to locate the research solely within the theory of promotional culture on the same grounds noted by Davis (2002, p.14), which is that Wernick’s thesis, while founded in the intellectual trajectory of critical theory, tends to be tilted toward a postmodernist concern with the realm of the symbolic rather than in the way in which conscious agents attempt to influence cultural outputs in order to gain control over capital, labour, material goods and other resources.

Secondly, this study concerns itself with the debates around Habermas’s (1989; see also Habermas 1987) original concept of the “public sphere,” which is defined as the discursive space where the public experience of the “lifeworld” is constituted and in which free individuals engage in “rational-critical debate” over the important issues of the day (for discussions see Dahlgren and Sparks 1991; Calhoun 1992). There are several conditions that must be satisfied in order for a democratic public sphere to function smoothly. Not only must the public sphere be universal in its access to all citizens, i.e. open to all regardless of class, age, race, etc., but the quality of debate must also be sufficiently high to ensure that public opinion will not be based merely on “inclination” (p.94).¹⁰ For Habermas, the modern era of mass communication has turned the public sphere into a façade: “the world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only” (p.171). The profit orientation of most newspapers has degraded the

¹⁰ For Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere of the 17th and 18th centuries was open only to men of nobility and thus could only ever approximate the ‘ideal typical’ public sphere. Critics have argued that Habermas’s preference for a unified public sphere misunderstands the political dynamics of inegalitarian societies and that “participatory parity is better achieved by a multiplicity of publics than by a single public” (Fraser 1996, p.127; see also Herbst 1994).

quality of discussion and debate and fuelled the growth of public relations and other “opinion management” professions (p.193), the latter of which has re-feudalized the public sphere such that news events become systematically ‘created’ or ‘exploited’ purely for commercial goals. This re-feudalization, Habermas argues, is based on the notion that media operates increasingly in the service of elite actors as a mode for displaying their prestige and power, conspicuous privilege and grandeur. The result of the expansion of publicity into the public sphere, Habermas writes, is that the public becomes increasingly “mediatized” (p.200) and participates in political life with a “benevolent passivity of a sort that entails no specific obligations” (ibid).

A third theoretical influence, and arguably the most important, is the notion of “reflexive modernization” (e.g. Beck et al. 1994) and the lesser-known companion concept of “subpolitics” (Beck 1996, 1997; Holzer and Sørensen 2003). In contrast to theories of postmodernism that had become *en vogue* in the 1980s, Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) posited that rather than having reached the end of modernity and entering into a postmodern state characterized by *inter alia* the dissolution of authority regimes and the triumph of simulacra (e.g. Baudrillard 1995), modernity had become radicalized and entered into a phase of ‘self-confrontation’.

The theory of ‘reflexive modernization’ takes as a starting point Luhmann’s (e.g. 1986) concept of autopoiesis for the study of social systems (for a discussion see Mingers 2002). Autopoiesis refers to a process whereby an entity seeks to maintain its essential characteristics in the face of ongoing environmental perturbations and structural change. Luhmann argued that social and political systems self-produce and self-construct, and

operate on the basis of communications about power and its use in order to make and enforce collectively binding decisions. However, as Jessop writes, modern political systems are caught up in a central paradox:

“As a force whose vocation is to create order, [the modern political system] operates by setting no limits to politics. And thereby it reproduces hopes and expectations which it must inevitably disappoint....Indeed, the openness of the modern political system to new demands is both a source of *flexibility* and of a potential for *overload*. In turn this generates various strategic dilemmas and contradictions concerned with managing the uneasy balance between openness and closure” (1990, p.322; emphasis added).

Pace Jessop's account of political systems as entailing both flexibility and the potential for overload, Beck et al. argue that the self-confrontation of modernity emerges through the constant recognition that the unanticipated and undesirable *side effects* of industrial modernity (risk, uncertainty, and so on) are manufactured phenomena. Whereas some would argue that with the abundance of technological innovation, scientific knowledge and wealth that are characteristic of advanced capitalist regimes we have reached a pinnacle of progress, Beck cites this so-called 'success' as a source of risk, danger and problematization. He thus argues that as we have entered into a 'risk society' and as individuals become anxious about and aware of the increasing production of risk (e.g. smog, radioactivity, &c.) new antagonisms and social conflicts will arise: “at the very point that the dangers of a hostile, external nature seem to be overcome by technological domination, modernity is forced to cope with the problem of self-produced, 'manufactured' risks...The self-confrontation of modernity, the recognition of its 'dark side' results in a breakdown of the 'grand narrative' of progress and thereby opens the

way for a re-politicization of areas that have up till now eluded public contestation” (Holzer and Sørensen 2003, p.81).¹¹

Beck introduces the concept of subpolitics to account for this “unexpected renaissance of a political subjectivity” (1997, p.100) from beyond and below the formal political and corporatist systems of the advanced modern state. For Beck, subpolitics differs from politics proper in that it is agents outside these traditional venues (i.e. parliamentarians, influential corporations and unions, &c.) that are now involved increasingly in the “stage of social design” (p.103). More importantly, where society was previously structured around ‘collectivist’ bodies and values, a subpolitical society is based on a structured individualization – thus it is not only social and collective agents, but now also individuals who are required and bound to participate and compete over the shaping of society. This argument hinges on the notion that politics has been reinvented such that we should cease looking for politics in all the usual places (e.g. parliament, political parties, trade unions, etc.) and with all the usual terms. “If the clock of politics stops there,” Beck writes, “then it seems that politics as a whole has stopped ticking” (p.98). Instead, Beck argues, there are many new areas outside of the formal political sphere that may be regarded as loci of subpolitical action and behaviour (Holzer and Sørensen 2003, p.82): from the private sphere of consumption within the household (Phillips 2000) to the public sphere of political protest in civil society (Knight and

¹¹ For its part, the mass media potentially serves as a surveillance mechanism for monitoring the broader ecological and political environment and assigning responsibility and blame when problems arise. The media becomes the central arena in which claims making and contestation over risk and hazard is waged between “the argumentation craftsmen” (Beck 1992, p.32) of modern industry and the state, and citizens initiative groups operating outside of the sphere of formal politics. And it is the latter, Beck argues, who “have seized power politically” (1997, p.100) and politicized those areas of public life which were previously unpolitical. For a fuller discussion of Beck’s view of the mass media see Cottle (1998).

Greenberg 2002). Conceptualized in this way, subpolitics has both ‘passive’ and ‘active’ dimensions (Holzer and Sørensen 2003).¹²

My interest, then, is not to situate my research within a single theoretical perspective but to be rather more flexible and far-reaching with the hope of generating discussion and, perhaps, some new ideas that might warrant further theorizing and empirical work. Overall, I have employed a “cultural political economy” framework (Jessop and Sum 2001) for the analysis of neo-liberalism – thus, Marx’s critique of capitalist political economy serves as an “obligatory reference point” (p.93). As with struggles over materials and resources, I view media coverage as entailing a process of struggle over the right to speak *and* be heard. Yet, in doing so I remain committed to avoiding the excesses of economic determinism and functionalism that arguably have pervaded previous Marxist-inspired studies of the media (e.g. Herman and Chomsky 1988). My primary interest is to pursue some of the implications that derive from the cultural turn in political economy research, namely in its discursive account of power. Following theorists like Laclau and Mouffe (1985), I concern myself with accounting for the ways in which the interests at stake in power relations are produced within and through discourse generally, and news discourse in particular.

¹² Upon first blush, Beck’s theory of subpolitics would seem to have much in common with much ‘new social movement’ theory (see Carroll 1992). Indeed, subpolitics subsumes social movement activity within a much broader understanding of political action. For Beck, subpolitics entails politicization outside and within the formal system, a point I seek to develop in chapter 2.2. Moreover, for Beck, “subpolitics is not open only to one side. This opportunity to fill a vacuum can always be seized and used by the opposite side or party for the opposite goals” (1997, p.101). As Holzer and Sørensen (2003) show, corporate actors can also be subpoliticians and may seek to influence the political process through a variety of mechanisms, from coalition building with local constituencies to lobbying to media relations activities and philanthropic endeavours (see more in chapter 3.2). In this regard, Beck goes beyond claims that ours is a “social movement society” (Meyer and Tarrow 1998) to argue that social movements are only a component (however fundamental) of a much broader subpoliticization process.

In doing so, I am also aware of the problems entailed in rendering all social relations discursive. As Miller (2002) reminds us, there is also the risk of overplaying the question of ideology to the expense of overlooking the material relations that underpin the production of discourse. Indeed, by taking into account such activities as public relations, lobbying, and other processes that tend to operate “behind the backs” of social actors, my hope is to also avoid the excesses of certain constructionist studies which seem to imply that with the aid of a carefully constructed and articulated rhetoric one can simply will anything into existence. Thus, by making reference to the material conditions of news production and policy outcomes I am not talking of social constructions while assuming an objective reality against which these constructions may find themselves judged, a slip in logic Woolgar and Pawluch (1985) call “ontological gerrymandering”. Rather, I argue that the construction of issues that emerge out of debates regarding utilities restructuring (chapter 2) and global sweatshops (chapter 3) does not rely only on the claims-making activities of government, corporate, and social movement actors, but is based on an interaction between the material conditions that make such claims-making possible and the implications of those claims for the broader material environment. My approach is an attempt to recognize and exploit the mutuality of materiality and discourse, particularly in the way material reality can only be rendered meaningful as an object of social action through discourse. This argues, therefore, that discourse may indeed be about rhetoric, but it is also a material resource that is unevenly distributed and employable.

Methodological Considerations

In developing a radical pluralist approach to media analysis, this research draws from the tradition of 'ideology critique', although it also attempts to overcome the limitations posed by the functionalism of much of the research done on the media by radical (neo-Marxist) scholars. Following Stuart Hall (1980), I conceptualize media production and analysis as entailing two broad processes of encoding and decoding. Whereas encoding refers to those conventions which are common for preparing a news text for publication (e.g. seeking out and citing authoritative and credible sources), decoding refers to the process in which readers, viewers, or listeners draw on certain values or norms in order to 'make sense' of the material with which they are presented. As Deacon et al. write, however, there can be no "one-to-one equivalence between these processes" (1999, p.140). Not only does the decoding process depend upon the reader's standpoint at a particular historic conjuncture, but the process of encoding is also based upon a range of historical, material, and other factors that bring themselves to bear upon the reader. Furthermore, the temporality of encoding/decoding is underscored by the fact that both processes embody the accretions of previous encodings and decodings. The ability to decode, in particular, is restricted by the knowledge and beliefs that the subject brings to the text, and these are themselves based on previous decodings that become internalized.

It is for these reasons that I argue that news coverage is incapable of sustaining a self-sufficient semantic unity. Drawing on the literary theory of Vološinov (1973), news coverage is treated as incapable in itself of generating a definitive interpretation. Rather, I

argue that texts are intersected by a variety of differently oriented accents (Deacon et al. 1999, p.141). This indicates that because context is as crucial to 'decoding' as the text itself, there can be no possibility for semantic closure: "any current curse word can become a word of praise, any current truth must inevitably sound to many people as the greatest lie" (Vološinov 1973, p.23). Nevertheless, while media texts are polysemic, this does not mean that they can sustain an infinite number of possible readings (as in the worst excesses of 'active audience theory'). Rather, encoding and decoding are discursive and material processes and the intersection of language with the conditions upon which language is used bring particular pressures (e.g. deadlines, news values such as impartiality, &c.) to the fore that not only encourage a news article to be prepared in particularly definitive and predictable ways, but which also exert pressure on the process of decoding, "channelling understanding one way rather than another and setting the stage for 'legitimate' interpretation" (Deacon et al. 1999, p.141).

The research has incorporated a range of qualitative and quantitative methods in order that, "the weaknesses of any single method...are balanced by the strengths of other methods" (Williams et al. 1988, p.47). Techniques associated with content analysis have been used in chapters 2.1 and 3.1 to account for the salient and manifest content of news reports about the two cases in question. While positivistic in nature, content analysis is a suitable method for examining a large sample of communicating texts, and the statistics generated from such techniques become useful for making "broader inferences about the processes and politics of representation" (Deacon et al. 1999 p.116). Put rather more prosaically, content analysis enables the researcher to 'map' the 'big picture' of the

coverage. Details about sampling and coding procedures, and the actual sources examined, are outlined in each of the articles.

Because content analysis deals only with “aggregated meaning-making *across* texts,” it does not adequately address the complexity of “meaning-making *within* texts” (ibid). To supplement content analysis, therefore, I have incorporated methods associated with discourse analysis to probe the deeper levels of meaning within the coverage. In pursuing this objective, I attend particularly to the ‘thematic structure’ of the news coverage. According to Deacon et al., a thematic structure is:

“...a preoccupying conception or proposition which runs throughout a media text, usually around an initiating topic...[it] helps to make a media text cohere – it orients a text around a central theme or strand of related themes running throughout a story. Without thematic structures, media texts would be fragmentary and narratively dissolute” (1999, p.169).

For example, in the case study of the anti-sweatshop debates, a central proposition was that the individual is a hybrid consumer/citizen whose concern about global labour standards can be addressed by changing styles of consumption rather than structures of production. Similarly, in the coverage of the restructuring of Ontario’s electricity industry the preoccupying conception or logic to the discourse was an economic one that identified costs, debt reduction and opportunities for market growth as the main concerns in policy development over other possible issue themes, such as the prospective impact of the legislation on the environment or the economic and political sovereignty of the province in relation to other jurisdictions (namely the United States).

My use of critical discourse analysis draws principally from the work of Fairclough (1989, 1995). Discourse analysis can be used to show how ideology ‘works’ to close meaning down, to fix it in relation to a particular view or perspective, to make

certain assumptions about the world appear 'self-evident', and to make the subject positions within a body of discourse transparently obvious (Deacon et al. 1999, p.154). In pursuing a critical discourse analysis of media content, I draw from Fairclough's three-step approach to examine: first, the traces and cues a communicating text provides in order to identify which norms, values and/or beliefs these help to sustain; second, to flesh out which textual features of the text possess a relational dimension with the reader (this is the case particularly with editorials and other forms of 'opinion discourse', which use personal pronouns such as "I" and "we" or "us" to establish intimacy or shared meanings with the reader); and third, to examine the text for cues that express evaluations of social reality and guiding frameworks for action.

As indicated earlier, a critical analysis of the news media requires more than an examination of the symbolic texture of news reports. Although the newspaper article or broadcast segment functions as the 'point of contact' for the majority of the public with a world that exists beyond their immediate experience, it is important to probe the analytically prior question of how news source activity might bring itself to bear upon the production (encoding) process. Moreover, although quantitative content analysis provides a useful set of macro-patterns regarding the news production process, it can tell us very little about the micro-level activity of sources. It is necessary then to develop a methodology that will allow us to determine what strategies news sources use to obtain a visible presence in media coverage, and what rules journalists follow and how these rules impact upon which sources are covered and/or how their viewpoints are reported.

In preparing the two articles that examine electricity restructuring in Ontario, from January until October 2002 I spent approximately 45 hours undertaking observational research and conducting open-ended interviews in a variety of ethnographic settings, including public information forums and PR training sessions organized by the Ontario Electricity Coalition, and at press announcements and government-orchestrated public information sessions. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone and in person with policy insiders, government public relations officers, social movement participants, and journalists.¹³ The primary research process for the second case study was comparatively less intensive. Much of the research was performed using content and discourse analysis of news reports and websites, and in a participant-observer role at a weekend campaign development and training session of the Students Against Sweatshops-Canada (SAS-C) network, held in Waterloo, Ontario in the summer 2000. I also attended the annual meeting of the Academy of Management (an association of academic business scholars) in the summer 2000, where I participated in a panel with Nike public relations representative, Amanda Tucker. Tucker's presentation to the panel was drawn upon as an official statement of Nike policy on the company's labour issues. The research draws further on an interview conducted by Don Wells and Graham Knight

¹³ Given that much of this time was spent in the policy's most contested phase, many of the sources I spoke to requested anonymity in the reporting of results. After I agreed to their requests, I asked these sources why they wished to remain unidentified. Given that the policy was 'ongoing' and open to considerable dispute during the course of my observation period, they indicated that they did not want to be quoted as saying something that might compromise their organization's respective position in relation to the policy. Many were also willing to go 'on the record' following the next election and I intend to follow up with these individuals at that time – it was clear that for many, the outcome of this particular policy debate also held implications for their long-term employment prospects. Sources who agreed to go 'on the record' have been identified in the text.

with a Nike public relations representative in 2000. Where relevant, these materials have been referenced in the text.

Dissertation Outline

The dissertation breaks down into two main chapters. Both chapters take up the issue of promotional communication and attend to the media politics underlying the neo-liberal policy turn. Both cases, discussed briefly below and in more detail in each article, are illustrative of the problems and problematization of neo-liberalism and thus attend to two examples of where a neo-liberal framework has experienced significant difficulty and varying degrees of resistance. Each chapter contains two substantive articles – one article deals with the news coverage of the issue and the second article attends to the public relations activities and positions of the main participants. The articles appear in the order in which the research was conducted: each section presents the news analysis first and the study of PR strategies and positions second.

Chapter 2 addresses neo-liberal policy at the sub-national level and focuses upon the debates surrounding the introduction, development, implementation and subsequent abandonment of a market-oriented policy framework for the generation, transmission and distribution of electrical power in Ontario. As such, it outlines a particular type of neo-liberal policy that can be best described as the attempted privatization of that which already falls under the responsibility of state provision. Chapter 2.1, “This News May Come as a Shock,” addresses how the issue of electricity restructuring has been framed and narrated over the first seven years of the Harris/Eves Conservative government. The questions it poses are: What are the central themes of the coverage? Whose voices are

given priority and how are they positioned in relation to others? What subject positions are constructed in the discourse, and what implications might these subject positions have for policy development? The article concludes that although the government seems to have failed in fully implementing its policy goals, the coverage does demonstrate that an economic logic pervaded the discourse from its earliest until later phases – that is, although the government was unable to ‘transition’ the electricity market from a ‘not-for-profit’ to a ‘competitive’ framework, it was successful in getting the media to talk about (and encouraging people to think about) the issue primarily in terms of costs and rates, debt reduction, and investment opportunity, rather than in terms of collectivist values, environmental security, and so on.

Chapter 2.2, “Discursive Crisis and Blame Avoidance,” attempts to account for why this exercise in policy development and political communication ultimately did not succeed and seeks to locate the government’s PR position and strategies in relation to its critics. This chapter thus asks the following questions: What are the public relations strategies that have been used by the main protagonists to the debate? How, and in what ways, did the government attempt to transition the electricity market from a ‘not for profit’ to a ‘competitive’ framework? To what extent was this resisted? What strategies of resistance were employed? The article makes the argument that the government’s persistent problems in the public relations arena was a result of the reflexive effects of both its political strategy and public relations campaign. Apropos Beck’s concepts of ‘reflexive modernity’ and ‘subpolitics’, the culture of risk and uncertainty ushered in with the neo-liberal shift is responsible for precipitating a resurgence of pressure group

activity, and this carries significant implications both in terms of how policy is developed but, importantly, also in terms of how it is communicated. The centrality of the mass media to political decision-making encourages greater promotional activity on the part of state actors, but this also means that promotionally oriented activist organizations, organized largely into issue-specific network groups, can compete for the hearts and minds of the public and, as this case illustrates, disrupt and interrupt the policy process and preferred meanings of it. The article also concludes with some critical revisions to Beck's thesis, as it notes that there is less of a clear-cut distinction between the formal political arena of parliamentary and party politics and the informal arena of social movement activism; rather, this case demonstrates the overlapping and hybridization of these spheres.

In contrast and by way of comparison, Chapter 3 examines the 'pre-emptive privatization' of global industrial relations policy. As a case study it focuses upon the debates over international labour standards in the conflict between the athletic footwear and apparel company Nike, and its critics within the international labour, human rights, and student movements.¹⁴ This section also begins with examination of how the issue of sweatshops generally, and Nike sweatshops in particular, have been framed and narrated in two foremost agenda-setting U.S. newspapers. Chapter 3.1, "Framing Sweatshops," shows that the issue of sweatshops has been the focus of considerable contestation and problematization, and that this occurred largely as a result of two high-profile events not

¹⁴ The articles in this chapter deal with research that has been carried out in the context of a broader project in which Graham Knight and Don Wells serve as co-investigators. The two articles that have been prepared for publication and which comprise this section of the dissertation have been completed with Graham Knight. See the preceding 'statement of co-authorship' on page xi.

directly related to Nike's production practices. The uncertainty about the cultural meaning of sweatshops is evidenced by the high proportion of opinion-format articles (e.g. editorials) within the overall volume of coverage. Although details about the sweatshop issue have been reported differently in each newspaper, the coverage consistently demonstrates that the issue has been framed and narrated primarily as a problem of consumption rather than production. Consequently, the source of the problem is not located in the manufacturing practices of an increasingly neo-liberalized global political economy; rather it is located in the agency of the consumer (i.e. her/his tastes, desires, wants, &c.). However, the coverage also points to the central paradox that while the consumer is positioned as the source of the problem, s/he is also seen to be the main source of its resolution.

This section of the dissertation also attempts to deal with the question of why Nike has experienced such a persistent problem in the PR arena. In chapter 3.2, "Promotionalism and Subpolitics," it is argued that Nike has become a major target because it has successfully integrated different forms of corporate communication into the promotion of a high-profile corporate identity. This article argues that the reflexive character of Nike's promotionalism, however, has allowed for activist criticism that contrasts the company's claims of social responsibility in relation to the labour conditions in its manufacturing operations. Like the campaign against market reform to electricity in Ontario, anti-sweatshop activism is illustrative of what Holzer and Sørensen (2003) call *active subpolitics*, and the movement opposed to Nike is motivated not by material self-interest but by mostly ethical concerns. The anti-sweatshop movement, again like the

campaign opposed to electricity deregulation and privatization, also has a decentered network form of organization, and a pluralistic, tactical focus. In the Nike case, the effect of this type of political activism has been to turn the debate over the corporation's labour practices into a dialectical relationship between 'issues' and 'crisis' management.

The concluding chapter elucidates the comparisons between these two case studies and provides some prefatory remarks regarding directions for future research. In particular, it offers some recommendations for elaborating on the theoretical frameworks employed in these case studies as well as possible avenues for future empirical research at both the local and global levels.

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ELECTRICITY RESTRUCTURING IN ONTARIO
The Tilt to the Market, 1995-2002

This News May Come as a Shock:
Press Coverage of Electricity Reform in Ontario, 1995-2002

In all my years of public life, I have never witnessed so little comment or resistance to such a massive public policy change.

-- Floyd Laughren
Chair, Ontario Energy Board

Introduction

Governments tend to be driven by a dual desire to initiate innovative policies and sustain electoral credibility. Although at first blush these objectives would appear to be compatible, the historical record reveals that successfully proposing and implementing substantial policy change while maintaining credibility in the hearts and minds of the public can never be a foregone conclusion. A range of contingencies – unanticipated events, procedural problems, social movement advocacy and activism, critical media coverage, &c. – can come together to interrupt and disrupt the policy process and preferred definitions and meanings of it.

This dilemma is particularly salient in the case of policies associated with the neo-liberal turn that has taken hold in many liberal democratic societies. Although the substance of neo-liberal policies and the extent of their implementation vary across time and place, an ideational commitment to de-funding social programs and retrenching the regulatory role of the state in favour of re-organizing social and political life along market lines is generally shared. Advocates of neo-liberalism argue that in contrast to the welfare state's inflexibility and profligacy, market-oriented policies are a more preferable steering mechanism for economic growth because they are associated with competition, choice, and operational efficiency. The problem for neo-liberal advocates, however, is

that the risks involved in dismantling public services and programs tend to be more socially concentrated while the dispersal of benefits remains diffuse and uncertain (Pierson 1994). In terms that are understandable to politicians, regardless of how 'innovative' or 'beneficial' a particular policy or policy framework may appear to be, voters tend to exhibit a strong "negativity bias" by responding more predictably to perceived or actual losses than gains (Weaver 1986).

These factors pose a considerable public relations challenge for governments oriented to a neo-liberal agenda, and provide the setting for the case study examined here. My interest in this paper is with the role of news media and definitional struggles in the context of market-based electricity restructuring in Ontario (1995-2002). The attempt to introduce competition in electricity was initiated by the New Democratic Party (NDP) government in the early 1990s, but did not become a policy priority until the election of the Conservatives in 1995. Whereas the Tories and supporters of a 'private power' model considered a competitive framework to be a panacea for a public electricity monopoly that was purportedly 'over-burdened' by debt and rife with 'accountability problems' and 'inefficiencies,' critics claimed that deregulation and privatization would cause electricity rates to double within a few years, compromise the province's short- and long-term power supply margins, unfairly impact people on fixed incomes, threaten economic sovereignty, and harm the environment.

To 'get the message out' about the benefits of deregulation and privatization, the government heavily promoted its policy agenda through an extensive communications campaign and it was primarily within the news media where this policy promotionalism

occurred. The purpose of this article is to examine this exercise in political promotionalism and to consider the extent to which the government succeeded in terms of recruiting media support for its policy directives. The attention to promotional communication and news coverage stems from an awareness of the role of the media as a forum in which neo-liberal politics and the struggle over its hegemony take place (Knight 1998). Not only are the media a space for mobilizing popular support for contentious policy reforms, but they are also a forum in which struggle occurs over the allocation and avoidance of responsibility and blame for the social harms such policies often entail (Knight 2001; Pierson 1994). Indeed, this is particularly important given what seems to have been the failure of market-driven electricity reform, as both a policy project and, as I will argue here, an exercise in political communication.

Electricity Policy Reform in Ontario: A Backgrounder¹⁵

“We’ve always believed that government ownership of commercial businesses is not in the best interest of taxpayers...We have a bold, historic plan to encourage investment in Ontario and increase efficiency in the energy sector. As part of this plan, today I am pleased to announce that we [are going to] privatize Hydro One...It is the responsible thing to do for a government, for the ratepayers and for the future of electricity growth and investment in this province.”

-- Conservative Premier Mike Harris
Ontario Legislature (12 December 2001, *Hansard*, 37:2)

In what would be his final day in the Ontario legislature, Conservative Premier Mike Harris announced that after much delay the province’s electricity sector would be

¹⁵ Two recent excellent studies of the history of electricity policy in Ontario are by Freeman (1996) and Froschauer (1999). There is also a broader political economic context that I do not have space to elaborate on here, which is the drive for more energy on the part of the Bush administration. As Marjorie Griffin Cohen (2002) has recently shown, increased demand and pressure on the part of the United States is a motivating factor behind the push to establish an open, continental energy market. Citing the U.S. *National Energy Policy* document, Cohen shows how Canadian markets are particularly vulnerable because of the “mismatch between generation of electricity and demand where it is needed. Currently, and within the foreseeable future, the major problem areas for electricity are California, New York, and the New England States, all areas that could dramatically increase their supply from Canada” (p.5).

opened to competition on 1 May 2002. He also announced that after much delay Hydro One, the transmission arm of the former Ontario Hydro and a natural monopoly, would be sold off to private investors in what would amount to the largest privatization in Canadian history – this would surely have been a significant policy achievement for the government on the eve of Harris's retirement from provincial politics.¹⁶

The background to this announcement was six years of intensive industry lobbying and committee and legislative work aimed at introducing 'market discipline' to electricity; this entailed attempts at encouraging opportunities for private investment and market growth; providing ratepayers with more choice and lower rates; reducing the role of the state in the governance of the utility; and paying down the utility's debt. Shortly after the 1995 election, the government commissioned a report by Ernst and Young chair, William Farlinger, on the status of the province's electricity industry. Farlinger, a Tory campaign organizer and policy advisor to Harris, called for a massive privatization of the province's generation assets (including nuclear) and the elimination of all government regulation of the industry, save for the monitoring of environmental standards. In November 1995, Farlinger was appointed chair of Ontario Hydro and in the same month, the Tories convened a special 'Advisory Committee on the Future of the Electric Power System,' chaired by former federal Liberal Finance Minister, Donald Macdonald, to recommend regulatory changes in order to facilitate competition.¹⁷ The Macdonald

¹⁶ Harris announced his resignation from provincial politics in the fall of 2001. In April 2002, Ernie Eves, Harris's former Finance Minister and deputy premier, was chosen party leader and was sworn into office two weeks prior to market opening.

¹⁷ At the time of his appointment, Macdonald was chair of the board at Siemens Electric Ltd., which sells turbines to electric utilities; a director of Banister Foundation Inc., a civil engineering firm that builds

Committee submitted its final report to the government in the spring of 1996 and recommended the elimination of Ontario Hydro's monopoly on electrical generation and a privatization of all its assets, except for its nuclear facilities (which would still be opened up to private investment) and the Niagara River holdings (which should be retained on the basis of its "symbolic significance" as the utility's original source for hydroelectricity).

On the basis of a compromise between the Farlinger and Macdonald reports, the government released a White Paper in 1997 articulating its vision for reform. In January 1998, the government established a Market Design Committee (MDC) to advise on a broad range of technical issues for establishing a framework for competition (e.g. market rules and procedures, codes and standards, information system requirements, &c.). The Committee's report to the government and all subsequent recommendations culminated with the passage of the *Energy Competition Act* (Bill 35) in October 1998, which broke Ontario Hydro up into five successor companies and laid the groundwork for competition and privatization.¹⁸

Whereas the introduction of a competitive paradigm had remained for the most part 'invisible' from the media's and public's radar screens, the spectacle of California's rolling blackouts in 2000 and subsequent revelations of corporate tampering with the energy market (in what became famously known as the "Enron scandal") had a significant effect on not only media interest in the implications of deregulation and

hydroelectric plants; and a director of TransCanada PipeLines Ltd., a gas supplier which stood to profit significantly under a deregulated utility market.

¹⁸ These five successor companies were: Hydro One [transmission], Ontario Power Generation (formerly Genco) [generation], the Independent Market Operator or IMO [surveillance and monitoring], Ontario Electricity Financing Corporation [debt manager], and the Electrical Safety Commission [safety regulator].

privatization for Ontario, but also the legitimacy of the government's main critics. For the government, it made the task of promoting the putative benefits of reform much more difficult. For critics within and outside the legislature, it provided an opportunity to participate in the definitional process and influence policy development. What had previously been described as a 'consensus for change' in the area of electricity policy (Swift 2002) was becoming a nest of conflict and controversy – the issue had become, in journalists' terms, much more 'newsworthy'.

This newsworthiness was underscored by a number of significant, if unanticipated events and the responses to these on the part of the government and its critics. In March 2002, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and Communications, Energy and Paperworkers' (CEP) union launched what became a successful court appeal to halt the privatization of Hydro One, and this had the effect of not only forcing the government onto the defensive, but also generating public awareness about the implications of deregulation and privatization. In June 2002, in the aftermath of revelations of excessive remuneration packages for its top executives (the "golden parachutes" fiasco), Hydro One's board of directors resigned en masse in protest over government intervention in the utility's governance, a move which came on the very morning that the government passed legislation to have the board fired. Due to the court ruling and the subsequent controversy over executive pay, the government announced that it would not seek a sale of all of Hydro One but search for a 'strategic partner' to purchase a minority stake (49%) in the company. In July, under government orders, the new board of directors moved swiftly to

relieve the utility's CEO, Eleanor Clitheroe, from her duties in what was intended to appear like the beginning of a new, more transparent approach to reform.

Finally, in November 2002 the government announced that the privatization of any or all of Hydro One was permanently 'off the table' and subsequently retreated on many other key aspects of its electricity policy programme. Citing unanticipated levels of consumer demand and insufficient supply reserves as the main cause for the problems, the government introduced (and subsequently passed) *The Electricity Pricing, Conservation and Supply Act* (Bill 210), which put into place a package of rebates and regulated price caps, promising that "every penny" spent by consumers over the frozen rate since market opening would be reimbursed. The legislation also indicated that despite the divestment obligations laid out for OPG in Bill 35, the public utility would be spearheading several new generation projects to ensure the long-term stability of the province's supply margins. And thirdly, the government announced a series of incentives to encourage, on the one hand, reductions in individual and corporate consumption, and, on the other hand, new private projects that would bring more generation on line.¹⁹ This policy reversal was unprecedented in the years of Tory rule and the response from the right wing press was swift and ruthless:

Attention conservatives across Canada! Attention all conservatives! The end is near. The Eves government of Ontario, heir to the modestly conservative Harris Revolution, is desperately blowing up every idea and principle Mike Harris might have had. The national implications of this massive act of destruction, now focused on the province's electricity market, are broad and serious. The Ontario achievement, such as it was, is in flames...For conservatives, the Eves electricity industry takeover is an unprecedented political and economic disaster.²⁰

¹⁹ The legislation also centralized much of the surveillance, monitoring, and regulation of electricity by replacing the authority of the Ontario Energy Board and IMO with "ministerial discretion".

²⁰ Terence Corcoran, "The New CEO of Ontario Hydro," *National Post*, 14 November 2002.

With this sudden about-face in its policy programme, the government's "bold and historic plan" to develop a new strategy for electricity appears to have transmogrified into an abysmal failure, as both a public policy initiative and, as will become more apparent below, an exercise in political communication.

Theoretical Framework

In a democratic society the news media are expected to fulfil a number of 'ideal' functions: provide active surveillance on the activities of powerful groups and institutions; enable as many individuals and groups as possible to have access to the channels of mass communication; and impart accurate information on the policies and events of the day in a 'fair' and 'balanced' manner. For some, while the media do not live up to all of these expectations all of the time, they do, for the most part, strive to do so and are successful some of the time. The role of journalists, for example, in bringing to light the scandal of the Watergate Affair that eventually brought down President Nixon is heralded as an example of the 'Fourth Estate' media at its best. According to others, however, several powerful institutions and groups (e.g. the state and corporate sector) still wield far too much influence over the democratic process and this extends to control over processes of news production (Davis 2002, p.7).

Underlying these ideal-typical assumptions about what news media should do is a belief that the media not only set the agenda for the news of the day, but that news coverage also has significant 'ideological effects,' i.e. the news supports the interests of elites and naturalises them as the interests of all, even if this is done without intention.

According to Stuart Hall, the media shape and organize popular consensus by 'masking and displacing' relations of domination and control, by 'fragmenting and individualizing' collective values, and by imposing an 'imaginary unity' on the social totality (1977, p.337). Although Hall notes that the ideological role of the media is by no means its exclusive function, he does argue that it is the pre-eminent one:

"The 'definitions of reality,' favourable to the dominant class fractions, and institutionalised in the spheres of civil life and the state, come to constitute the primary 'lived reality' as such for the subordinate classes. In this way ideology provides the 'cement' in a social formation" (p.333).

The media thus shape the parameters of public discourse by deciding what will count as "reasonable talk...as the appropriate and inappropriate registers, as the intangible boundaries which rule the inclusion or exclusion of certain things [and] certain points of view" (Hall 1986, p.12).

The ideological effects argument is taken a step further in the classic study of political communication, *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 1978). Hall et al. argue that a dominant ideology is secured through a combination of pressures germane to the organizational dynamics of professional journalism, viz. the demands imposed by deadlines and the need to produce impartial and objective news copy:

"The media...tend faithfully and impartially, to reproduce symbolically the existing structure of power in society's institutional order. This is what Becker has called the 'hierarchy of credibility' – the likelihood that those in powerful or high status positions who offer opinions about controversial topics will have their definitions accepted, because such spokesmen are understood to have access to more accurate or specialised information on particular topics than the majority of the population. The result of this structured preference is that these 'spokesmen' become what we call the *primary definers* of topics" (p.58).

In the 'primary definer' model, journalists operate in a position of structured subordination to the privileged and powerful because the operational demands of news

production place journalists into a relationship of dependency upon those sources who can provide the facts about and witnesses to issues and events that are the raw materials of newsgathering. Hall et al. argue that in the search for reliable news copy, journalists seek out institutional news sources over non-official sources, because the former are already “accredited” by virtue of their power, electoral legitimacy, and/or expertise.

Hall et al. present a convincing argument: by virtue of its role in democratic society and beliefs about impartiality and objectivity, news media possess a unique power to structure popular consciousness in a manner conducive to the interests of the state and free market. Nevertheless, the assumptions underlying this framework have not passed without considerable criticism. Schlesinger (1990), in particular, has taken Hall to task for reifying institutional power by assuming: first, that official organizations will speak with the same voice on the same issue(s) all of the time; second, that the flow of influence goes in only one direction; and third, that the media are resistant to the primary defining activities and abilities of alternative and marginal groups. Moreover, following Schlesinger (1990), Miller (2002) argues that there is a risk in ‘overplaying’ ideology at the risk of downplaying or avoiding altogether other important issues, such as the ways in which elite actors attempt to use their resource advantages to control both the policymaking and news production processes. These ‘mechanisms of rule’ are numerous and include such activities and practices as lobbying, public relations, and political marketing.

Nevertheless, despite the reservations we might have about the theoretical assumptions underpinning the ‘ideological effects’ thesis, it is important to resist the

temptation of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Studies of political communication, from both the critical (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Knight 1998; Hackett et al. 2000) and liberal pluralist traditions (Gans 1979; Blumler and Gurevitch 1995), continue to show that the powerful enjoy privileged access and, more often than not, news discourse articulates a view of the world that is amenable to the interests of the state and private capital. This suggests that while it is an important part of critical scholarship to investigate all of the mechanisms by which ruling ideas rule, we must not at the same time lose sight of the notion that for the majority of the public the news serves as the primary point of contact with the political environment. While individuals may develop their political viewpoints, sympathies and opinions in other facets of their lives (e.g. in conversation with friends and colleagues), the news still plays an important role in shaping their interpretive schemas for making sense of the world and engaging with it.

Methodology

The dataset for the news analysis portion of the research is the entire population of electricity policy news coverage from 1995-2002 in four mass-market daily newspapers: the *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Toronto Star*, and *Toronto Sun* (N=1,527).²¹ These media have been selected because they are the largest circulating newspapers in the province and tend to ‘speak’ with different editorial voices on policy issues. The *Globe* and *Post* circulate nationally and are considered to be “serious” or

²¹ Copies of full-text articles were obtained utilizing the Lexis-Nexis, Virtual News Library and Canadian Periodical Index (CPI.Q) databases. Searches were conducted using combinations of the following keywords: Ontario, Ontario Hydro, electricity, Ministry of Energy, deregulation, and privatization. The average daily circulation for each newspaper is: *Post*=293,989; *Star*=492,068; *Sun*=244,683; and *Globe*=386,874. Figures have been obtained from the Ontario Press Council and the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom. See <http://www.ontpress.com> and <http://www.presscampaign.org>.

“upmarket” newspapers and both tend to express open editorial support for conservative economic policies. The *Star*, a “popular” or “mid-market” paper, is the largest-circulating English-language broadsheet in the country and circulates primarily in the greater Toronto area and north-central region of the province. A socially liberal paper, the *Star* normally assumes a critical editorial position toward conservative policies that unfairly impact vulnerable populations (e.g. children, the aged, ethnic minorities, &c.). The *Sun*, meanwhile, is a tabloid paper characterized by a firm pro-business, pro-market, and populist perspective. This newspaper is unwaveringly critical of organized labour and other groups it labels as being motivated by ‘special interests,’ but is also critical of policies it sees as threatening to the freedoms and securities of ‘ordinary folks’.

The news articles were examined with regard to three main concerns: first, with the total distribution of all electricity policy coverage over the sample period; second, the presence and presentation of key individuals and institutions as news sources; and third, the dominant themes. If Hall et al.’s “primary definer” thesis is correct, we should expect elite sources (i.e. those in positions of government or in the corporate sector) to dominate the news agenda and have their interests reproduced and naturalised as the interests of all.

Drawing on Deacon and Golding’s (1991, 1994) approach to source access, individuals and institutions were coded in terms of their visibility in the coverage (as sources) as well as their critical disposition toward the reforms (i.e. ‘critical’, ‘neutral’, ‘supportive’).²² Following Callaghan and Schnell (2001), dominant news frames were

²² There were instances when a policy actor fell into two different source categories, for example Dofasco Steel is part of the “Business/Corporate Sector” category, but as a member of the Association of Major Power Consumers of Ontario (AMPCO), a pro-deregulation pressure group, it is also part of the “Pressure Group (+)” category. In this instance, unless explicitly identified as part of the larger coalition or group,

operationally defined in terms of “which arguments were stated or inferred by the topical organization of each news item.” Each news article was coded for its ‘dominant’ theme(s), for which there were never more than three themes per item. To verify the reliability of the findings, a second coder examined a sub-sample (30 percent) of the total population of articles. An inter-coder reliability test was conducted, and the test revealed a reasonable 84 percent agreement on the presence and disposition of actors and 81 percent agreement on issue themes.²³

To complement the content analysis, information on government communications and public relations expenditures was obtained from the Ministry of Finance’s Public Accounts record (for fiscal years 1996-97 thru 2001-02). Data on policy promotional campaigns were obtained in interviews with policy participants and in the course of the data collection. Subsequent efforts by the author to obtain a fuller account of the government’s promotional campaigns through access to information legislation were rejected. Field observations of source-journalist relations were also recorded in the context of policy announcements and at public forums, and provided additional context.

Promoting Private Power: Government PR

“We see the full-page ads in the newspaper. We see the television ads. We’ll hear it on the radio. It’ll be a multi-million dollar program designed to promote the government’s position using [our] tax dollars... That advertising is, for the most part, self-serving advertising, something to make the government look good in the eyes of the consumer or in the eyes of those who are watching the advertising” (Liberal MPP, *Hansard*, 18 November 2002).

Dofasco was counted as a “Business/Corporate Sector” news source. Similarly for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which belonged in the category “Labour Unions” but was also a member of the Ontario Electricity Coalition (OEC), which was part of the “Pressure Group (-)” category. Again, unless identified as a member of the OEC, CUPE was always coded in the “Labour Unions” category.

²³ Inter-coder reliability tests examine the extent to which different researchers working with the same material and using the same instruments of measurement will attain similar results.

The government's attempt to introduce a competitive paradigm for Ontario's electricity sector has arguably been a major disaster. Assessing the wreckage in the aftermath of her public firing from the top job at Hydro One, former CEO Eleanor Clitheroe attributed public hostility and resistance to the competitive framework to a lack of understanding and awareness about the implications of reform:

"What was not done was to keep the public apprised of the strategy, of the changes, that were going on in the electricity sector...[The public] hadn't been closely involved or knowledgeable about this progression so their views were potentially on all different points across the spectrum about what the company was and where it was going. That's something I would do differently if I had to do it again."²⁴

Clitheroe's assessment of the situation was not unique. On the eve of market opening, Premier Eves also acknowledged, "There is some confusion, it's fair to say, in the public's mind with respect to the opening of the market on May 1 and the IPO with respect to Hydro One," adding that it would be the task of his government to "explain those differences to the public and to receive input from the public as well."²⁵ For those favourably disposed to the government's policy agenda, it was clear that the policy was a good one, but the problem lay in its communication.

Yet, if the government and its supporters failed to get the message out, it surely wasn't for lack of trying. As outlined in Figure 1 below, Ministry of Energy spending on media and public relations increased significantly since 1996-97, peaking at more than \$5

²⁴ Quoted in T. Tedesco, "Everything I did was approved. Clitheroe speaks out: Former Hydro One boss 'devastated' by recent events." *National Post Online*, 26 July 2002, <http://www.nationalpost.com>.

²⁵ Quoted in R. Benzie and P. Vieira, "Ontario presses ahead with huge privatization." *National Post Online*, 26 April 2002, <http://www.nationalpost.com>.

million in 1999-2000, when the market was first slated to open, and again in 2001-2002 in the build-up to the eventual date of market opening.²⁶

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

In March 2000, eight months before the original November 2000 market opening date, the Ministry of Energy, in conjunction with the Ontario Energy Board, launched a \$1.3 million advertising campaign to explain to consumers “how the new system will work, why things have changed, and how to use your new power of choice.” The campaign, *It’s Your Electricity – It’s Your Choice*, consisted of radio ads running on 119 English and French radio stations from the end of February to the end of March 2000, newspaper advertisements over the same period in 43 Ontario dailies and in 157 local newspapers, and a 12-page brochure made available at information kiosks in 82 shopping malls and as inserts in consumer hydro bills from March thru August (Van Den Broek 2000).²⁷ The campaign slogan clearly revealed the government’s belief that electricity is to be treated like all other commodities and, as such, consumers should be responsible for and have the freedom and ability to pick and choose the provider that is right for them.

²⁶ These figures do not include expenditures after September 2002. For 1996-97, 1997-98, and from May thru June 2002, the Ministry of Energy was combined with the Ministry of Environment. Figures reported here are estimates only, as the government does not report details of expenses below \$50,000. For example, we know nothing about how much of the \$14.5 million spent on “Accounts under \$50,000” between 1998-2002 was devoted to media-related activity. Furthermore, these figures do not capture how much of the expenses were devoted solely to electricity restructuring communications. A request through the Freedom of Information Act for details of all PR expenditures related solely to electricity restructuring was denied.

²⁷ After announcing in the summer 2000 that the November market opening would be put off indefinitely, the government expanded the *It’s Your Electricity* campaign by broadening its newspaper advertisements to 122 dailies and weeklies in Ontario. It also sought to go beyond conventional, mainstream media by placing its ads in a variety of multicultural publications. Complementing the mainstream and multicultural press spots, the Ministry of Energy also distributed millions of magnets and brochures featuring its helpline phone number and web address, from which consumers could learn more about “the benefits of deregulation” (Van Den Broek 2001).

Hydro One, still operating as a publicly owned company in 2000, launched its own multi-million dollar publicity campaign throughout the summer of that year. Reaching audiences through television, newspaper, magazines, and radio, the campaign, *Connecting at the Speed of Light*, was intended to re-brand the (soon-to-be former) public monopoly as a lean and efficient service provider in a new competitive market. From May 2000 through 2001, Hydro One expanded its re-branding campaign to include the sponsorship of a travelling heritage exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). *Electrification in Ontario* was the story of public power, “from its discovery and development to its profound effects on daily life in the past, present, and future” (Hydro One news release, 26 May 2000).²⁸ While it might seem strange that an organization which is attempting to transform itself into a private enterprise would extol its accomplishments and contributions as a public company, the exhibit covered only the period 1906 until the mid-1960s, prior to the period of massive expansion and growth that encouraged the accumulation of a \$38 billion debt, the elimination of which was explained as the principal reason for deregulating and privatizing the industry.

On 25 January 2002, as part of a broader education campaign involving the distribution of approximately one million pamphlets and a series of public meetings across the province, the government launched a \$2.3 million television-advertising blitz publicizing the arrival of competition in the province’s electricity market. The ads featured soft-focused pictures of regular people in everyday settings and were accompanied by a voice track explaining the need for more electricity to meet the growth

²⁸ A. Van Den Brock, “(Ontario) Hydro rebranding for deregulation.” *Marketing 105* (18), n.p. 8 May 2000.

and development needs of the Ontario population and economy, and to outline the options and responsibility for consumers – whether they wanted it or not – to pick the energy provider of their choice. The ads were clearly intended to integrate electricity into the ‘picture’ of everyday life, a construction of intimacy that is a source of both reassurance and anxiety (Edelman 1977). The commercial urged viewers to call the ministry’s toll-free telephone hotline or visit its website for additional information.

The most controversial component of the government’s promotional campaign emerged approximately one month before market opening, when a six-page advertising supplement, paid for by the government and formatted to replicate actual news copy, appeared in several Ontario newspapers. The *Toronto Star* ran the supplement on 21 March. In response to reader complaints, the paper’s ombudsman published an editorial nine days later, calling the supplement, “slick and cheery feel-good stuff that government publicity factories dream up as vehicles for one-sided messages.”²⁹ He also noted that the newspaper had made a mistake by including the supplement without more extensive information about its partisanship. The advertorial also appeared in the *Globe and Mail* on 11 March. Energy Probe, a consumer and environmental advocacy organization that has called for deregulation and privatization of the Ontario electricity market for almost two decades, launched an official complaint with *Advertising Standards Canada* and wrote a letter to the *Globe* urging it to not pass off “disguised advocacy advertising” as news copy in the future. In his letter, executive director Tom Adams (who was also a member of the government’s 1998 Market Design Committee) argued, “Nowhere is there

²⁹ See “Power Ad Paraded as News.” *Toronto Star*, 30 March 2002, H6.

an indication in the supplement that the material mimicking journalistic content outside the ads was paid for and controlled by the advertisers. The authorship of the ads in the piece is clear but the authorship of the text is not disclosed.” Adding to Energy Probe’s protests were similar complaints by the NDP and the anti-deregulation advocacy group, the Ontario Electricity Coalition (OEC).³⁰ Unlike the *Star*, the *Globe* did not publish a response.

The above summary does not exhaust all of the government’s PR activities over the course of this policy’s history, nor does it consider the vast communications campaign undertaken by other policy participants, particularly the local distribution companies and private sector energy generators and retailers who came out in support of the government’s policy programme. For example, the discussion does not take account of the common yet not widely reported or examined government PR technique of seeking access to newspaper editorial boards in the period surrounding the introduction and/or implementation of a new policy to explain the rationale and benefits of change. Whether attempts to manage the news agenda are clear and intentional, as in the case of editorial board meetings, or less direct, such as during extensive promotional and public education campaigns like those discussed above, the question automatically arises as to how successful government promotionalism will be in terms of recruiting media support for a particular policy programme (Deacon and Golding 1991, p.298). This question is taken up in the remainder of the study, where I examine how the issue of electricity restructuring has been reported in the mainstream press. Who are the most visible actors

³⁰ See S. Salaff, “Ontario propaganda ad causes controversy.” *Electricity Daily*, 11 April 2002. Retrieved online <http://www.electricity-online.com>.

and how are they represented? What are the main themes, and what does this tell us about how the public might have understood the policy process? In doing so, I hope to provide a reasonable measure of the tenor and tone of the coverage, and in particular of the government's success or failure in its agenda-building efforts (Deacon and Golding 1991, p.298).

News Coverage of Electricity Reform, 1995-2002

The Evolution of Electricity Policy News

Figure 2 provides a distribution of all news items focusing on electricity policy in the mainstream Ontario and national press from the date of the Tories' first election win in June 1995 until December 2002.³¹ The most noticeable characteristic of this distribution is the unprecedented upsurge of coverage in the final twelve months of the sample. Indeed, we find that more than 60 percent of the total news reports were filed between 11 December 2001 and 1 December 2002. Although there were three other times when the coverage jumped over this seven-year period (in the periods surrounding the Macdonald Committee report; the passage of Bill 35; and around the time of the California/Enron disaster and November 2000 market opening date) these moments in the policy's history were reported with comparatively less intensity. Up until Harris's "farewell-to-the-legislature" speech in December 2001, electricity restructuring received little press attention overall.

³¹ There were several additional articles (N=174) where Ontario's electricity policy was discussed in a broader context, for example in coverage of the 1999 provincial election campaign and in news reports of California's and Alberta's electricity deregulation experiments in 2000. Unless Ontario's electricity policy was the main topic of a news item, it was not included in the formal analysis. All of these additional items were examined for background and context, however.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

These data also show the differences in issue attention across these newspapers. In terms of total coverage, the *Star* reported on the electricity restructuring debate much more extensively than the other newspapers. Reports in this newspaper accounted for 39 percent of the total coverage (n=600), compared to the 23 percent each by the *Globe* (n=350) and *Post* (n=348), and the *Sun's* 15 percent (n=229). This finding is important because the *Star* has a much more extensive circulation and audience reach than any of the other newspapers and, particularly, because this circulation is so heavily concentrated in the most densely populated and industrialized region of the province. The disparity is also likely explained by the fact that the *Star* (as well as the *Sun*) is a local newspaper, whereas both the *Post* and *Globe* are national papers – consequently, the editorial and hard news content in those papers must compete with issues and events occurring elsewhere in the country. Nevertheless, the finding is important for the additional reason that the *Star* was the only newspaper to maintain a consistently critical editorial tone over the course of the policy's history, and this might account for the extent of public hostility to the policy at its moment of implementation. The following excerpt, published just after the government's release of the 1997 White Paper, while not representative of the breadth of critical opinion about market-driven reform published in this newspaper, adequately summarizes this paper's general disposition:

"The Harris government is looking for ways to bring the private sector into the electricity sector in Ontario, [however the] Tories know that Ontarians would balk at the wholesale privatization of Hydro. What we are likely to get is privatization on the instalment plan. In the end, the consequences will be the same. We will no longer own and control our own electric power system, something our ancestors rejected as the course of folly...If you need to be reminded of what the private sector ethic is, tune in CNBC, the U.S. business channel. On CNBC, which keeps the current value of the Dow Jones average on

the screen even during commercials, one ethic dominates from morning to night – making money...A northern people just can't afford to leave its most vital affairs in the hands of people who think like that" (Op-ed column, 23 January 1998, A19).

In contrast, the *Globe*, *Post* and *Sun* all expressed clear and open editorial support for the government's policy direction, referring to the competitive paradigm as "concise, direct, visionary, [and] coherent" (*Globe and Mail*, 7 November 1997), as "a bold move that should go down as one of [Harris's] crowning achievements" (*National Post*, 13 December 2001), and "the only way to go" (*Toronto Sun*, 19 December 2001) to ensure reliability and low-rates.

As we will see, however, this unambiguous support became less stable and predictable as time wore on. While the reasons for this vary with each paper, the growing sense of discomfort is suggestive of a communications failure on the part of government officials to control the definitions of the policy situation in a manner to which it had, with the exception of the *Star*, grown accustomed in the policy's formative years. As we will see below, this was likely due to changes in the "real world" over time and to the resultant shifts in patterns of source access and issue themes in response to these changes.

Patterns of Source Access

In any system of ranked groups, participants take it as a given that members of the highest group have the right to define the way things really are. And since...matters of rank and status are contained in the mores, this belief has a moral quality...Thus, credibility and the right to be heard are differently distributed through the ranks of the system (Becker 1967, p.241).

To capture shifts in policy actor representation over time, Table 1 provides a temporal account of how policy actors were represented in terms of their overall visibility as quoted news sources. The policy's history is compartmentalized into three phases:

Phase 1 covers the period spanning the Conservatives' 1995 June election win until December 1998, two months following the third reading of Bill 35 in the legislature. Phase 2 covers the period January 1999 until December 2001, which includes the California energy crisis, the date of the government's first delay of market opening, revelations about market "rigging" and "gaming" during the Enron scandal, and the period surrounding Harris's deregulation/privatization announcement. Phase 3, finally, covers the period from 1 January until 1 December 2002. We can refer to these stages in the policy's history as the 'developmental', 'introductory', and 'implementation' phases, respectively.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

The most notable observation is that, when averaged over all three phases of the policy's history, government sources were the most frequently cited policy actors (24 percent), followed by representatives of the public utilities (14 percent), and pressure groups supportive of the competitive paradigm (13 percent). In contrast, the policy's main opponents were opposition party politicians, unions, environmentalists and citizens groups opposed to deregulation and privatization, and these sources accounted for only 10 percent, 6 percent, and 4 percent, respectively.³²

That the news reports tended to be indexed to the viewpoints of government representatives is not surprising. Government sources possess the most up-to-date policy information and enjoy a privileged ability to determine much of the time which aspects of a given policy will be released to the media and public, and when. As illustrated here, this

³² These figures are not presented in the table, but have been reached by taking the mean score of each source category in each phase of the policy's history.

is particularly the case in reporting on policies that are future-oriented, i.e. whose effects and outcomes will not be felt for some time. Still, when we compare the results reported above to those in other empirical studies of news and public policy (Bennett 1990; Bennett and Manheim 1993; Deacon and Golding 1994; Zaller and Chiu 1996), it is somewhat surprising to find that government sources, and, indeed, institutional political actors generally, were not more conspicuously dominant. Taken together, official party political actors accounted for only 30 percent of the total source viewpoints represented in the 'introductory' and 'developmental' phases, and a much more 'respectable' 45 percent by the time of implementation.

It is also notable that over the introductory and developmental stages, the representational balance of actor dispositions remained virtually unchanged, with approximately 60 percent of the news sources supporting the government's policy direction, compared to only roughly 25 percent who were critical. This is accounted for largely by the 'prospective' nature of the policy at this stage. Because the impacts and effects of the legislation were 'future-oriented' in the introductory and developmental stages, the claims making tended to be speculative in nature, i.e. what would the effects be economically, environmentally, ethically, &c.? The 'prospective news' orientation (Knight 2001) puts greater emphasis and reliance for journalists to seek sources who will provide specialized knowledge and information. This accentuates, of course, the importance of source credibility and institutional legitimacy as an underlying factor to the production process. In contrast, however, the most significant shift to occur in the source access patterns was the dramatic drop in overall source support for the government's

policy in the implementation phase, to only 32 percent. In comparison, critical voices became much more prominent, rising from approximately 25 percent to 37 percent, and those expressing only neutral support also rose sharply from 17 percent to 32 percent. As the policy shifted from a future-oriented story with prospective effects to a current story with immediate effects, journalists appeared to accommodate competing voices to weigh in on the issue.

Looking more closely at the dispositions of government actors, as the policy entered into its final and most contentious stage support within the ruling party also became less tenable, dropping from a very strong 95 percent to a rather more moderate 76 percent support. At the same time, the numbers of government sources expressing only neutral or mixed support increased more than threefold. One possible explanation for this decline in support for the policy within the government can be explained by the political strategy of the Ontario Electricity Coalition (an alliance of unions, environmentalists, citizens groups, and local political activists, with support and financing from the NDP) to exert pressure on Tory (and to a lesser extent Liberal) MPPs through letter-writing, telephone complaints, and marches and protests outside constituency offices from January through October 2002.³³ Responding to a swell of public opposition and hostility, Conservative politicians – mostly backbenchers, but also one cabinet minister and the member who served as ‘Speaker of the House’ – all began to speak out publicly against the policy by calling on their government to impose a rate freeze and ‘rethink’ its direction for electricity reform. Conversely, the modest to small measures of policy

³³ A detailed account of the OEC’s public relations campaign is presented in a companion article. See Greenberg 2003.

support expressed by Liberal Party politicians in the early years of the policy's history also evaporated. This downward shift in support for the policy no doubt contributed to critical news coverage of it, and would seem to support conclusions drawn in other studies of political communication that state domination of the news agenda can be undermined when cleavages within the consensus of elite opinion become a matter of public debate (Hallin 1986; Tumber and Morrison 1988; Deacon and Golding 1994).³⁴

It is also interesting to note the definitional prominence of pressure groups expressing support for the government's programme in the policy's formative years. The most visible of these pressure groups (61 percent overall) was the environmental watchdog, Energy Probe, whose preference for market solutions to the 'problems' of the electricity industry is underscored by the fact that its executive director, Tom Adams, served as a member of the government's 1998 Market Design Committee.³⁵ In addition to Energy Probe, these pressure groups consisted of coalitions of corporate consumers and private energy producers with a vested interest in seeing the market opened to competition. The most notable of these pressure groups were the Association of Major Power Consumers of Ontario (AMPCO), the Stakeholders' Alliance for Competition and Choice in Electricity (SACCE), and the Independent Power Producers Society of Ontario

³⁴ Cleavages over policy are common within ruling parties. The point to be made here, however, is that this becomes a problem for policy communication when these disagreements spill out into the public sphere.

³⁵ Indeed, Energy Probe has consistently called not for more but less government regulation of the environment as a solution to ecological risks and harms. Its preference for regulatory liberalization also expands beyond the electricity industry. The Canadian Policy Institute, headed up by Energy Probe's research coordinator, Larry Solomon, has long called for the replacement of public medicare by individual medical savings accounts and private insurance, as well as the privatization of public transit. Another affiliate pressure group, Probe International (headed by Solomon's wife), has lobbied the federal government extensively to end government-to-government aid programs, while Environment Probe, has long called for the privatization of forests, mineral resources, and sewage and water plants. See T. Walkom, "Hydro thorn Energy Probe rooted on the right." *Toronto Star*, 23 August 1997, E1.

(IPPSO). Each of these, and a number of other associations and organizations with a financial stake in a competitive market, lobbied the government extensively in the periods leading up to the passage of Bill 35 and, more especially, prior to Harris's December 2001 announcement.³⁶ By the implementation phase, however, these voices became less prominent in the coverage, dropping from approximately 17 percent during the developmental and introductory phases, to only 6 percent. And even among these policy actors, the Tories' staunchest and most consistent allies, the extent of unambiguous support dropped 18 percentage points (from 61 to 43 percent).

Given this overall decline in policy actor support for deregulation and privatization, it is somewhat surprising that critical voices from outside of the legislature did not enjoy a more significant increase in their media visibility. While the relative presence of pressure groups critical of the policy framework did increase twofold from Phase 2 to Phase 3, it is clear that these policy actors remained, nevertheless, somewhat marginalized in the overall discursive scheme of things. Where critical voices tended to be concentrated, at least in the coverage, was within the official categories of parliamentary politics. In contrast to theories of the "post-parliamentary polity" (Richardson and Jordan 1979), therefore, the debate around electricity reform, at least insofar as it was articulated in news discourse, was waged principally by official and quasi-political actors.³⁷ The marginalization of critical pressure groups from the discourse does not, however, mean that such groups were not successful in influencing the news

³⁶ Data on active and inactive lobbying activity for each government ministry from 1999 thru 2002 can be obtained online through the website of the *Office of the Integrity Commissioner*, Lobbyists Registration Office <http://www.lobbyist.oico.on.ca>.

³⁷ By quasi-political actors, I refer to non-partisan members of legislative committees and those in 'appointive' positions (e.g. utility executives and market regulators such as the IMO).

production or policy processes. It simply means that their influence was likely exercised in less visible ways (e.g. through grassroots campaigns) or that their media visibility may have been located elsewhere.³⁸

Thematic Structure

Studies in political communication frequently resort to a constructionist account of policy debates as entailing a struggle over whose definition of the economic, political, or social situation will prevail (Edelman 1977). That political actors will attempt to “control the prevailing image of the policy problem through the use of rhetoric, symbol and policy analysis” (Baumgartner and Jones 1991, p.1045) underscores the importance of language and discourse as the medium that “reflects, advances, and interprets these alternatives” (Rochefort and Cobb 1994, p.9). This process of attributing meanings to a policy and connecting these to the broader political milieu is referred to as ‘framing’. Following Goffman (1974), media frames allow readers to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” (p.21) the multiple happenings of the social world in a meaningful way. Issue frames are the “centre or core of a larger unit of public discourse” (Pan and Kosicki 1993, p.56) and will be intelligible if they can draw on a common stock of already available public knowledge, i.e. if they can achieve a measure of resonance with real-world actors living under real-world conditions. Most importantly, media frames have the capacity to do more than merely organize the world cognitively for newsreaders – as Snow et al. (1986, p.464) have argued, frames also serve as a “guide to action”.

³⁸ A methodological limitation of this study is its inattention to the local press. Given the grassroots campaigning of the Ontario Electricity Coalition, there is reason to believe that critical groups may have accomplished a greater presence and visibility in the smaller market dailies. Testing this hypothesis empirically, however, must remain the focus of a follow-up study.

Table 2 shows that the news reporting of this policy tended to cohere for the most part around eleven issue themes. When we take these themes as an aggregate, they fall into six broader ‘framing’ categories:

1. *Economic Impacts* – included themes related to the purported effects of the policy on electricity rates, debt, and taxes (increase or decrease); differential impacts of proposed rate changes on vulnerable populations; investment opportunities; and consumer choice.
2. *Environmental Impacts* – included themes related to whether a competitive framework would encourage the development of new technologies that would be less harmful for the environment (e.g. wind, solar, fuel cells, etc.), or whether a profit-driven system would encourage more production of ‘dirty’ (coal) and ‘dangerous’ (nuclear) energy and thus lead to increased health risks (e.g. asthma).
3. *Governance* – included themes related to the desirability of a reduced role for the state; the question of whether changing a public service into a private good was in the best interests of the public; the threat an open market posed to political and economic sovereignty; and the electoral consequences associated with change in the face of public resistance.
4. *Policy Issues* – included themes related to the legislative decision-making process and those describing technical features of existing or proposed legislation, as well as policy alternatives.
5. *Ethical Probity* – included themes related to aggressive door-to-door salesperson tactics; violations of fiduciary responsibility on the part of utility executives; and secrecy and deceit on the part of politicians and utility executives.
6. *Other* – included a smorgasbord of themes related to *inter alia* government attempts to manipulate public opinion with sophisticated PR campaigns; global pressures circumscribing the push to open utilities markets; and individual profiles of key policy participants (e.g. utility executives, consultants, board directors).

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

There are several notable observations to be made here. Firstly, and most evidently, in all of these newspapers and across the policy’s entire history, electricity restructuring was framed primarily as an issue of economic concern above all other possible issue frames. While there is great debate over the extent to which a neo-liberal

framework has truly taken hold in advanced liberal democracies (Pierson 1994), it is less contestable that neo-liberalism has been incredibly successful in getting the public to think about the world in primarily economistic terms, i.e. by prioritising notions of deficit management, debt reduction, service efficiency, and returns on investment as the dominant concerns in policy design. Indeed, as one *Toronto Star* columnist has suggested, in Ontario a free market sensibility has become hegemonic such that “the rules of neoclassical economics are now firmly entrenched in public policy.”³⁹

When we examine the economistic issue frame more closely, however, we can note that there are interesting and important differences in terms of inflection. In the policy’s introductory phase, with the notable exception of the *Star*, media framing of electricity reform still overwhelmingly privileged the notion that deregulation and privatization would lead to more choice and lower rates for consumers, broaden the capital growth opportunities for investors, and pay down the utility’s debt. By the developmental phase, it is clear that the ‘economic benefits’ to be obtained from a competitive paradigm were by far the most salient; however, by the time of implementation, with the experience California firmly entrenched in the public consciousness, the focus on the economic impacts of reform had shifted to account not for the benefits of restructuring but of the harms that such a policy framework would likely entail.

The ability to steer journalists toward a circumscribed definition of the past is a key rhetorical strategy for news sources in encouraging ‘favourable’ definitions of the

³⁹ Carol Goar, “We’ve become a market society.” *Toronto Star*, 27 July 2002, F6

present and future (Greenberg 2002). It would appear that whereas in the policy's formative years the government was able to keep the media focused on the historical rationale for the policy (viz. curb the debt accumulated by the 'old', i.e. Keynesian, approach to managing the economy),⁴⁰ by the time of implementation this preferred definition had been usurped by a sustained focus on the immediate experience of rising rates and the prospect of blackouts. Thus, in contradiction to the government's preferred definitions of the policy as a long-term solution, news coverage had increasingly taken on a short-term focus, demonstrating how competition and the push to privatization was not helping, but harming businesses and ratepayers (and impacting particularly hard on seniors and other financially vulnerable people), not encouraging but discouraging private sector investment, compromising the government's preferred definition of itself as the most responsible of the three political parties to 'manage the economy' and, as demonstrated by the upsurge in reporting on the theme of ethical probity, protecting the public from the excesses of the market (see more on this below). The modest increase (1.4 to 4.8 percent) in reports focusing on the electoral consequences of the policy in terms of an erosion of political support for the government reinforces this finding.

In addition to framing electricity reform as a primarily economic issue, the media were also responsive to the government's argument, shared with those in the investment and corporate energy community, that the introduction of market forces to the electricity sector would be an important step toward curbing the interventionist proclivities of the

⁴⁰ This was clearly the result of a coordinated media relations campaign by the government to ensure, as one communications representative stated, "that the policy would be seen as an economy issue...that's why we targeted the finance and business reporters." Interview, 7 May 2002.

state in the organization of everyday economic life. Indeed, the marked prevalence of the 'governance' issue frame across all three phases of the policy's history is indicative of the implementation challenge of retrenchment initiatives. As has been the case with market-based approaches to healthcare reform, for example, governments that delegate service responsibilities to private providers frequently find themselves having to become more involved than ever before in system administration (Light 2001). The initial enthusiasm to reform electricity along market lines in order to reduce the regulatory role of the state was met with a constellation of structural and ideational realities that prevented the preferred transformation of this policy field.

In much the same way as the focus on economic outcomes was characterized by a shift in attention from a longer-term, historical rationale to a focus on predictable, short-term effects (rising costs, electoral consequences, etc.), the theme of governance was taken up in much the same way. Early in the policy's history the 'governance' frame was used in a 'positive' sense to reinforce the argument that less government is good government; however by the time of implementation, the restricted meanings associated with this issue frame had been destabilized – it was now being utilized by critics to point to the 'inevitability of market failure' and by the Tories' key supporters in the private sector (and the entourage of right wing business columnists) who were using it now to argue for the importance of protecting utilities from the meddlesome hands of the state. For example, in response to the passage of Bill 210 in November 2002, the *Post* opined that,

"The scale of Ernie Eves' retreat from conservative principles of private enterprise, market forces and less government is so massive and irreversible that it's hard to imagine

any segment of the population will again trust a conservative politician...From now on, Ernie Eves is the CEO of the new Ontario Hydro, a monster monopoly that is in even worse shape than the old bankrupt institution that Mike Harris helped dismantle. The new policies – fixed power rates, direct political control over every facet of the business, widespread bureaucratic intervention – are more aggressive than anything seen in any province” (*National Post Online*, 14 November 2002).

The shift to a negative and constrained interpretation of the effects of electricity restructuring was mirrored in other thematic areas as well. In particular, it is noteworthy that the ‘ethical probity’ theme increased substantially in the implementation phase, enjoying a 128 percent increase in media attention (7.4 percent to 17.4 percent in overall media attention from phase 2). This upsurge in issue attention was due to three sets of events: first, we cannot overlook the impact of the Enron scandal on Ontario’s electricity restructuring. While the blackouts in California in the summer of 2000 surely affected public confidence in the merits of a competitive policy paradigm, this no doubt paled in comparison to the anger and resentment toward the private energy sector when it was revealed that a major source of the California crisis was the pricing schemes which made millionaires of corporate executives and paupers of the public and institutional and individual (especially employees) shareholders. Secondly, in the period spanning the date of Harris’s announcement until the market opening in May, the door-to-door sales activities of energy retailers increased substantially and, with this, revelations about contract tampering, misleading sales pitches, and incidents of outright deceit. News reports provided regular accounts of these events, which, no doubt, served to undermine public confidence in the private sector to deliver cheaper power more reliably. And third, in the aftermath of the aborted plan to privatize all of Hydro One, news coverage came to focus increasingly on the so-called “golden parachutes” and excessive

remuneration packages of utilities executives. From June until August 2002, Hydro One CEO Clitheroe was pilloried almost daily in the mainstream press, characterized as “greedy” (*Star*, 8 June), “just another big boy in a good suit” (*Post*, 29 July), and “the \$6M woman” (*Sun*, 6 June) who “should have been satisfied with less” (*Globe*, 13 August). Clearly, this shift in issue attention corresponded to the propensity of news media to “individualize” (Cottle 1993) what are in most cases structural matters. Most damagingly, the effect of this overall shift from the historical rationale for reform to matters of greater immediacy was that the coverage overwhelmingly focused on the deficiencies of the new system rather than the ‘failures’ of its predecessor (Deacon and Golding 1991, p.309), and created or reinforced expectations among the public that policymaking is a short-term endeavour the evaluation of which should be measured in terms of immediate outcomes.

When we shift our attention from these more general framing patterns to comparisons between these news outlets, some interesting disparities begin to emerge. The most notable observation is the much greater diversity of critical coverage in the *Star* than what we find in the other papers.⁴¹ In the policy’s introductory phase, coverage in the other media was focused almost exclusively on the issue themes of ‘economic benefits’, ‘policy’, and ‘reduced role for the state’. While the *Star* attended to the first two of these themes, it clearly also broadened its reportage in the policy’s formative years to include coverage of the negative economic impacts for individuals and businesses.

⁴¹ Interestingly, news source access patterns within the *Star*’s hard news coverage were not that different from what was found in the other papers. Although there were more critical voices present, the difference was nominal. Where there was a more notable difference, however, was in the presence of critical opinions within the editorials and, particularly, op-ed pieces.

This paper also addressed the question of whether the reforms are ‘in the public interest’ (10 percent) an issue theme that was virtually invisible in the other papers. Additionally, the *Star* paid much more attention to the impact of the policy on the province’s economic and political sovereignty. Under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), clauses that would protect existing publicly owned institutions would be rendered moot in the event of a privatized energy market and it was also clear that this newspaper was much more concerned about the implications of foreign ownership of public utilities than the other papers. The *Star* made this concern an issue in 8 percent of its total coverage (peaking at 16 percent in the developmental phase), compared to less than 1 percent by the other three papers combined. When we look at other differences across these media, the *Post* and *Globe*, not surprisingly, focused more attention to the ‘problem’ of government interventionism, and the *Sun* was clearly more committed to reporting on issues of ‘ethical probity’. Lastly, when the chips were down the *Post* remained much more steadfast in extolling the economic benefits of deregulation and privatization, and, predictably (given the role of this newspaper within the business community), focused less attention to reporting executive excesses (ethical probity theme) than the other papers.

Discussion and Conclusion

Now that we have surveyed the news coverage of this ill-starred venture in electricity restructuring, we should begin to draw some conclusions about government failures to communicate policy change through the media. We may recall Hall et al.’s (1978) argument that official institutions, in particular those of the state, will almost

always succeed in shaping the news agenda and interpretative frameworks of journalists because of the inherent newsworthiness and privileged position these sources occupy at the top of the credibility queue. Hall et al. also argue that this definitional prominence is explained by an ability of elites to marshal and mobilize resources for publicity and promotional purposes, resources that are generally unavailable to less powerful actors. While Hall et al. do not deny that non-official sources can intervene in or contest the primary definitions of elite sources they do maintain that their viewpoints will always only ever be secondarily defined.

At first blush, the analysis above would seem to support some of the central assumptions of the primary definer model, in particular the notions that: (a) institutional authorities will be able to inundate the media with promotional material conducive to a more favourable reception of their policy proposals and plans; and (b) official sources will achieve greater representation than non-official actors in news articles for explanations of their interests and views. The analysis has shown that the government in fact did enjoy a position of definitional prominence, particularly early on, a finding that is attributed to both the 'prospective' nature of the policy over the majority of the sample period as well as the extensive investment by the government in a policy marketing and public relations campaign. Despite this promotionalism, however, this major policy project did not secure a popular mandate and has proved to be incredibly more problematic than even the government must have anticipated initially.

The findings discussed above also call into question some of the assumptions underlying the 'primary definer' model. The government's policy ultimately failed as an

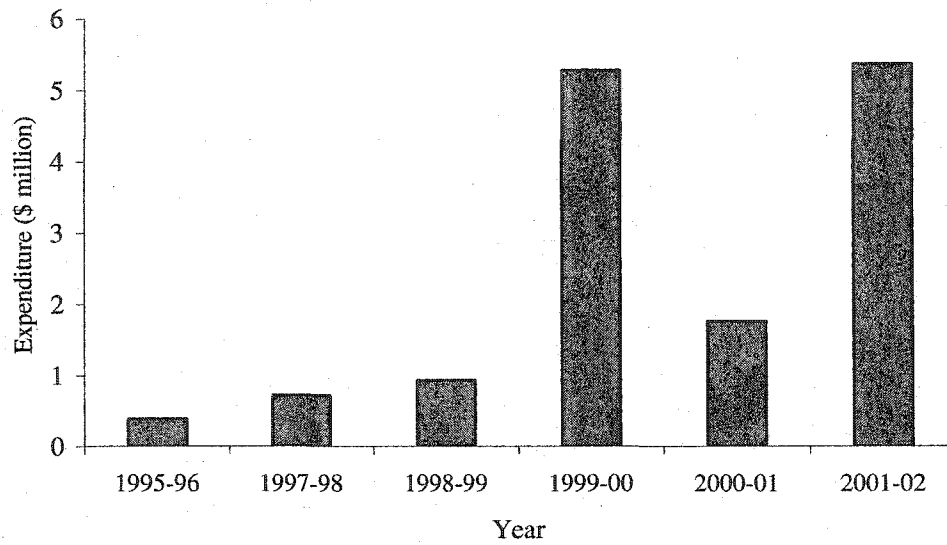
exercise in political communication because institutional sources – both within the ruling party, the Liberals and among supporters in the investment and private energy sectors – did not speak with a cohesive voice on the issues all of the time. As the policy entered the implementation phase, some notable cracks began to appear both within and outside the ruling party. While divisions within the Tory caucus did not reach crisis proportions, as in the cases, for example, of the ‘poll tax’ failure in the UK (Deacon and Golding 1991, 1994) or in the case of the contradictions between U.S. state department and military officials during the Vietnam War (Hallin 1986), there was a significant enough change in the levels of unambiguous and neutral support for a competitive paradigm to undermine the government’s preferred definition of its policy direction at its most critical stage.

The second most important finding is that over the policy’s history, from the introductory through to the developmental and implementation stages, the discourse was dominated by an economistic logic. This logic was articulated by universalistic claims to resolving such fundamental problems as ‘debt’ and ‘rising rates’ and is thus illustrative of the growing ‘tyranny of the market’ over all aspects of economic, political, and social life (Bourdieu 1999). The implications of this preferred issue framing was twofold. First, the attention to the policy’s impact on rates, debt, taxes, investment and market growth opportunities had the effect of rendering less visible (or invisible) other issue themes that were arguably as important. Indeed, newsreaders that did not follow the coverage of this policy and its debates in the *Star* would not even have been provided with an opportunity to consider the impacts of a competitive electricity policy on the environment or its effects on the province’s political and economic sovereignty. Second, while helping to

drive initial enthusiasm for the legislation this discourse became, ironically, a source of vulnerability. When prospective claims about lower rates and more choice for consumers did not materialize, news reports retained the economic logic but in a manner contrary to the government's preferred framing. Instead, an alternative narrative focused on increased rates in the short-term rather than expectations of long-term rate reductions became predominant over time. While the coverage played into the government's objective of having the public consider this policy framework in economically circumscribed terms, this became problematic when the economic impacts became, in the immediate sense at least, a source of risk and harm.

This 'reflexive effect' of the discourse suggests that while neo-liberal reforms might provide increased opportunities for economic growth and efficiency, they also open up and widen the field of discourse to include the latent side effects that such policy initiatives also entail. In this regard, both neo-liberalism and its promotional apparatus can be seen as self-problematizing, for not only is promotionalism a possible 'solution' to the harms and negative effects that contentious policies often obtain, but clearly it is also a source of new problems (Knight and Greenberg 2002, p.553). While we can agree with Hall and his colleagues that the state and other policy elites no doubt possess a significant structural and definitional advantage when it comes to policy debates, their 'success' is also potentially constrained by the permeability of the very political structures and discourses they construct and help to maintain. As the dominant field in which policy debates are waged, news discourse offers us a view to how these successes and failures unfold.

FIGURE 1
Ministry of Energy PR Expenditures, 1995-2002



Note: Missing data for fiscal year 1996-97

FIGURE 2
Ontario Newspaper Coverage of Electricity Restructuring, 1995-2002

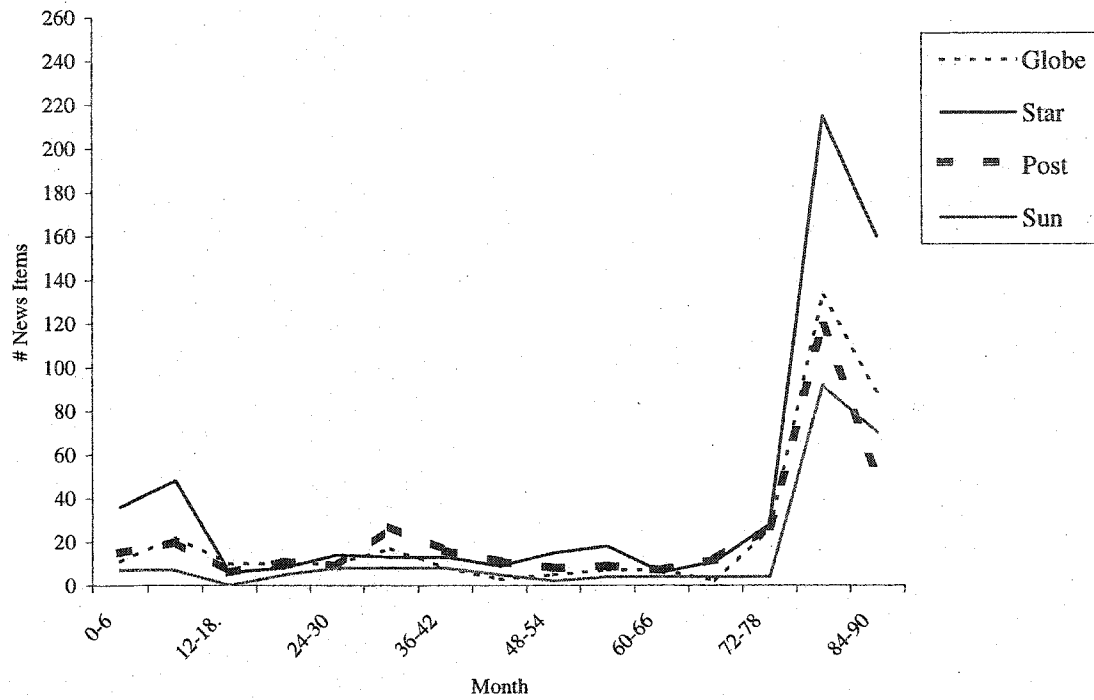


TABLE 1
NEWS SOURCE ACCESS (%): ELECTRICITY RESTRUCTURING, 1995-2002

NEWS SOURCE	FREQUENCY (%) ^a	DISPOSITION TOWARD POLICY (%)		
		Critical	Neutral	Support
PHASE I (June 1995 – Dec 1998)				
Government	22.1	0.0	6.7	93.3
Electric Utilities	19.2	18.8	28.2	53.0
Pressure Groups (+)	17.7	0.0	0.0	100.0
Labour Unions	9.2	53.6	28.6	17.9
Business/Corporate Sector	8.4	3.9	17.7	78.4
Political Opposition	5.4	60.6	21.2	18.2
Committees/QUANGOs	5.3	0.0	0.0	100.0
Pressure Groups (-)	3.1	100.0	0.0	0.0
Individual Consumers	2.6	69.0	25.0	6.3
Financial Community	2.0	25.0	25.0	50.0
Other	5.1	29.0	48.4	22.6
TOTAL	610	154	96	360
PHASE II (Jan 1999 – Dec 2001)				
Government	21.7	0.0	4.0	96.0
Pressure Groups (+)	16.5	0.0	0.0	100.0
Electric Utilities	12.7	20.5	34.1	45.5
Business/Corporate Sector	10.4	11.1	27.8	61.1
Political Opposition	8.4	84.0	16.0	0.0
Committees/QUANGOs	6.9	4.2	33.3	62.5
Financial Community	5.5	31.6	26.3	42.1
Pressure Groups (-)	4.9	100.0	0.0	0.0
Labour Unions	2.3	12.5	12.5	75.0
Individual Consumers	1.5	60.0	20.0	20.0
Other	9.3	59.4	25.0	15.6
TOTAL	346	80	60	206
PHASE III (Jan – Dec 2002)				
Government	29.1	9.1	14.8	76.1
Political Opposition	16.4	95.3	4.7	0.0
Electric Utilities	10.9	11.5	73.3	15.3
Committees/QUANGOs	6.2	12.0	66.7	21.3
Financial Community	6.1	17.8	52.1	30.1
Pressure Groups (+)	5.8	11.4	45.7	42.9
Labour Unions	5.8	67.1	24.3	8.6
Business/Corporate Sector	5.7	31.9	44.9	23.2
Pressure Groups (-)	5.3	96.9	3.1	0.0
Individual Consumers	4.6	87.3	9.1	3.6
Other	4.1	30.6	61.2	8.2
TOTAL	1204	439	382	383

^a Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

TABLE 2
MEDIA FRAMES (%): ONTARIO ELECTRICITY REFORM, 1995-2002

FRAMES	Star	Globe	Post	Sun	TOTAL ^a
PHASE I (June 1995 thru Dec 1998)					
Benefit the economy and 'taxpayers'	32.3	34.9	45.7	58.5	39.5
Policy (process, design, alternatives)	19.5	24.9	15.8	15.4	19.5
Reduce the role of the state	4.9	24.9	26.8	12.3	16.0
Hurts businesses and ratepayers	13.2	3.9	3.2	3.1	7.2
Not in the public interest	9.8	0.0	3.9	0.0	4.8
Benefit to the environment	1.5	6.2	2.4	4.6	3.2
Ethical probity	2.9	2.3	0.8	4.6	2.5
Harm to environment and health	5.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.1
Threat to sovereignty	3.4	1.6	0.0	0.0	1.7
Electoral consequences	2.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5
Risk and safety	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8
Other	2.6	1.6	1.6	1.5	2.5
Total (N=)	205	129	127	65	526
PHASE II (Jan 1999 thru Dec 2001)					
Benefit the economy and 'taxpayers'	14.8	43.7	46.7	65.6	35.7
Policy (process, design, alternatives)	14.8	31.0	28.6	9.4	22.3
Reduce the role of the state	5.9	11.5	14.3	6.3	9.7
Hurts businesses and ratepayers	19.3	3.5	0.0	0.0	8.1
Threat to sovereignty	16.3	1.2	0.0	0.0	6.4
Ethical probity	7.4	3.5	1.0	12.5	5.0
Benefit to the environment	3.0	3.5	4.8	3.1	3.6
Not in public interest	7.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.8
Harm to environment and health	4.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7
Risk and safety	1.5	1.2	1.9	0.0	1.4
Electoral consequences	3.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.4
Other	1.5	1.2	2.9	3.1	1.9
Total (N=)	135	87	105	32	359
PHASE III (Jan 2002 thru Dec 2002)					
Hurts businesses & ratepayers	27.9	21.8	16.0	23.2	24.0
Ethical probity	17.4	16.6	11.1	22.4	16.8
Reduce role of the state	3.6	22.7	28.4	13.6	13.2
Policy (process, design, alternatives)	9.9	14.0	11.1	7.0	10.7
Benefit economy & ratepayers	6.9	6.0	12.4	5.6	7.4
Not in public interest	9.1	3.0	2.5	0.8	5.7
Harm to environment and health	7.1	5.7	1.2	4.8	5.5
Risk and safety	6.9	3.1	5.6	4.0	5.4
Electoral Consequences	3.8	2.2	6.2	12.0	4.8
Benefit environment	2.6	3.1	3.1	3.2	2.9
Threat to sovereignty	4.4	0.4	1.9	2.4	2.9
Other	0.4	1.3	0.6	0.8	0.7
Total (N=)	495	229	162	125	1011

^a Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

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Discursive Crisis and Blame Avoidance:
Strategic Public Relations and Electricity Reform in Ontario

Introduction

In November 2002, the Ontario Conservative government announced that after six months into its new competitive electricity policy programme, it was introducing legislation (Bill 210) that would freeze rates for a period of four years and provide upwards of \$300 million in consumer rebates to offset the impact of recent price increases. The Tories also announced that their plan to privatize the province's electricity transmission grid (Hydro One), a deal that was expected to yield upwards of \$6 billion in general revenue for the government and generate as much as \$200 million in underwriting fees for the investment community, was now 'off the table.' It also proclaimed that the publicly owned electrical generating company, Ontario Power Generation (OPG), which was required by legislation to "decontrol" its dominant market position by divesting the bulk of its generating assets to private investors, would be spearheading two new large-scale power projects in an effort to stabilize the province's increasingly precarious electricity supply margins. For advocates of market reform, these announcements spelled the end to all hope, interest, and effort in regulatory liberalization, while critics of the government's policy framework warned that the announcements were little more than a public relations smokescreen that would be lifted after the next election.

The context for these announcements was political and communicative. The introduction of a competitive electricity framework has been an off-again-on-again affair

since the Tories' electoral victory in 1995.⁴² Backed by what was described at the time as a "consensus for change" in electricity policy, the government established an independent commission to advise on market restructuring shortly after the election, and in 1997 a panel of US experts was hired to assess the performance of Ontario Hydro's nuclear division. In the fall of 1997 the government presented a White Paper articulating its vision for reform. It then assembled a Market Design Committee in January 1998 to propose the rules and regulations for the new competitive market, and in October of that same year passed legislation (Bill 35) to create a regulatory environment amenable to private sector competition. However, in the shadow of the rolling blackouts, dramatic price spikes and Enron scandal that defined California's electricity deregulation experience in 2000, the government twice delayed market opening before it finally announced in December 2001 that competition and privatization would commence the following May.

In what must have seemed like the ghost of California's past, within two months of market opening Ontario consumers were confronted with major price hikes and rate volatility and regular calls by the independent electricity market operator (IMO) for the public to reduce consumption or risk the possibility of blackouts. The enormous pressure on the government to intervene did not result from these 'objective' conditions alone, however, but came on the heels of a broad based PR campaign by the Ontario Electricity

⁴² The path to market liberalization in electricity was forged by Maurice Strong, chair of Ontario Hydro under the former New Democratic Party (NDP) government (1990-1995). In 1993, Strong undertook an enormous 'restructuring' campaign that reduced the utility's workforce by nearly 20 percent. Strong was an outspoken advocate of deregulation and privatization, however his political masters were much less committed to the idea of introducing market-based reforms in the electricity sector. It was not until the election of the Conservative Party in 1995 that regulatory liberalization in electricity would become a policy priority.

Coalition (OEC), an alliance that was formed by the New Democratic Party (NDP) with some of the province's most powerful unions, and included environmentalists, citizens' groups and grassroots activists. Following a successful litigation appeal to halt the privatization of Hydro One in April 2002, the OEC persuaded more than twenty municipalities representing nearly six million Ontario residents to pass resolutions calling on the government to retreat from its policy campaign. As the public grew more informed, angered, and confused about the implications of deregulation and privatization, the sphere of consensus within the ruling party eventually cracked as several Tory backbenchers, one cabinet minister, and the 'Speaker of the House' all called on the government to intervene with some form of price relief. It had become abundantly clear that what once appeared to be an inevitable policy paradigm shift had turned into a colossal failure in government policy communication.

The main concern in this article is with the question of why the government has faced such a persistent problem in the PR arena. In formulating a response to this query, I argue that the government's difficulties have been based on the *reflexive effects* of both its political project and public relations strategy. The research draws on the analysis of policy documents, trade publications, news reports, field observations and interviews with journalists, activists, and other policy participants.

The argument is developed in three sections. In section one, I argue that the push to open markets and redefine the role of government from one of regulation to one of mediation and negotiation between the corporate and civil spheres has called into question the ability of state institutions to shield populations from harm, setting into

motion a culture of insecurity, uncertainty and risk (e.g. Giddens 1991). The retrenchment of the welfare state and the political vacuum this has created has given rise to what Ulrich Beck (1997) describes as a process of “subpolitics”: a politicization of subjectivity from below and beyond the representative institutions of the formal political and corporatist systems. Subpolitics differs fundamentally from the politics of the formal system by virtue of both its structure and form insofar as subpolitical movements tend to be decentralized, transient, more reliant on a pluralistic range of tactics rather than a commitment to an overall sense of strategy, and less dependent on democratic processes (e.g. elections) for legitimization and accountability. The implications that the culture of risk and rise of subpolitics has for policymaking is that rather than seeking to ‘claim credit’ for anticipated benefits, governments increasingly pursue strategies that will enable them to ‘avoid blame’ for the actual or perceived social harms such policies often entail (Weaver 1986; Pierson 1994).

In the second part of the paper, I look specifically at the government’s strategic management of the electricity issue. In seeking to avoid blame for the possible negative effects of market restructuring, the Conservatives have attempted to create a “climate of discontent” (Cohn 1997) with the former policy framework by identifying and selectively recruiting a series of financial and organization contradictions and ‘failures’ (debt, safety violations, mismanagement) as symptomatic of a more deeply rooted crisis with the ‘public power’ policy framework. The narrative construction of a ‘crisis’ was incorporated into a broader issues management strategy in which the crisis could serve as a moment of decisive intervention and change. Once the crisis had arrived, the broader

strategy required that the government build mutually beneficial relationships with key supporters and manage tenuous relationships with influential critics (negative influencers) as a way of generalizing and dispersing responsibility and blame. However, while constructing a crisis is a potentially effective blame avoidance strategy, it is also a paradoxical and thus deeply problematic one. Those who promote crisis thinking also create anxiety and therefore must provide reassurance – in short, the crisis has to be made identifiable and controllable or amenable to resolution. Because crises are only ever representations and hence constructions of failure, they are vulnerable to contestation and re-articulation. Preventing the spread or expansion of crisis thinking, and over-using crisis terminology and thus deflating concern and producing indifference, are two of the paradoxes that crisis construction faces. This underscores the point that for a discourse of crisis to find resonance, it must circulate in the public sphere where its meanings cannot be totally controlled.

The third section of the paper is devoted to an examination of the ‘reflexive effects’ of the government’s PR campaign. Specifically, it entails a discussion of the Ontario Electricity Coalition’s “repertoire of contention” tactics (Tilly 1978). The ‘success’ the OEC obtained was based on an ability to subvert the logic of crisis by crafting a flexible PR strategy that made use of not only formal institutional venues, such as parliament and the courts, but also “alternative policy venues” (Baumgartner and Jones 1991) at the local, grassroots level.

Neo-liberalism and the Politics of Blame Avoidance

Weaver (1986) has argued that in seeking re-election politicians are less concerned to initiate innovative policies that will enable them to “claim credit” with constituents and stakeholder groups for actions taken in their interests than they are to pursue strategies that will allow them to “avoid blame” for the harms associated with decisions for which they may be directly or in some other way held responsible. This is because voters tend to exhibit a strong “negativity bias,” reacting to real or potential losses more than prospective gains by punishing incumbents when they believe that a policy decision(s) has adversely affected them (see also Tversky 1990). As interests associated with the benefits of aging policy frameworks become concentrated, the expectations that bearers of those interests will mobilize collectively and seek redress also increases, as does the likelihood that blame avoiders will require a broader repertoire of avoidance strategies.

Building on Weaver’s thesis, Pierson (1994) demonstrates that strategies designed to avoid blame have achieved a particular saliency in the case of policies that are associated with the shift to neo-liberalism. To be sure, neo-liberal policies vary according to time and place, and the extent of their implementation will be contingent upon a number of contextual factors (e.g. location, party dynamics, economic circumstances, past policies, institutional architecture, &c.). Nevertheless, what is common to all neo-liberal projects is an embrace at the ideological, if not the policy level, of a programmatic retrenchment of the welfare state, an attempt to allow the market to operate with greater freedom and flexibility by redefining the state’s role from one of legislative and

regulatory intervention to one of facilitation and mediation between the corporate sector and civil society. As Cohn (1997) has put it, with the turn to neo-liberalism “the goal [of policymaking] is no longer to protect society from the market’s demands but to protect the market from society’s demands” (p.586), and in particular from demands that are reflexively determined, i.e. demands which can take on new and in some cases more extensive and intensified forms. Once this process becomes publicized, it generates new anxieties about the future and thus precipitates demands to manage these anxieties communicatively.

The embrace of neo-liberalism in Ontario, as elsewhere, has inverted the principles for the provision of public services and programmes that were prominent under the postwar consensus such that the activity of government is no longer oriented toward distributing the greatest number of ‘goods’ (e.g. jobs, education, pensions) to the greatest number of citizens than mediating in the distributional conflicts that occur over the re-allocation of ‘bads’ (Beck 1992). In contrast to the modern industrial period, which was based on a “purposive-rational system of politics” and an “everything-is-under-control mentality” (Beck 1996, p.17), the current period of *reflexive modernity* is premised on the notion that societies “produce of their own accord the problems and challenges which confront them” (Beck 1997, p.40). In this context of political, economic and ideational transformation and change, individuals experience a sense of existential anxiety or “ontological insecurity” (Giddens 1991) as they come to realize that modern institutions and expert systems can no longer safeguard them from the harms or risks associated with the industrial era. As Marlow (2002) has recently argued, the pursuit of market-led

approaches to policy reform tends to contribute to, rather than assuage, the generalized sense of existential anxiety that theorists such as Beck and Giddens detect. The consequence of this is the creation of an “eager political market” (Galbraith 1992, p.2) for reassurance, a pressure that is to address both the material well being of the ‘contented’ majority and the commonality of anxiety among all (Marlow 2002, p.245).

While neo-liberal policies erode the ability of states to provide stability, order and security for their populations, they have also had a reflexive effect of politicizing subjectivity from outside and beyond the representative institutions of the formal political and corporatist system (Richardson 2000), i.e. of displacing a politics of class-based solidarity with a form of solidarity that transcends class difference and is motivated by a shared sense of anxiety.⁴³ Beck (1997) refers to this reflexive effect as the rise of *subpolitics*.⁴⁴ While social movements have always responded to the uncertainties and instabilities created by the contradictions of the capitalist system, subpolitics introduces a new form and style of activism. In contrast to conventional modes of political expression that are characteristic of the formal system, subpolitical movements are typically

⁴³ As Beck writes: “The driving force in the class society can be summarized in the phrase: *I am hungry!* The movement set in motion by the risk society, on the other hand, is expressed in the statement: *I am afraid!* The *commonality of anxiety* takes the place of the *commonality of need*. The type of the risk society marks in this sense a social epoch in which *solidarity from anxiety* arises and becomes a political force” (1992, p.49).

⁴⁴ It should be noted at the outset that Beck’s concept of subpolitics has been subject to considerable refinement over the years. Throughout his publications, Beck uses the concept of subpolitics in seemingly different ways. On the one hand, he uses the concept “sub-politics of technocracy” to refer to the notion that increasingly differentiated subsystems, guided by divergent priorities, generate increasingly manifest forms of ‘self-confrontation’. On the other hand, there is the “sub-politics of experience,” in which individuals and groups, living within increasingly differentiated and self-confronting institutions, are forced by necessity to negotiate new ways to live out their lives in a state of increased awareness of risk, change and diversity. My purpose here is not to interrogate the conceptual consistency of Beck’s thesis but to examine its general relevance for the case study in question. For a more detailed theoretical critique, see David and Wilkinson (2002) and Levitas (2000).

organized in issue-specific network arrangements (Castells 1996) that lack a definite centre with binding decision-making power. Consequently, this makes these movements more nebulous, transient and reliant on a pluralistic range of tactics rather than a strong sense of overall strategy (Knight and Greenberg 2002, p.555). Beck's attention to the politicization of social movements, citizens groups, and other grassroots actors has led him to argue that the formal political system operates merely as a façade (1997, pp.136-9). Yet, insofar as social movement groups appear to have seized the mantle of political action, I would argue that the impact of subpolitics is felt not only in the political renaissance that has occurred within civil society. Building critically upon Beck's thesis, I suggest that the subpoliticization of society has not contributed to the "withering away" (p.139) of the state vis-à-vis the rise of social movements. Rather, if we are truly witnessing a "reinvention of politics", this is to be understood not in terms of a separation between the formal and informal spheres of politics, but of the hybridization between the two.

This hybridization is exemplified by the formation of the Ontario Electricity Coalition. Formed in the aftermath of the government's announcement to sell Hydro One, the OEC operates as a single-issue network of unions, (NDP) party politicians, environmentalists, and citizens' groups committed to preserving a public, not-for-profit electricity system with strong government regulation. The coalition exemplifies the flexible and tactical characteristic of subpolitics by utilizing a repertoire of grievance tactics to get their message out to the public (see more in section 3). Although a small organizing committee develops and instructs members in the implementation of a general

strategy, the coalition is decentralized to the extent that its 'members' use these instructions to customize community-specific modes of action, and many of these member groups also continue to struggle for their own issue-specific concerns independently of the broader alliance. Given the plurality of voices within the network, the OEC relies extensively on the use of the Internet, a tool that is seen to have democratized activism by enabling protest groups to share vital information immediately and at little to no cost (Klein 2000; Coombs 1998; Heath 1998). The use of the Internet to facilitate the instantaneous transmission of information has been particularly relevant in the case of the restructuring of Ontario's electricity system, as the period leading up to and following market opening was marked by rapid and regular policy changes.

The debates circumscribing the restructuring of Ontario's electricity industry point to the fundamentally communicative character of both neo-liberalism and subpolitics. As will be made clear in the section to follow, the future oriented nature of 'risk thinking' opens up both anxiety and the opportunity for re-assurance – risk is thus contingent and individualizing in that it may or may not materialize into harm for you and yours (as opposed to someone else). The key to the management of risk, therefore, is information. To think about risk with an eye toward minimizing harm and loss means to think in terms of information and communication. When risks do materialize into harm, risk thinking tends to commute itself into grievance-thinking (Eide and Knight 1999), and this continues to emphasize the centrality of communication: publicizing one's grievance and calling for remedial action on the part of those who can be held responsible.

The Institutionalization of Blame Avoidance: The Role of PR

Risk concerns future happenings – as related to present practices – and the colonising of the future therefore opens up new settings of risk, some of which are institutionally organised (Giddens 1991, p.117).

The shift to neo-liberalism and rise of subpolitics mark the importance of strategic discourse and communication to debates over policy reform. In this context, public relations (PR) assumes an important role, contributing, in some instances, to the improvement of the democratic process by empowering social movements and other marginal actors to develop PR strategies toward progressive ends (Deacon 1996; Davis 2000; Knight and Greenberg 2002). As is more often the case, however, PR entrenches already existent hegemonic discourses and relations of power and dominance (L'Etang and Pieczka 1996). In a society marked by the democratization of uncertainty and ontological insecurity, the need for political actors to process risk and avoid blame becomes, as suggested in the quote by Giddens above, an organizational-institutional priority. The cost of having a cadre of professional communicators, however, is often a prohibitive impediment for organizations whose priorities are less promotional than pragmatic and practical.

While the use of PR by the state and corporate sector has a history dating back at least as far as the early 1920s (Ewen 1996), the need for organizations to control information and manage issues strategically has taken on increased importance in the context of the culture of uncertainty that has been intensified by the neo-liberal turn. In its classical formulation, PR was concerned with the management of crises, i.e. repairing and restoring an organization's reputation in the face of destabilizing events and the adverse publicity these events generate. For example, in 1996 when the Odwalla juice company

learned that its products had been contaminated by the E. coli 0157:H7 bacterium, it was forced to respond with an immediate product recall and 'flash pasteurization' programme to protect not only the health and safety of consumers but also the company's identity and image from the bad publicity that might have arisen had no action or only limited action been taken. Following these initiatives, on the advice of its PR counsel, Odwalla then raised the issue of pasteurization as something that all juice makers ought to institutionalize (Martinelli and Briggs 1998). In another case, when Johnson & Johnson learned that its popular analgesic drug Tylenol had been tampered with, the company immediately removed all of its products from pharmacy shelves and called for improvements in industry-wide packaging standards (Berg and Robb 1993). In both examples, public relations has entailed crafting a *response* to an unexpected event in such a way that would allow the company to accept responsibility for what had occurred but to also avoid blame by translating the events into issues whose resolution could be dispersed and generalized to other actors and stakeholders.

Crisis communications came into its own in the 1970s and gave rise to what scholars have termed "strategic issues management" (SIM) (e.g. Heath 1997). While PR can and often is still used by powerful actors "to manipulate the issues" (p.4), the emphasis of SIM is for organizations to "make adaptations needed to achieve harmony and foster mutual interests with the communities in which they operate" (p.3). As the expansion of neo-liberalism has intensified the optic of uncertainty and insecurity, crisis events have begun to acquire a new dimension: the risk of future problems. This possibility of new problem events has precipitated a new kind of PR activity that goes

beyond simply dealing with crises after-the-fact. In the neo-liberal era, PR involves not only responding to unanticipated events, but also managing risk proactively and, in some instances, cultivating perceptions of risk by controlling the definitions individuals have of the political environment and the temporality of locating and implementing solutions.⁴⁵ In terms of political communication, PR involves a dialectic between inciting anxiety or mass arousal, on the one hand, and providing reassurance or quiescence, on the other (Edelman 1971) – anxiety is not only socially determined in that it is the way that the problematic registers itself subjectively, but it is also social in its potential effects inasmuch as anxiety undermines trust, particularly in public institutions. Issues management is the strategic form in which organizational actors attempt to process crisis and risk proactively rather than reactively (Knight and Greenberg 2002). Issues are constructed discursively out of the way that crises lend themselves to risk calculations. Risk, in other words, mediates the transformation of crisis events into issues that can be resolved multilaterally.

There are two ways that governments can strategically process risk to manage and shape the meanings publics construct about contentious policies, and the Tories have made use of both. First, governments may adopt a multilateral structure of negotiation and resolution that will generalize and disperse not only responsibility and accountability for the issue but also the blame that might ensue down the road. Prior to doing so, however, there must be a reason to proceed toward a new policy paradigm. As the

⁴⁵ These tactics vary from “dirty tricks” such as infiltrating activist groups, exposing and discrediting critics, and leaking damaging information/misinformation about adversaries (Lubbers 2002) to the more “ethically positive” such as creating dialogue with concerned stakeholders and integrating critical voices into corporate decision-making.

examples of the Odwalla and Tylenol cases suggest, a crisis must be seen to have already occurred prior to attempts to resolve it institutionally. If this first approach is primarily structural, the second is more symbolic and discursive, and indicates that, in creating such a need for transformation and change, a crisis can be constructed to justify a decisive intervention and which will necessitate specific forms of resolution that are consistent with broader policy goals.

Electricity Reform in Ontario: Government Issues Management

The use of a multilateral approach has been fundamental to the government's electricity restructuring campaign. Following the 1995 election, the Tories appointed former Ernst and Young chairman William Farlinger, a confidante of party leader, Mike Harris, and head of the new government's transition team, to deliver a report on the status of the electricity industry. The Farlinger Report, submitted to the government in June, called for a rapid restructuring of the electricity market and a full-scale privatization of all of Ontario Hydro's generating assets, including its nuclear plants. In November of the same year, the government followed up on the Farlinger report when it appointed former federal Liberal finance and energy minister, Donald Macdonald, to head up an 'independent' commission to advise on how to achieve competition in the electricity industry.⁴⁶ The Macdonald Commission's key recommendations included the break-up of Ontario Hydro into several smaller companies and a privatization of its generation and

⁴⁶ In addition to being Farlinger's long-time friend and squash partner, at the time of his appointment Macdonald was a chairman of Siemens Electric Ltd., and a director of both Banister Foundation Inc. and TransCanada PipeLines Ltd. Each of these companies stood to profit substantially under a deregulated market in Ontario. Macdonald was also a member of two policy think tanks – the Trilateral Commission and the Bilderbergers – devoted to the cause of global market liberalization and de-statism.

transmission assets, excluding the Niagara facilities and nuclear stations. On the basis of a compromise between the Farlinger and Macdonald reports,⁴⁷ the government prepared and delivered a White Paper in 1997, and in January 1998 appointed a 16-member Market Design Committee to provide recommendations on issues pertaining to the structure, governance, monitoring, and operations for a deregulated electricity market.⁴⁸ In October of the same year, the government passed the *Energy Competition Act* (Bill 35), which vertically de-integrated Ontario Hydro into five separate companies and required local distribution companies to begin operating on a for-profit basis.

Two points are important here. First, the process of ‘governance by commission’ is part and parcel of the rise of the ‘appointed state’ that has been intensified by the neo-liberal turn (Skelcher 1998). Under pressure to reduce the regulatory and interventionist role of the state, governments now increasingly manage their roles and responsibilities via a process of arm’s length administration under the guidance of non-elected appointees. Second, and of greater importance for our purposes here, the process of institutionalizing reform through an appointive process requires that government’s build strategic relationships with influential individuals and groups. In addition to teaming up with powerful political figures such as Macdonald, the Ontario government also benefited from involving key influencers like Jan Carr, a global energy consultant who had been appointed to the Macdonald Commission and later became a board member of the IMO; the market-libertarian environmentalist organization Energy Probe, which has enjoyed a

⁴⁷ On differences between these reports see J. Wells, “Power Play,” *R.O.B. Magazine*, June 1999, pp.36-42.

⁴⁸ The MDC comprised executives and lobbyists in the private electricity sector, members of the Macdonald Committee, corporate strategic planners from Ontario Hydro, and representatives from the Association of Major Power Consumers of Ontario (AMPCO). There were no representatives for residential consumers and taxpayers or from the labour movement.

consistent media presence as an 'arbiter' on energy reform issues since the 1980s;⁴⁹ and the Association of Major Power Consumers of Ontario (AMPCO), the lobby group representing industrial heavyweights such as Dofasco, Inco, and the big motor companies. The construction of mutually beneficial relationships with influential industry stakeholders can be viewed as a mechanism for obtaining legitimacy through independent "third party endorsements." More importantly, because the policymaking process is increasingly subject to media scrutiny and attention, the more influential stakeholders a government can find to invest their energy and resources into developing and communicating policy, the more likely it will be for news discourse about that process to be "restricted" among those key insider groups (see Greenberg 2003).

While establishing positive relations with key supporters is crucial to the strategic management of contentious issues, it must also be accompanied by attempts to assuage important critics or "negative influencers" (Weaver and Motion 2003, p.335), whose stake in the issue, and in particular its framing in the public sphere, has either posed a problem in the past or will likely do so at some point in the future. In this case, the most significant of these critical stakeholder groups was the Power Workers Union (PWU). In 1996, the PWU launched a multi-million dollar media campaign to oppose the

⁴⁹ As Tom Walkom has documented, Energy Probe is not your run-of-the-mill environmental organization. The Energy Probe Research Foundation (EPRF) is also active in pushing for private medicare and private transit through its affiliate organization, Consumer Policy Institute. Probe International, another affiliate, has lobbied for an end to government-to-government foreign aid, and Environment Probe has called for the privatization of forests, mineral resources and sewage and water plants. EPRF also runs a newsmagazine, *The Next City*, which was launched in 1995 with a \$1.4 million grant from the right wing Donner Canadian Foundation. The magazine regularly posts editorials that advocate in favour of charter schools and an end to government subsidies for the arts. In addition to supporting market-based reform to Ontario's electricity industry, Energy Probe was also an active supporter and advocate on behalf of the 1989 Canada-U.S. Free Trade pact. See T. Walkom, "Hydro thorn Energy Probe rooted on the right," *Toronto Star*, 23 August 1997, E1.

recommendations of the Macdonald Commission on the grounds that the 'consultative' process had not been open to enough stakeholders (i.e. it excluded residential ratepayers and small businesses) and that the price spikes that would result from privatization would not be in the public's interest. By 1998, however, the union had tempered its position and joined the cacophony of voices heralding the benefits of market solutions to the industry's challenges and problems. In exchange for the endorsement of a competitive policy framework, the government granted the PWU representation on all of the post-Hydro companies' boards of directors and ensured that the new regulatory environment would be amenable to the union's interests in expanding its membership base. Bringing the PWU onside followed standard issues management protocol by quieting key critics who were not only the most clearly identified voice of opposition in the past, but who might continue to pose a threat to the government's policy goals later on (Heath 1997).⁵⁰

The management of the issue by means of a process of multilateralism has two consequences for how electricity reform has been communicated. First, responsibility for the issue has been generalized and dispersed among several parties. The PWU, like the major power consumers, utilities executives, Energy Probe, and other non-state actors share in the responsibility not only to get the word out that regulatory liberalization is in

⁵⁰ This change in position must be also understood within the broader context of struggles over power and resources within the labour movement. According to CUPE, the PWU not only sold out its 'brothers' and 'sisters' in the labour market by opting for "jobs instead of justice," but its endorsement of regulatory reform also paid off for former PWU leader, John Murphy, who was promoted to executive vice-president of human resources at Ontario Power Generation (OPG) following the passage of Bill 35 (Interview with Paul Kahnert, CUPE member and OEC spokesperson, January 2002). Myron Gordon, a University of Toronto finance professor who advised the PWU in its 1996 media campaign argues that the power workers "threw in the towel" when they saw the writing on the wall by siding with their own self-interest rather than the public good, a position that is consistent with the view taken by Jim Stanford, economist for the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), who described Murphy's move as a "disservice to those unions who are trying to better their workers." See P. Weinberg, "Ontario power union head turns privatization choirboy," *Straight Goods*, 4 November 2001, <http://www.straightgoods.com/Weinberg/010115.asp>.

the public's best interest but also, ideally, to shoulder some of the blame when things go awry. The second consequence of this process of generalization and dispersion is that multilateralism also implicates all of the parties to institutional arrangements as the best method for a resolution (Knight and Greenberg 2002). The consequence of this is that these arrangements tend to require a commitment on the part of all parties to follow the course of action laid out in the overall PR strategy, which is particularly important when the lead actor in the coalition is the government. While 'toeing the line' may ensure consistency in the delivery of key messages and prevent against conflicting statements that call the credibility of the government and its policies into question, it is also a strategy that is potentially vulnerable to the activities of other actors who might be less reliant on developing an overall strategy than in utilizing subversive tactics whose primary aim is to puncture the attempts on the part of the powerful to manage the issue.

The Role of Crisis: Translating Possibility into Necessity

Given that policies in which social harms are most likely to be concentrated are also those that require a broader repertoire of blame avoiding techniques, the strategic management of a policy issue requires a perception that the proposed solution is not only *possible* but *necessary* in order to stem the likelihood of future harm or risk.

To accomplish this, the existing policy framework must be shown to be in a state of unremitting or systemic failure, i.e. a state of 'crisis'. Cohn (1997) has argued that to achieve their policy objectives, market reform advocates normally attempt to "create discontent with certain government services" (p.591) by imposing *structural* changes that will limit the resources available for public agencies to operate effectively. According to

Cohn, these changes result when governments “starve the state” (p.589) financially to ensure *failure* in programme and service delivery. Cohn cites the example of water privatization in the UK by the Thatcher government, which was accomplished by imposing a series of cutbacks to the treasury that had the effect of undercutting the ability of state water and sewage service companies to operate efficiently. Similarly, the provisions in Ontario’s Bill 35 requiring municipal utilities to pay generating companies ‘up front’ for the electricity they then distribute to businesses and residential consumers was key to creating discontent with the public electricity system. This is because to cover these costs the local utilities would have to increase rates and pursue more aggressive payment policies with their customers or run deficit budgets to cover their costs. The logic was that as prices continued to rise and customer satisfaction with their local utilities declined, ratepayers would be more likely to entertain policy alternatives whose stated primary objective was, among other things, rate reductions.

In addition to possessing a structural dimension, crises require policy advocates to be capable of selecting and recruiting specific contradictions and failures to be enchainned and narrated into a more generic discourse that will connote a pervasive sense of urgency. This is because it is not the context itself but the “ideas actors hold about the context in which they find themselves...which informs the way in which actors behave” (Hay and Rosamond 2002, p.148). Moreover, “a given constellation of contradictions and failures can sustain a multiplicity of conflicting narratives of crisis. Such narratives compete in terms of their ability to find resonance with individuals’ and groups’ direct, lived experiences, and not in terms of their ‘scientific’ adequacy as explanations for the

condition they diagnose” (Hay 1996, p.255). Unlike Cohn, whose approach tends to conflate failure and crisis, the approach taken here identifies the distinction between failure and crisis as a matter of analytical priority.

Endorsing Hay’s conceptualization of crisis as a primarily discursive (i.e. narrative) process, I argue that accumulated failures and contradictions (even when wilfully imposed) cannot in themselves be crises, but rather they merely provide the “structural preconditions for crisis – the necessary but insufficient conditions for the mobilisation of perceptions of crisis” (1995 p.64). Crises, therefore, can be conceptualized as the articulation of failures into an overarching problem that is, reflexively, much more than the sum of its constituent parts – each failure becomes both a signifier and a signified of other failures. For a crisis to be perceived as a crisis requires that the situation be shown to be on the verge of an escalation or meltdown in which failure tendencies can proliferate in all directions. Crises serve a functional purpose by offering policy advocates an occasion for ‘subjective intervention’ into a moment of ‘objective contradiction’ (Koselleck 1988, pp.103-4). As Martinelli and Briggs (1998) have argued, crises “serve to create or add to a key public’s sense that a problem exists that needs public policy remedy” (p.446).

Constructing Ontario’s Electricity ‘Crisis’

There is not sufficient space here for a complete review of Ontario Hydro’s institutional history (but see inter alia Freeman 1996; Froschauer 1999; Griffin-Cohen 2002), however some background on the ‘troubled’ financial past of the utility is in order. Anticipating increased demand for electricity in the 1970s and 1980s, Ontario Hydro

undertook in the development of an expansive nuclear program in the late 1960s that, in the words of one of the utility's harshest critics, eventually led Ontario Hydro to "collapse under the weight of its own liabilities" (Energy Probe 2000). Ontario Hydro's long-term debt is approximately \$38 billion, of which nearly 60 percent is attributed to nuclear spending. The biggest source of this debt is the Darlington nuclear station which was to be completed in the early 1980s for an estimated \$2.5 billion, but which did not get completed until a decade later at a cost of more than \$14 billion. Considered alone, this type of debt might appear to take on 'crisis' proportions; however until the government opened the market to competition in May 2002, Hydro's debt had not increased since the period just preceding the Tories' first election win and was on schedule to be paid off before 2020. Moreover, Hydro's debt is consistent with the \$34 billion debt at Hydro Quebec, which is seen in that province as its economic 'crown jewel.' The costs involved in servicing Ontario Hydro's debt and its commitment to nuclear power became more problematic in the 1990s, when reduced demand brought on by a recession and technological innovations in cogeneration and advances in natural gas and bio-fuel meant that electricity could potentially be produced more cheaply.⁵¹

The financial problems facing the utility would not be enough, however, to precipitate the crisis necessary for deregulation and privatization to appear palatable to the public. The concept of 'public power' is a part of the province's industrial history and sense of economic identity (Freeman 1996), and since public electrical utilities have always taken on large debts as part of delivering a public service, a more systemic

⁵¹ *Oxy-Fuel News*, "Biomass-to-Ethanol Plants Could Gain from Deregulation," 17 March 1997.

institutional 'failure' would be needed to create the discontent required for decisive intervention and change. This opportunity would arise on 12 August 1997, when Ontario Hydro's directors gathered at the utility's Toronto headquarters for what would become the most notorious meeting in its history. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the findings of an external audit of Hydro's nuclear programme, commissioned to a team of experts headed by American engineer Carl Andognini.⁵² The Andognini Report delivered a scathing indictment of the nuclear programme, citing among other problems "poorly trained personnel, lazy managers, a huge backlog of maintenance, even substance abuse" (Lorinc 1998, p.53).⁵³ The day after the report was publicly released, Farlinger, who had been appointed chair at Ontario Hydro in November 1995, denounced the utility's nuclear division as a "cult," claiming that "it is doubtful such management problems would have persisted for so long if Hydro had private shareholders to answer to."⁵⁴ The report became an example of what Hay (1995, 1996) has referred to as a "tipping point" in that it had the effect of channelling the failures of the utility (and the state more generally) in such a way that the crisis could be simplified and narrated to resonate with the lived experiences – anxieties, fears, worries, &c. – of the electorate.

As would be expected, the media revelled in the news of the report and Farlinger's account of it. As the main arena in which definitional struggles over public policy take place, news coverage is fundamental to the narrative construction of a crisis

⁵² *Nuclear Report Card: Ontario's Nuclear Reactors are Minimally Acceptable*. The report was submitted to Hydro Management in July 1997. Retrieved online at http://www.ccnr.org/hydro_report.html#cul1.

⁵³ The impact of the Andognini report on morale within the Power Workers' Union is credited by Energy Probe's Tom Adams as having contributed to that union's eventual endorsement of the government's policy programme. See Weinberg, *op cit*.

⁵⁴ Quoted in G. Crone and R. Brennan, 1997. "Report points fingers at Hydro managers." *Hamilton Spectator*, 14 August 1997, A1.

(see Greenberg 2003 for a study of media framing of electricity reform). The *Toronto Sun* likened the utility's nuclear staff to "real life Homer Simpsons" ("Slaying the Hydro Monster," 24 August 1997, p.6) while in a front page feature the *New York Times* accused Hydro's engineers of playing "hide and seek for a thousand dollars a week" ("Canadians export a type of reactor they shut down," 3 December 1997, A1). For *Maclean's*, Canada's premier weekly newsmagazine, the nuclear division had become a "problem-plagued, mismanaged horror" that had the potential of becoming a "disaster on a monumental scale" ("Meltdown," 25 August 1997, pp.12-15). And the neo-conservative newsmagazine, *Western Report*, suggested that Andognini's revelations of "empty beer bottles and syringes, hashish pipes and marijuana found in radiation areas of the plant" would be 'good news' for Alberta's pipeline businesses if it led to calls for market liberalization ("No nukes are good nukes," 1 September 1997, p.17). The crisis had thus arrived and market solutions were seen by the government and utility's corporate planners to be not only a possible solution, but also a necessary one.⁵⁵

These broader events provide the context within which the province's electricity crisis came to be narrated as that of an outdated monopoly beset by an unmanageable debt and safety liabilities. This is an important consideration given that the Andognini team did not raise issues previously unaddressed by either the government or the utility's management. Under the NDP government, Ontario Hydro chair Maurice Strong instituted an employee reduction programme that eliminated close to 20 percent of the utility's

⁵⁵ Greenberg (2003) has shown how the *Toronto Star* is the only newspaper in the province to have taken a consistent position of editorial opposition to the government's electricity policy programme. While coverage of the Andognini report in this newspaper pointed to the cultural and managerial problems at the utility it did not, as other newspaper had, point to market solutions as the best course of remediation.

workforce as part of a broader strategy of reducing the company's debt-equity ratio while ensuring price stability. And by 1996, Hydro had undertaken a multibillion-dollar nuclear repair programme with objectives that were similar to those spelled out by Andognini's team. What had changed, however, was the broader political, ideological and discursive environment in which an 'electricity crisis' could be successfully narrated to find resonance with the public. As Knight (1998) has argued, the success of the *Common Sense Revolution*, the Tories' policy platform, has been its ability to create "a pervasive sense of possible victimization on the part of those who...feel provoked or threatened with insecurity" (p.120; see also Fletcher 1999). The significance of the Andognini report, then, lay in its ability to bring together a constellation of specific failures into a unified crisis narrative that would help to create not only discontent with the former policy framework but also a sense that the new policy direction was not only possible but necessary to fight the current crisis and avoid future risks. This indicates that part of crisis framing – the implication of a sense of urgency – is the exclusion of alternative ways of representing not only the problem but also the necessary solutions. Crisis is thus an exclusionary concept as a result of the way that it selectively integrates different problem features together and caps them in a conspicuous way that introduces 'external' troubles into the heart of the focal problem (in this case tales of drug and alcohol abuse at the nuclear plants); and this gives momentum to the assumption that only radical reform, i.e. a complete system overhaul, will work. This strategy was successful not because of the scientific accuracy or objectivity of the pronouncements, but because the narrative that had been created resonated with the dominant ideology of the time. Within months of the

Andognini report, the Tories passed Bill 35 and, although the California debacle delayed the process of transitioning the electricity sector to competition in 2000, Premier Harris finally announced in December 2001 that the government would commence with deregulation and privatization the following May.

Subpolitics and PR: The Strategic Reversal of Crisis

At first blush the foregoing analysis might suggest an instrumentalist view of strategic policy communication given that I have focused almost exclusively on the ability of the ruling party to promote and preserve its vested interests through a variety of institutional and discursive mechanisms. Appealing and persuasive such a view might be, however, it “fails to consider the conditions of response to ‘crisis’” (Hay 1995, p.68) and the degree to which the neo-liberal project and strategies used to advance it are susceptible to reflexive effects that may in fact undermine them.

As Hay argues, crises are analytically distinct from failure in that whereas failures are identifiable and distinct, crises are representations and, hence, social constructions. In order for a crisis to be seen and perceived as such it must, as the media clippings above suggest, circulate in the public sphere to find resonance with the lived (and mediated) experiences of individuals and groups. As numerous scholars have argued (e.g. Abercrombie et al. 1980; Therborn 1980), however, the ideologies upon which notions of a crisis struggle to find their resonance are never fully closed. This is because ideologies “not only subject people to a given order. They also qualify them for conscious social action, including actions of gradual or revolutionary change” (Therborn 1980, p. vii). The decision of the Ontario government to delay market opening in the context of the

California debacle, for example, indicates that structural failures cannot in and of themselves support the construction of a crisis. Rather, the implications of California's disastrous deregulation experiment suggests that the *ideas* individuals and groups hold about policy projects are "highly specific and unique – the contingent outcome of a complex constellation of circumstances" (Hay 1995, p.68).

In contrast to the "consensus for change" that had characterized the developmental phase of this policy campaign, when the Tories announced in 2001 that the electricity market would be opened to competition the following May and that Hydro One would be sold off in what would have been the largest privatization in Canadian history, the broader context for reform had changed and, consequently, so had the terms in which the 'crisis' would likely come to be understood. While it would be difficult to detail the characteristics and nature of all of these changes, four are worth mentioning: first, California's rolling blackouts in the summer 2000 and the subsequent Enron scandal created considerable debate over the merits of electricity reform in Ontario;⁵⁶ second, the impact of failures or setbacks in other neo-liberal policy areas, notably water privatization (Walkerton), generated a great deal of suspicion about the putative benefits of privatization and market liberalization for public utilities; third, the shift in public disapproval for the Tories' retrenchment agenda (derived in part from the Walkerton experience), which elevated the popularity and status of the other political parties and

⁵⁶ According to one reporter close to the electricity issue, "California really messed things up for the government...it gave people a real picture of how complex, hard to understand policies take effect in the real world" (Interview, May 2002). A government communications officer shared this view: "California was more of a problem than it should have been. We knew that our policy design was different [from California's] and we could convince business reporters and people who know a thing or two about energy policy that we wouldn't make the same mistakes. But the images of those blackouts...the public would be harder to convince" (Interview, May 2002).

enhanced their credibility on the issue; and fourth, most importantly, the formation of the Ontario Electricity Coalition in December 2001 as the voice of grassroots opposition to market reform in electricity. Utilizing institutional and grassroots forms of protest and advocacy, the OEC was able to achieve a dialectic in its management of the policy issue between an 'issues' approach, in which the problem is treated as a matter requiring institutional remediation and resolution, and a 'crisis' approach, which employs the logic of rupture and immediacy. It is to an analysis of the repertoire of contention tactics used by the OEC in its campaign that the final portion of this paper is directed.

Repertoires of Contention and Tactical Diversity: The Ontario Electricity Coalition

The question of how activists select particular modes of protest from amongst the range of possible options has been a matter of considerable theoretical and empirical debate within political and historical sociology. For instance, resource-mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tilly 1978; Kitschelt 1986) argues that social movements can emerge if aggrieved groups can marshal internal resources to contest and challenge the barriers that restrict their 'access' to those rights, services, and programs to which they feel a sense of ownership and entitlement. Working within this perspective, Tilly developed the important concept of 'repertoires of contention' to describe the range of possible action courses available to movements to articulate or give expression to their grievances.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Eide and Knight (1999) conceptualize grievance as the sense of moral dissatisfaction that comes from the perception of having been harmed or placed into a position of risk, where harm or loss would follow. Importantly, according to these authors grievances are 'other-directed' in that "blame lies elsewhere, at least in the mind of the aggrieved" (p.530). In relation to the politics of blame avoidance, the action courses

Repertoires of contention are “learned, shared and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice...[they] are learned cultural creations” (Tilly 1995, p.26). Tilly argues that “action takes its meaning and effectiveness from shared understandings, memories, and agreements...[and]...resembles not individual consciousness but a language” (p.30). The emphasis on social learning and the practical constitution of contention tactics suggests that the concept entails much more than just action; crucially, the choice of which action to take will also be influenced by a process of *interaction* among movement participants, as well as between movement participants and actors located elsewhere in the political arena. Politicized agents are constantly developing new and creative solutions to the problems that confront them and to which they are opposed. This is consistent with the theory of subpolitics discussed above, where the outcome of intensified risk and the democratization of uncertainty borne in the context of neo-liberalism have precipitated not only an overlapping or hybridization between institutional and non-institutional actors but also a reflexivity whereby activists not only learn from one another which strategies of protest will succeed (under which circumstances) as well as which will fail, but also, crucially, learn from and appropriate the strategies and actions of their protagonists.

Political and Legal Opportunity Structure

Social movements will adopt strategies that not only fit their resources but which are also relevant to their organizational dynamic and makeup. Hilson (2002) has recently

from which activists are most likely to draw will be those that can successfully *attribute* blame to those in positions of responsibility.

argued that the most significant factors that influence strategy choice and movement success are political and legal opportunities. For example, lobbying can be enormously effective, but is likely to be useful only for those groups who can either afford to pay the dues professional lobbyists charge or whose network contacts intersect with the policy elite. Consequently, when conventional strategies fail, or when individuals or groups that previously exercised some influence over the policy process find that access or receptivity to their viewpoints have been reduced, they can choose to operate in different policy “venues” and construct new “frames” or “images” of the policy in question (Baumgartner and Jones 1991).

The political opportunity structure (POS) refers both to the “structural openness or closedness of the political system” as well as the “more contingent receptivity of political elites” to movement expressions of grievance (Hilson 2002, p.242). This suggests that while there are ways in which a policy area can be ‘open’ on one level, it is also important to consider carefully the extent of openness in particular sub-areas. For example, in May 2002 the Ontario government held a series of ‘public consultations’ to elicit viewpoints from “interested stakeholders” to the following question: “The Government has signalled its intention to develop legislation that will permit Ontarians to invest directly in Hydro One through a public offering of Hydro One shares. What features should the legislation contain?” (Ministry of Energy advertisement. *Toronto Star*, 29 April 2002). The ideological inflexions of this question aside, on the surface it might appear as though the province’s political system was ‘open’ to the viewpoints and

interests of non-official voices.⁵⁸ Yet, Hilson argues that it is also important that the POS be seen “not just in terms of openness (in other words *access* to the administration), but also in terms of political *receptivity* to the claims being made” (2002, p.242). Although access to the government was available in theory, there were, as the government’s framing of its question implies, some deputations that it would be more receptive to hearing than others. This was a point of considerable frustration on the part of numerous organizations. The following excerpt is from the deputation delivered to the Ministry of Energy on 7 May 2002 by OEC member organization, the Ontario Coalition of Senior Citizens’ Organizations (OCSCO):

We had welcomed your government’s stated intention to hold public hearings on the matter of privatizing Hydro One and had trusted that hearings would allow Ontario citizens to express their views on the wisdom of privatizing this public asset. The question you posed has clarified your government’s intention to go through with the planned privatization no matter what Ontario citizens may have to say about it. Sell [sic] the idea is not consultation. Consultation means listening to Ontario citizens’ points of view before developing legislation.⁵⁹

This statement suggests that while some interest groups may have been granted a degree of ‘access’ to the government at a critical stage in the policymaking process, they did not meet directly with success because the relevant elites were unreceptive to their viewpoints (Hilson 2002, p.242).

Despite the ambiguity of the political system’s ‘openness’ to ‘policy outsiders’ (Grant 1990), however, the presence of the NDP as a key member of the OEC meant that although other member organizations in the coalition were denied ‘receptive access’ their viewpoints were articulated in the formal, institutional arena of the political system (and

⁵⁸ Indeed as one government representative stated, “...any time you allow the public an opportunity to speak directly with policymakers you are opening the system to the people whose lives are directly affected by it” (Interview with Ministry of Energy communications officer, May 2002).

⁵⁹ A complete copy of the OCSCO deputation is available at <http://www.web.net/~ocscsco/electricity.html>.

thus also news coverage as well). From the date of the government's IPO announcement until the November 2002 policy reversal, the NDP continued to push the electricity issue as its top priority in the legislative assembly. It constantly pointed out the daily price of electricity, noted examples of seniors, pensioners or single mothers with young and/or disabled children whose bills had grown so high that they were at risk of having their service cut by their local MEU, drew attention to the regular calls by the IMO for the public to reduce their consumption or face the risk of rolling blackouts, publicized attempts by the government to prevent the public (and opposition parties) from gaining access to market information to find out why prices were skyrocketing and who could be held responsible, and regularly invoked the spectre of California and Enron in an attempt to draw a comparison between the two jurisdictions. The following statement is representative of the tone and tenor of the NDP's efforts to attribute blame to the government for the price increases and cloud of secrecy hanging over the electricity system:

Mr Hampton: Premier, why did they cover up a study which predicts exactly how prices can ricochet up after privatization and deregulation, and why, over the past two weeks, has the Independent Market Operator refused to disclose why we're seeing price spikes? In California, this kind of price manipulation happened under Enron. You must have heard of their market manipulation strategies – Death Star, Get Shorty, Fat Boy – all of them now under criminal investigation...If you want this so-called open market, then you've got to allow people to have access to the information. Why is your government so intent on covering up the kind of information people need so they can make informed decisions? Premier, it goes even further than this. Your former Minister of Energy boasted about three months ago that he had a study which said that prices under deregulation and privatization will be lower. We wanted to follow up on that study...We called and asked for that study, one that was put out by a Professor Lazar. We were told that in fact he didn't have the real study. It's put out by an organization in the States called PIRA. PIRA wants \$5,000 to access the study but then you have to sign a whole bunch of confidentiality agreements that say you can't make the study available to ordinary people (*Hansard*, 15 May 2002).

Thus, although OEC member organizations such as the OCSCO were ‘shut out’ of the policy process in the terms discussed above their interests and objectives nevertheless remained prominent in daily political discourse and debate by virtue of their involvement in the OEC with the NDP.

When the political opportunity structure is not receptive to movement objectives this can lead to the development of alternative contention tactics. As in the conceptualization of subpolitics offered above, one might suggest that subpolitics is itself a system response (reflex) to the closedness of the modern political system, as the coming together of state and non-state actors into issue networks helps to erase the clear cut distinction that is connoted by the ‘open’ vs. ‘closed’ dichotomy. In this example, the other OEC member organizations still had their own agendas to pursue, thus the search for alternative or, in this case, *parallel* modes of contention remained circumscribed by the specificities of the historical, political, and social context in which the organizations were located.

In addition to the characteristics of the broader context, Hilson also argues that the ‘legal’ opportunity structure (LOS), in particular court-based litigation, also plays an important role:

“...a lack of political opportunity may influence the adoption of litigation as a strategy in place of lobbying, and that the choice of protest as a strategy may be influenced by poor political and legal opportunities...the emphasis on ‘influence’ here is important...”
(p.239).⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Although he does not cite the work of Poulantzas (e.g. 1978), Hilson’s case for the ‘relative autonomy’ of the legal system is clearly consistent with, if not indebted to, it. Hilson’s argument that court-based litigation should be treated as a separate variable from the political system is consistent with Poulantzas’ critique of earlier Marxist scholarship, which reduced the law to either a reflex of the economic base and/or, when it became a tool for political purposes, the incarnated will of the dominant class.

Like political opportunity, legal opportunities are also structured and contingent, including, “relatively stable features relating to access to justice,” on the one hand, as well as “judicial receptivity to policy arguments,” on the other (Hilson 2002, p.243). In many cases, political opportunities will be negatively correlated to legal opportunities in the repertoire of contention – as the opportunity to effect change in the political system drops, the recourse to legal opportunity and action will increase.

In Ontario, the adoption of a litigation strategy by CUPE and the CEP proved beneficial in the face of a government and elite policy community that was otherwise not receptive to its arguments and position. On 28 March 2002, the two unions launched court-based litigation in Ontario Superior Court to prevent the government from privatizing Hydro One. Although the appeal had nothing directly to do with deregulation of the electrical generation market, the case was founded on the claim that Bill 35 did not provide the government with legal entitlement to “dispose of or otherwise alienate the shares” in Hydro One; in short, while the legislation enabled the government to hold and control shares in the public utility, it did not give it the right to sell those shares, especially given the context of the “very nature of Hydro One’s historic and economic importance”.⁶¹

In this case, the receptivity of the judiciary provided an opportunity to include court-based litigation as part of the coalition’s broader repertoire of contention. The court case generated a significant amount of critical media and public attention and was a major setback for the government. The decision justified the position taken by the unions

⁶¹ Mr. Justice Arthur Gans in the oral judgement of his decision, delivered in Ontario Superior Court on 19 April 2002. Full-text of the decision is retrievable at <http://www.electricitycoalition.org/GansDecision.pdf>.

and their affiliate members in the OEC that a private power policy was an affront to a public institution that was “one with which [Ontario] residents could identify, and one by which the Province was known internationally.”⁶² More importantly, the policy of privatization was also shown to be illegal, a decision which elicited a whole range of additional negative connotations.

Grassroots Campaigns: Empowering Citizens

While the emphasis on obtaining visibility in legislative debate and utilizing court-based litigation were key aspects of the coalition’s PR campaign, these were only component parts of a broader tactical arsenal that distinguished between the strategic management of the issue at an *institutional* level and the critical management of the issue at the *local* level. While the NDP and unions occupied the formal policy venues of the legislature and courts, the grassroots members of the coalition – environmentalists, citizens’ groups, local union chapters, &c. – focused more on local modes of activism geared toward generating popular support. The general strategy, developed by NDP and CUPE communications staff, was primarily to pressure members of the provincial government and their traditional supporters – industrialists, business people, senior civil servants and politicians at the municipal and federal levels.⁶³

Prior to generating the volume of local activist support that would be needed for such a broad-based campaign, the OEC leadership orchestrated a province-wide tour of more than forty cities in the seven-week build-up to market opening (13 March thru 30

⁶² Gans, *op cit.*

⁶³ Ontario Electricity Coalition, “Campaign Organizer’s Guide,” p.1.

April 2002). Flyers advertising 'public information campaigns' regarding the changes that were taking place in the province's electricity sector were distributed in unionized workplaces, on university campuses, to community centres, and on street lampposts. On 9 March, the OEC held its first campaign mobilization meeting where experienced labour organizers and the director of communications for the NDP and CUPE public relations staffers led interactive sessions on lobbying, media training, and coalition building. The purpose of these meetings was to provide ordinary citizens with the necessary 'tools' and skill-sets to conduct effect campaigns in their own communities.⁶⁴

Once equipped with the tools of the lobbying and PR trade, individual citizens, local labour activists, environmentalists, and members of the various other OEC member organizations undertook an extensive grassroots campaign that involved: door-to-door leafleting; meetings with local municipal councillors and school trustees to discuss the economic impacts on the local economy and school boards; submitting letters-to-the-editor and writing op-ed pieces in local newspapers; meeting with local business improvement associations; and demonstrating outside of the constituency offices of local MPPs (especially those in Tory and Liberal ridings). In the period surrounding market opening and the aforementioned court case, news reports, radio phone-in shows, letters-to-the-editor, and other forms of popular discourse were dominated by discussion of the

⁶⁴ This emphasis on making local campaigning relevant to the political makeup of each region was crucial as it allowed OEC members to not only be involved personally in crafting a 'local strategy,' but also because it was sensitive to the very different reasons people might have for opposing deregulation and privatization. Jurisdictions that are more traditionally conservative, such as Peterborough or London, have typically embraced the tradition and protectionism that is part of the party's history and would thus be more likely to oppose the policy on the grounds that it would make the energy market vulnerable to foreign ownership and control. Conversely, more 'progressive' jurisdictions where a (nominally) socialist commitment is more pervasive, such as in Toronto-Hamilton-Niagara hub, opposition to the policy might be based more on ideological principles, such as the impact market solutions in electricity are likely to have on the environment or on the rights of labour.

impact the potential reforms would have on rates and of the fears and anxieties of local citizens, particularly those who were seen to be most vulnerable (e.g. seniors, pensioners, the disabled, single parents) to fluctuations in price. The following excerpt, from *The National*, CBC Television's national nightly broadcast, is from the OEC's information meeting held in Barrie on 22 April 2002, the week prior to market opening:

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN (1): If my hydro bill doubles, I'd probably go back to work full-time. I'm only working half time now so I can be home with my kids. If it doubles, that's, you know, a lot less possible.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN (2): And this to me is the selling of Ontario. Like we're being given away.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN (2): Like some seniors, we don't understand that stuff they talk about. I mean, I don't even know what hydro, you know, I throw a switch which I've been doing all my life. Now you're telling me there's generating stations. There's transmission stations. There's all this other stuff. I mean, what do I know? What do I know about all that stuff? But I'm scared that hey, if I go to throw a switch, it's not going to happen or I'm going to have to pay an enormous amount of money for it.

REPORTER: The protest has been muted, some say, by government design but now that privatizing power is about to happen, it's getting a lot more attention.⁶⁵

The Strategic Reversal of Crisis: When Issues Bounce Back

What made the OEC so successful, therefore, was an ability to achieve a dialectic between issues management and crisis management strategies. The government's attempts to deal with the issue in a general and system-wide way were continually punctured by critics' claims about local crisis situations. When the government would argue that its reform policy would introduce stability and lower rates in the long-term, activists and critics would counter that the prices are too high here and now and a private, for-profit system will only drive rates higher. When the government would issue a press

⁶⁵ CBC Television, "Power Game." *The National*, 30 April 2002. Host: Peter Mansbridge, Reporter: Susan Ormiston.

release or make a public statement to the effect that “prices appear to be stabilizing” its critics would respond with discrete examples of where the prices were continuing to rise (e.g. in rural areas).⁶⁶ When the government would claim that introducing competition will provide consumers with more choice than they previously had with only one electricity provider, critics would counter by asking “what kind of choice is it to decide whether to pay the electricity bills or the rent?”⁶⁷ When the government would argue that privatization would enable the utility’s debt to be paid down faster, critics would counter that “selling the house to pay the mortgage” is no way to responsibly manage the economy. In short, the effect of this process of claims and counter-claims making was to reconstruct the electricity ‘crisis’ as a problem not only of government policymaking but also the latter’s credibility and motive. Because the benefits of neo-liberal reforms are generally unproven and speculative, a space can be opened up in which claims of universalism can be punctured by arguments of particularism, specifically counter-claims that the rationale for reform is to pass on benefits to friends and supporters. What gets questioned, then, isn’t just believability in terms of the prospective effects, but also the anterior motives behind the changes.

Because the logic of crisis requires the circulation of a discourse in the public sphere where it can find resonance with the lived (and mediated) experiences of

⁶⁶ In Wawa, for example, even after electricity rates were frozen in November 2002, distributional costs continued to rise such that total hydro bills had increased by as much as 100 percent from the pre-market opening rates. This had the effect for one couple of seniors of forcing them to lower their thermostat and attempt to keep their kitchen warm by relying on their gas stove for heat. Moreover, several local businesses in the same town had been forced to either close or greatly reduce staffing levels in order to meet rising power costs (CBC Radio One, Reporter Sherry Drysdale, *Ontario Today*, 12 May 2003).

⁶⁷ See M. Leong, “Hydro bills electrify citizens: People wandering around in the dark, even losing homes,” *Toronto Star*, 22 November 2002, D8.

individuals and groups, it is thus vulnerable to attack by others who, under a changed context, can utilize the logic of crisis toward different ends. Discourses of crisis are thus stratified and differentiated by degrees of uncertainty, risk and harm. Although the structural conditions upon which an electricity crisis could be narrated in the mid to late-1990s had not changed, the context that could support this discourse had changed. In the first place, despite what many observers took to be the government's radical political agenda, the Tories had acted slowly and cautiously when it came to the privatization plank in its neo-liberal agenda. Privatizing Ontario Hydro was the first significant move toward divesting public assets to the private sector. Other prominent privatizations, such as the publicly funded educational station TV Ontario and the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) and its retail outlets, had been abandoned. As such, there was no established precedent or 'culture' of practice to draw on and point to as a legitimating device. The only concrete example came from elsewhere (California), where the record was clearly a failure. The most significant change, I argue, was the formation of the OEC and its ability to articulate growing public anxiety about the implications of market reform. As I have attempted to show, the financial and management failures that had previously been mobilized to articulate Ontario's 'electricity crisis' had, under a different ideological and discursive context, been subverted by the OEC and bounced back – in the legislature, in the courts, and in local communities – as a crisis in government credibility.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how neo-liberal policies which are intended to impose market relations onto the polity and economy (and thereby erode the ability of state

institutions to protect populations from risk or harm) necessitate communications strategies that are designed not to claim credit for benefits but to avoid blame for the social harms such policies often entail. Drawing on the case of electricity restructuring in Ontario, the paper has shown how the Conservative government institutionalized a blame avoidance strategy by embarking on a two-pronged PR campaign. First, it created discontent with the existing policy framework by constructing a crisis of financial accountability. Such a crisis involved the selectivity of a series of contradictions involving the utility's accumulation of debt and instances of operational mismanagement that could be recruited into a broader narrative and which would circulate in the public sphere to find resonance with the lived and mediated everyday experiences of individuals. And second, it created a multilateral form of institutional resolution that involved creating alliances with key influential groups and stakeholders and building bridges with negative influencers. In the absence of concrete precedents, however, the debate became primarily a 'prospective' one (Greenberg 2003): the political vacuum that neo-liberalism opens up is in many respects a virtual vacuum rather than a real one, i.e. a vacuum that is occupied by guesswork and speculation about the future. In the absence of such hard evidence that can show the actual effects (positive or harmful) of prospective reforms, the communicative dimension of politics becomes paramount and the nature of political struggle becomes more heavily one of arguments over evidence.

While the construction of a crisis and the resort to a multilateral form of resolution appears to have worked in the policy's formative years, the reflexive effects of the broader political project and the PR strategies used to promote it eventually

undermined the government's goals, leading, ultimately, to a reversal in policy direction after only six months into the implementation phase. First, neo-liberalism is vulnerable to strategic reversal because the political vacuum opened up by the state's retreat provides an opportunity for social movement activism to thrive. Political scientists and sociologists have argued that we have entered into a new phase of modernity in which a 'social movement society' (Meyer and Tarrow 1998) has taken hold. Along these lines, Ulrich Beck (1997) has argued recently that the reflexive effect of the neo-liberal turn has been the subpoliticization of society, a renaissance of political subjectivity on the part of previously marginalized groups and movements. This study has shown, however, that insofar as citizen groups have taken power politically, the subpoliticization of society marked by the intensification of neo-liberalism has not rendered conventional political institutions or strategies inoperable. Rather, the effect of this transformation has been not a demarcation but hybridization between the two spheres such that the distinction between 'official' politics and 'unofficial' subpolitics must be re-conceptualized. The issue alliance that included the NDP, labour unions, environmentalists and a host of citizens' groups and grassroots activists suggests therefore that simplistic arguments regarding the unilateral replacement of party politics by movement subpolitics are misplaced. I would argue, rather, that the very success of neo-liberalism in marginalizing or converting social democratic political parties (as in the cases of the Ontario NDP and New Labour in the UK, respectively) has created the opportunity for progressive political groups to join more successfully on an issue-by-issue basis with minority social

democratic parties whose electoral position has been weakened (as has been the case with the NDP in Ontario, reduced in the last election to a rump of only 9 seats).

At the time of writing, Ontario's electricity policy consists of an awkward hybrid of public and private approaches that have already proven to be contradictory and unsustainable. While maintaining control over pricing by capping rates has temporarily cooled public anger and political opposition to the Tories' intended policy reforms, the government has pushed itself deeper into debt to pay the costs associated with continuing to meet its commitments to private generating firms to pay the 'market price' of electricity while shielding consumers from having to do the same. This problem has been exacerbated by recent decisions to also extend the new price protection scheme to industrial clients. In the same breath, however, the government claims to be committed to opening the market to still more private sector involvement, although the only tepid interest on the part of private firms to do so places this scheme very much into doubt. The ongoing problems in the province's electricity sector are therefore exemplary of Gramsci's notion of catastrophic equilibrium, in which "the old is dying and the new cannot be born" and whereby "a variety of morbid symptoms appear" (1971, p.276).

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NIKE AND SWEATSHOPS: DEBATES OVER GLOBAL LABOUR STANDARDS

Framing Sweatshops: Nike, Global
Production and the American News Media

Introduction

The 'Battle of Seattle' in December 1999 marked the culmination of a decade-long growth in popular activism in opposition to the intensifying pace and impact of neo-liberal globalization that had ensued from the decline of European communism and embrace of capitalism by China. This opposition has spanned a broad array of different but overlapping issues and problems, from the physical environment to political repression and corruption, human rights, the status of women, labour rights and working conditions, and sustainable forms of social and economic development. In this paper we are concerned with one particular aspect of these changes and the broader social movement that has emerged in response to them, namely sweatshop labour practices in the contract factories of large, Western transnational corporations (TNCs) located primarily in low wage, developing countries.

Our particular focus in this paper is not sweatshop labour practices and working conditions *per se*, but how they have been represented in the mainstream American press. Although sweatshops have a long history, media attention to contemporary sweatshop practices, particularly in developing countries, only started to appear in the mid-1990s as voices critical of globalization and the power and role of TNCs began to be recognized as legitimate. In particular, we are interested in three related questions. The first is the structure of the news coverage of sweatshops: which voices were given access to the media to speak about sweatshops, and how were these voices positioned in relation to one

another? The second question deals with how sweatshops were problematized in the news coverage: which aspects of sweatshop practices and conditions were emphasized, which, if any, were downplayed or ignored, and how was their problematic character defined? Finally we pose the question of how sweatshops were explained by the media: what factors were identified to account for the existence of sweatshops, what was omitted from the account, and what did these explanations imply about appropriate solutions? By addressing these three broad questions we hope to be able to examine the way in which social, political and cultural issues are transformed into essentially economic problems, and to contribute to a broader understanding of the relationship between processes of structural change and the formation of social activism as a means by which these changes are given meaning.

As a case study, we examine news coverage of the sweatshop problem for the athletic branding company, Nike. We focus upon Nike for several reasons: first, it is an industry leader and arguably the most publicly recognized sports footwear and apparel brand in the world; second, Nike has been one of the most aggressive corporations within this industry to pursue offshore manufacturing as a core component of its overall business strategy; third, Nike has been and continues to be the most consistent target of criticism by the anti-sweatshop movement; and fourth, because the news media, like the company's chief critics, have focused the bulk of their attention to sweatshops on Nike – its competitor companies (e.g. Reebok, Adidas, Fila, &c.), while using the same production practices, have remained lesser targets for the critical attention of news organizations and activists.

Case Background: Nike and Sweatshops

Nike is the most publicly recognized company in the global sports shoe and apparel industry and has established itself as a celebrity corporation by successfully integrating different aspects of its corporate identity into an effective promotional strategy that associates its brand name and image with positive social values ranging from athleticism and fitness to social and environmental responsibility and patriotism (Goldman and Papson 1998; Cole 1996; Cole and Hribar 1995). Nike has employed the logic of 'promotionalism' (Wernick 1991) to craft a multifaceted identity that enables the company to represent itself simultaneously as serious and cool, earnest and ironic, image conscious and technologically sophisticated, and fashionable and socially conscious. This logic consists of a repertoire of conventional marketing and advertising practices, media activities, and issues management strategies that come to be fused into a broader communications plan such that the distinctions between each practice and technique become indistinguishable from the other(s). Using celebrity endorsements and sponsorships as vehicles for the promotion of worthy social causes (e.g. equal opportunity for women, racial minorities and the disabled), Nike has combined its product and brand name, corporate identity, social activism on behalf of others, and the identities of its endorsers and the sports those endorsers play, into a larger promotional mix that has helped make the company a commercial success story.

Nike's economic success has not been based only on the ways in which it has successfully promoted its brand image, however. Crucially, this success has also been

founded on an ability to develop and use a production strategy designed foremost to maximize investment and increase shareholder value. Nike is an excellent example of the “hollowed out” TNC found in “buyer-driven commodity chain production,” where economic success depends on an ability to control the initial and final stages of the production process, i.e. product conception, design, and composition, on the one hand, and marketing, promotions, and consumer relations, on the other (Applebaum et al. 1994; Gereffi 1994; Korzeniewicz 1994). The intervening stages of manufacturing are sourced out to subcontractor factories in less-developed countries where wages are already low, unskilled and semi-skilled (particularly female) labour power is plentiful, and labour standards are limited and/or easily ignored in practice (Burns 2000; Carty 1997).

This dialectic between promoting finished goods that communicate ideals of opportunity and transcendence, on the one hand, and the use of a manufacturing strategy that imposes a particularly intensive regimen on the labour process, on the other, creates a significant contradiction between meeting the needs of overseas workers and appealing to consumer fetishes in global core countries for what are essentially stylistically differentiated parity products. As Pearson and Seyfang (2001) argue, the rise of global neo-liberal economic and social policy since the late 1970s has restricted collective bargaining opportunities and/or practices locally and deregulated markets globally to encourage the freer flow of capital, labour and goods, and the effect of this is felt most acutely on the factory floor. The global expansion of economic trade and use of “unregulated labour as production for export markets,” Pearson and Seyfang write, “has constructed new ‘cheap’ labour forces such as young women workers” (p.51; see also

Pearson 1998). As Stabile (2000) argues, this contradiction demands that a company such as Nike employ carefully crafted image management strategies in order “to sell its products, providing that such images can be stitched into a seamless narrative that poses few contradictions for consumers...Nike’s commercial image...absolutely depends on maintaining the invisibility of real contradictions for the consumerist caste” (pp.197-99). This critique insists that the objective ‘facts’ of global manufacturing do not speak for themselves; rather, it suggests that if consumers actually knew the truth about the labour processes behind their favourite labels and brands, they would think twice before making a purchase. Given the weight of the unremitting external interests of power centres such as global corporations to promote their brands and products, therefore, this contradiction must be contained through discourse and managed via the promotional apparatus of endorsements, imaging, and social marketing.

While we agree with Stabile that there exists a significant gap between the image Nike bestows upon itself as a socially responsible corporation and the realities of the ‘hidden abode’ where foreign workers toil, we also argue that, despite the enormous economic and financial powers of TNCs such as Nike, the public sphere has not been totally monopolized by commercial or materialist values and meanings. In the first place, although running shoes, soccer balls and t-shirts can be commodified in the narrow economic sense, the social or cultural meanings that get imparted onto those goods cannot be commodified because, at the level of its meaning, promotional imagery has to incur no cost and be free from the privative, exclusionary control that commodity relations necessarily entail. And secondly, although a promotional logic has become

hegemonic in the public sphere (Wernick 1991; Habermas 1989), it is a logic that has been successfully appropriated by anti-sweatshop activists in their efforts to problematize the actions of such global power centres as TNCs. Drawing on a repertoire of direct action campaigns, culture jamming and publicity stunts, Nike's labour critics have successfully turned the logic of promotionalism back onto Nike and in the process have generated media and public attention to the issue of sweatshops in order to debunk the preferred image of itself that Nike has attempted to create through its advertising and philanthropic endeavours. Indeed, social movement activism against Nike demonstrates that the logic of promotionalism has a reflexive effect insofar as "the branding formula leaves corporations wide open to the most obvious tactic in the activist arsenal: bringing a brand's production secrets crashing into its marketing image" (Klein 2000, p.345).

Theoretical Framework

As a privileged site for the construction, contestation, and criticism of issues and problems, news organizations play a leading role in establishing which issues and events locally and internationally will be selected for attention and how they will be made salient to newsreaders. It has become almost a truism to note that news media may not tell readers what to think, but they have a particularly powerful effect on encouraging readers to think about certain issues and do so in certain ways (Soroka 2002; McCombs and Shaw 1993; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). This is not to say that the media have the ability or power to supersede the direct experiences of the world that individuals obtain at

home, with friends, or in the workplace, but that in the sorting of issues of public concern, news media play an active, rather than simply a reflective role.

This role is particularly important in the context of issues and events that occur outside of newsreaders' immediate field of vision and experience. The ability of news organizations to bring events that occur half a world away closer to home is crucial for examining the sweatshop issue because the vast majority of North Americans are physically separated from the production sites where Nike's and its competitors' products are made. When international issues or events become problematic, news media come to play a key role in "sounding the social alarm...what eludes sensory perception becomes socially available to 'experience' in media pictures and reports" (Beck 1995, p.100). Sweatshops are therefore a relatively 'unobtrusive' issue, which is to say that media effects regarding the coverage of sweatshops are likely to be more pronounced than for other, more 'obtrusive' social problems (e.g. unemployment), where the personal experiences of newsreaders will tend to have a greater influence on their cognitions and actions (Soroka 2002). Citizens thus 'experience' sweatshops not in the actual context of production per se, but indirectly through the discourses of mass media.

Nevertheless, as suggested above, news reports of sweatshops do not simply *reflect* the objective realities of a global world economy in which sweatshops are a particularly salient and controversial feature. Rather, news is a socially constructed and thus a contested product. Locating our approach squarely within the spirit and conceptual architecture of the Gramscian tradition, we treat media texts as sites of ideological struggle, and news discourse more generally as a claims making arena in which powerful

groups attempt to secure hegemony but where oppositional groups also move to resist, puncture or subvert dominant group efforts at definitional control and provide, however inchoately at times, a view of the world that is founded on alternative values and goals. In acknowledging the ability of marginal groups to manoeuvre and develop 'counter-hegemonic' strategies (Carroll 1997), we do not suggest that news organizations deny institutional elites a privileged 'over-accessing' to channels of mass communication – indeed, empirical accounts, cast from both the liberal (Gans 1979; Hallin 1994; Blumler and Gurevitch 1995) and radical traditions (Glasgow University Media Group 1976, 1980; Hall et al. 1978; Gitlin 1980), have consistently demonstrated the ability of powerful individuals and groups to 'primarily define' the news agenda. Rather, we maintain that while 'primary definition' undoubtedly occurs it is not an *a priori* effect of the 'objective' political-economic position that political actors qua sources occupy, but is based upon the ability of news sources to develop effective communication strategies and messages that will compete for and find resonance with the 'lived' and 'mediated' experiences of news audiences.

Simply put, media texts cannot be defined non-problematically as a vehicle for the transmission of a dominant ideology. Despite appearances that might indicate the contrary, a dominant ideology is never internally coherent (Abercrombie et al. 1980; Therborn 1980) – ideology is an attempt to create coherence out of competing and contradictory interests, and this is especially the case for bourgeois ideology since it represents a class whose members are, at least at the economic level, in competition with one another. Ideology thus does not erase the contradictions of the economic system, but

rather it tries to manage them by naturalizing the social and historical, universalizing the particular, and representing contradiction and division as difference. While 'preferred' definitions of the situation might be brought to the surface, news discourse articulates a range of social and symbolic elements that cannot be ideologically closed or rendered invulnerable to contradiction and contestation. Indeed, it is because of the gaps and fissures within the dominant ideology that alternative viewpoints, which are always relational, can develop. And it is by prizing open these gaps that *oppositional* and *alternative* hegemonies (see Williams 1980) can also come to the fore, i.e. via the process of critical interrogation. Just as for Marx any new society necessarily grows out of the contradictions of the old, so too do alternative viewpoints grow out of the contradictions of the dominant ones. And this is precisely how criticism of sweatshop practices developed into a recognizable and resonant global social problem, by holding Nike to account for the clear contradictions between what it claimed to be doing in its promotional and philanthropic endeavours and what was actually occurring on the factory floor.

Having situated our study within this theoretical framework, we are now in a position to examine the news coverage, and the questions of which sources were given access to the media and how they were positioned in relation to one another, which aspects of sweatshop practices and conditions were emphasized and which were downplayed, and how the presence and origins of sweatshops were explained and what these explanations implied about possible solutions. Before doing so, however, we

provide a few prefatory remarks about the methodology that helped guide the research process.

Methodological Considerations

Our focus in this paper is upon how sweatshops have been framed and narrated in two mainstream U.S. newspapers, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. We examine these newspapers because of the crucial agenda-setting role they play not only in relation to public opinion and policymaking in the United States, but also because they are frequently used as ‘sources of record’ by other media outlets, both national and international. Using the Lexis-Nexis database, we generated a total sample of 219 articles dealing with the general issue of sweatshops from 1990-2000. Within this broader sample, the bulk of the coverage (82 percent or n=179) fell within the period 1995 until 2000, and within this timeframe, 48 percent (n=87) of the total articles were concerned solely with Nike (Times=56; Post=31). For the purposes of the analysis, we concentrate only upon this latter sub-sample of Nike-focused coverage.

Our approach to issue framing in news discourse draws upon Goffman’s (1974) original concept of ‘framing,’ which argues that people organize their experiences of a complex social world into meaningful, discrete, and coherent categories in order to “organize experience and guide action” (Snow et al. 1986, p.464). Frames, according to Gitlin, “organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely on their reports” (1980: 7). In this regard, frames are the core principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation that identify, either directly or

indirectly, common-sense views about the meanings of issues and events and why these should matter. Framing essentially involves “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality [to] 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” (Entman 1993: 52). Although a news frame cannot guarantee how a reader will interpret or comprehend a communicating text in the context of everyday life, frames do play a fundamental role in structuring the range of *decodings* (Hall 1980) newsreaders are likely to obtain under a given set of circumstances. News frames thus shed light on the prevailing field of social intelligibility within which meaning about the world is constructed and problematized.

Despite the benefits that a framing analysis of news discourse can provide, it cannot adequately account for the temporal, i.e. shifting, character of representation over time. That is, frame analysis is incapable of explaining how different and, sometimes, competing frames will interact with and affect one another either within a single story or across time (Robinson 1998, p.7). Because media frames flow with changes to events and the claims made about these in the real world, we require a methodological schema that can account for the temporal construction of issues and problems. To supplement our examination of media frames of the sweatshop problem we employ techniques associated with the application of ‘narrative analysis’ to the study of news (e.g. van Dijk 1988), to account for how a broader temporal dimension to the coverage developed and shifted over time.

We utilize both content and textual methods of analysis to account for the framing and narrativization of the sweatshop issue. Content analysis, in Berelson's (1952) original formulation, is a "research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (p.147, cited in Deacon et al. 1999, p.115). We employ this method principally to identify and quantify salient features of the coverage, and to use these findings to make broader inferences about the processes of communication and representation (Deacon et al. 1999, p.116). Each article was thus coded for its dominant theme(s), and in no cases were there more than three themes identified and coded. We supplement content analysis with techniques associated with textual analysis (e.g. lexical analysis) in order to address the dimensions of media texts that content analysis cannot obtain. News articles, we argue, draw on a language that is loaded with social conceptions, values, identities and relations, the meanings and usage of which are often not clear or identifiable through quantitative methods. We thus employ a qualitative approach to discourse analysis that is informed by a view of language as constitutive of the social reality in which it is being used (e.g. Fairclough 1995).

Data Analysis

We have indicated in the introductory section above that the use of commodity chain production techniques in the apparel and footwear industry has increased steadily since the late 1970s, however the sweatshop issue has taken considerably more time to gather momentum as a widely acknowledged global 'problem'. Claims of sweatshop practices against Nike began to surface in the late 1980s, primarily through the work of

Jeff Ballinger of the NGO Press for Change, in his investigation of Nike factories in Indonesia. In the early 1990s *Harper's* magazine published a short extract on Nike (Ballinger 1992), which began to draw some broader attention to the issue on the part of television and print journalists. Broadly, though, public awareness about sweatshops was limited, as news coverage remained relatively sparse and disconnected until the mid 1990s.

This shift in the media spotlight appears to have been due to two significant events (not directly implicating Nike): first, the raid by U.S. Labor Department officials on the El Monte sweatshop in California, in August 1995; and second, the exposé by Charles Kernaghan of the National Labor Committee (NLC) of Kathie Lee Gifford's signature line of clothing sold in Wal-Mart Stores, in July 1996. As illustrated in Figure 1, prior to the period surrounding these events the sweatshop problem remained largely unreported. These two events, however, thrust the sweatshop issue into the media spotlight in an unprecedented way, establishing 'sweatshop' practices as "incidents of instances" of a new social and political problem (Best 1991, p.330; Fishman 1978, p.534).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

What makes the sweatshop issue so newsworthy is the way it conforms to the narrative requirement that news reports involve conflict, normative disorder and the presence of identifiable 'victims'. In conforming to this standard news format, issues also need to be seen as socially constructed phenomena that are worthy of public concern. Typifying 'sweatshops' as a particularly problematic feature of global business practice

involves a social process of problematization through which the construction of sweatshops 'as a problem' is contested or otherwise opened up to competing claims about meaning, causality and solutions. In other words, problematization is a social *and* a political process, and the news media are a major forum in which the politics of problematization occur. With this in mind, the coverage was examined with respect to three major concerns: first, its overall structure; second, how sweatshops were problematized; and third, how sweatshops were explained.

1. Structure of News Coverage

The location an issue or event is given in the overall layout of a newspaper is a reliable indicator of that issue or event's newsworthiness. For instance, topics appearing on the front and editorial pages, which are the most heavily and attentively read, set up a relationship with the reader as a 'public person' in touch with the 'public domain' (Kress 1986). Media scholars (e.g. Kress and van Leeuwen 1998) have argued that news placement positions indicate the general level of newsworthiness newspapers ascribe to the issue or event in question, and that the details of more prominently placed news items tend to be more easily retrieved in memory by newsreaders. As shown in Table 1, *New York Times* coverage of Nike and the sweatshop problem was most heavily concentrated in the front section of the newspaper, whereas in the *Post*, the coverage was located more heavily near the middle and back of the newspaper, in the *STYLE* section which addresses issues that are primarily of consumer interest and concern. This suggests that for the *Times*, sweatshops were seen as a general political and economic issue, while the

Post coverage points to a concern less over the broader problems associated with transnational business practice and behaviour than of the implications this has for meeting the needs and expectations of consumers. The implications of this distinction are important not only in terms of the 'subject positions' media reports create for newsreaders (e.g. citizens or consumers) but also to the construction of causes (structural or agential) and solutions (regulation, voluntary monitoring, &c.) that are offered for first explaining and then remedying the problem of sweatshops.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Although there was more total coverage in the *Times*, the most striking finding in terms of the overall structure was the fairly high proportion of 'opinion' format reports (i.e. editorials, op-ed articles, guest columns, letters-to-the-editor) in both newspapers. That the proportion of opinion discourse within each newspaper accounted for approximately 30 percent of the total coverage is significant inasmuch as opinion discourse generally signifies an imperative on the part of news media not only to report issues and events that occur in the real world but, more importantly, to *evaluate* and pass judgement on those issues, events and the key participants, by allocating responsibility and blame. The presence of opinion discourse in the overall structure of news coverage points to the problematic or contested nature of the issue inasmuch as these discourses typically deal with matters that are controversial and for which no simple solution, explanation or consensual meaning is readily available.

This concern over the attribution of responsibility and blame and the contentiousness of the sweatshop issue is noted in the more overtly critical tone of the

Times coverage, particularly where Nike was concerned. A series of op-ed columns by Bob Herbert, with titles such as “Brutality in Vietnam” (28 March 1997, A29) and “Nike’s Boot Camps” (31 March 1997, A28) took Nike to task for its sweatshop practices and failure to remedy the problems resulting from poor monitoring of its contractor and subcontractor factories. In the *Post*, on the other hand, the editorials and other opinion pieces focussed more on the role of the consumer in the battle against sweatshops, but from the perspective of inducing change rather than airing criticisms. As we will discuss in more detail below, whereas the *Times* framed the sweatshop issue as a ‘production’ problem, the *Post* primarily interpreted the sweatshop issue as a problem both *for* and *of* ‘consumption’.

2. Problematizing Sweatshops

The term ‘sweatshop’ emerged in the coverage as the definition of a contentious feature of global business practice by way of a process of competitive claims making between corporate interests, particularly Nike, and their critics (media and movement) in the public sphere.

Interestingly, the corporate voices present in the debate did not refute sweatshop allegations *per se*. In Nike’s case, there was a general shift over time from providing a macro-economic rationale for its manufacturing practices, i.e. weak labour conditions are a necessary, short-term stage along the road to long-term economic prosperity,⁶⁸ to

⁶⁸ Nike consistently used this rationale until the unexpected deflation of the Indonesian rupiah, which precipitated massive closures of contract apparel factories in that country. Prior to this, Nike touted itself as the key link in the modernization process in non-industrialized countries, for instance claiming in a press release, “history has *proven* that Nike’s production can help build thriving economies in developing

statements affirming the company's commitment to being a good employer, and announcements about measures it intended to take to remedy general problems by adjusting its hiring and factory monitoring practices. This attempt by Nike to manage the sweatshop issue strategically was disrupted by the claims made by activists, who continually pointed to incidents of specific abuses (in this factory or that) in order to create a legitimacy and credibility gap between what Nike claimed to be doing to address the problem and what was actually taking place on the factory floor. The balance in source access and representation is shown in Table 2.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

Several observations are worth noting here. First, although corporate voices figured prominently in the coverage, activists were the most frequently represented news source. In large part, the greater presence of activists in the coverage was due to the repertoire of tactics and strategies (e.g. demonstrations outside of Nike Town stores, 'sweatshop' fashion shows, student protests, &c.) that conformed with the general criteria of newsworthiness (Bullert 2000). Thus, contrary to the notion that government and other elite sources are the ones who 'primarily define' the news and policy agendas (Hall et al. 1978; Gitlin 1980; Herman and Chomsky 1988), in this instance the primary definers were so-called 'marginalized' groups: students, unions, and NGOs. Second, corresponding to the change in the role of the state from one of regulatory intervention to one of facilitation and mediation between the corporate sphere and civil society, government voices played only a very limited role as a participant to the discourse.

nations" (*italics added*). Quoted in T. Vanderbilt, "There's Less Oomph in the Swoosh," *Washington Post*, 29 March 1998, C2.

Government sources were quoted and their viewpoints were represented only sparingly, and particularly early on in the coverage. This is significant because construction of the sweatshop issue as a point of contention between corporations and its critics in civil society enhanced the salience of a consumer-oriented discourse while restricting or minimizing the ‘political’ dimension of the issue. And third, apart from a few early reports, workers themselves remained “absent referents” (Boje 2001) to the debate over the employment standards to which they are subjected.⁶⁹ While the working conditions were the primary subject of debate between the corporation and its critics, workers rarely spoke for themselves; rather, their ‘best interests’ were most often articulated in the ‘assertion-type speech acts’ (van Dijk 1988) of others and came to be defined through discursive struggle between activists and corporate representatives.

The most significant observation in terms of how sweatshops were problematized was the shift that occurred in the overall prominence of the activist groups in the coverage over the course of the sample period.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

Table 3 shows how in the mid-1990s the most commonly identified activist organizations were unions and labour rights NGOs, such as the National Labor Committee and the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textiles Employees (UNITE), and NGOs such as Press for Change and Global Exchange. By the later 1990s, however, the United Students

⁶⁹ In addition to the near absence of workers in the discourse, factory owners and managers were also given short shrift by these media. On the few instances where worker voices were prominent, see E. Gargan, “An Indonesian Asset Is Also A Liability: Low Wages Woo Foreign Business, But the Price Is Worker Poverty,” *New York Times*, 16 March 1996, D1; S. Mydans, “For Indonesian Workers at Nike Plant: Just Do It,” *New York Times*, 9 August 1996, A4; K. Richburg and A. Swardson, “U.S. Industry Overseas: Sweatshop Or Job Source? Indonesians Praise Work at Nike Factory,” *Washington Post* 28 July 1996, A1.

Against Sweatshops (USAS) emerged as the most commonly cited critical voice in the coverage. Long criticized for a lack of political engagement that was more prominent in previous decades, students have become a leading force in the battle to eradicate sweatshops by pressuring the administrations at several large academic institutions (which are also major purchasers and sellers of branded apparel) to adopt progressive 'buyer codes of conduct' that will ensure that none of the university's branded apparel or athletic team uniforms is manufactured under sweatshop conditions. Student activism has been waged on two, interdependent fronts: first, utilizing direct action tactics (demonstrations, sweatshop fashion shows, &c.) to gain the media and public attention necessary for enhancing their bargaining positions with university administrators; and second, engaging in multilateral processes of negotiation with university faculty and administrative representatives to implement 'buyer codes' that will ensure a 'sweat free' campus.⁷⁰

This increased presence on the part of the students as prominent voices in the debate had two consequences for the texture and tone of the coverage. First, students (and to a lesser extent NGOs) were not as easily discredited as labour activists (who were criticized for being motivated by economic self-interest) by Nike or its sympathizers because the students are motivated less by self-interested material gains than a sense of altruism in that their actions are aimed not at enhancing their own material resources but

⁷⁰ For a fuller account of the United Students Against Sweatshops movement, see the collection of essays in Featherstone (2002).

at improving the standards of living and well being of others.⁷¹ As one *Washington Post* contributor explained:

What motivates these well-fed, comfortably housed students to fight for workers thousands of miles and a language away? A concrete answer seems to elude even the most ardent activists. Many recall Thoreau's idea that citizens must take responsibility for the actions of their country. Since American corporations are involved and the products of alleged abuse occupy students' dresser drawers, activists feel compelled to protect workers.

Some cynics say these students are motivated by guilt at their own affluence, or bored by the stability and security in their lives, or even brainwashed pawns following persuasive rhetoric. The activists resent this criticism, pointing to the irresponsibility of people who don't stand up for the rights of the exploited.⁷²

This had the effect of not only making the ethical dimension of global manufacturing more salient in the coverage, but of pressuring Nike and other apparel companies to step up its efforts at improving the material conditions for its overseas workers.⁷³ Second, as students became more successful in pressuring their administrations to adopt progressive 'buyer codes,' news attention to the sweatshop issue shifted discursively from a focus on the tactics activists were using and the reasons they were protesting, to the nature of the buyer codes and the details of their negotiations. This aspect of the coverage is consistent with the general ways in which sweatshops have been defined, which is discussed in the next section of the analysis.

Because activist voices were the most prominent in the coverage, the problematic character of sweatshops was established primarily through the claims they advanced, and

⁷¹ While Nike and its sympathizers/supporters have recognized and encouraged the value of student awareness and involvement in global issues, they also argue that the students have been manipulated by big labour organizations (which have been and remain principal sources of funding and support).

⁷² See K. Palmer, "Few Causes Get Past Campus Activists." *Washington Post* 21 December 1999, C4.

⁷³ After years of denying that the problem was as bad as activists made it out to be, or of displacing blame for the problem of sweatshops onto its overseas contractors, on 12 May 1998 Nike CEO Phil Knight appeared at the National Press Club in Washington to announced "new initiatives to improve factory working conditions worldwide and provide increased opportunities for people who manufacture Nike products" (Nike 1999).

these claims centred on a variety of sub-issues that fell into the five main categories outlined in Table 4. Sweatshops were framed by anti-sweatshop activists as a problem pertaining to: (1) remuneration; (2) working and living conditions; (3) management practices; (4) socio-demographic characteristics of the workforce; and (5) union repression.⁷⁴

[INSERT TABLE 4 HERE]

Of these various categories, *remuneration* was the dominant one in terms of frequency, prominence and persistence of attention. This is primarily because the question of wages remained the major point of contention between activists and industry representatives, though the framing did shift from addressing the issue of the ‘minimum wage’ to that of a ‘living wage’. This shift mirrored the way in which the larger sweatshop narrative developed in response to different activities and the reaction of the news media to these. Of particular importance was the emergence of the Apparel Industry Partnership (AIP) in 1996, an attempt by then-U.S. President Clinton to bring together interested parties (including apparel and footwear companies, human rights groups, the National Consumers Association, and organized labour groups) to work out a common, voluntary code of corporate conduct aimed at the eventual elimination of domestic and foreign sweatshops.⁷⁵

As the media spotlight shifted onto the AIP (and subsequently its successor partnership agreement, the Fair Labor Association or FLA) and the attempt by the

⁷⁴ Themes subsumed under the category of working conditions included health and safety, hours of work, overtime, and the food and living quarters provided for workers. Those encompassed under the category of management practices included allegations of physical, verbal and sexual harassment and abuse.

⁷⁵ See Emmelhainz and Adams (1999) for an analysis of the apparel industry’s formal response to ‘sweatshop’ concerns.

government to facilitate a multilateral resolution, news coverage tended to focus more and more on procedural issues, such as areas of conflict between the different parties concerning what should and should not be included in a particular code of conduct. This is shown by the relative prominence of the category *factory monitoring* in the overall framing of the coverage. The effect of this shift was threefold. First, some of the other categories (e.g. abusive management practices) began to fade as parties reached agreement about these. Second, the collective definition of specific problem issues (e.g. wages, air quality, &c.) tended to be framed increasingly from the point of view of solutions rather than explanations. This is what happened, for example, when corporate representatives agreed unanimously that they should always pay the local minimum wage, while activist groups countered by claiming that the minimum wage is often artificially imposed by local governments at below-subsistence levels in order to attract and retain foreign investment, so employers should instead commit to paying a 'living wage' focused on meeting 'basic human needs'.⁷⁶ And third, new problem categories emerged, for instance those concerning the operational aspects of implementing and actually enforcing a non-state regulated code of corporate compliance. In other words, coverage of the problem shifted discursively from being a substantive issue situated in factories in Asia, Central America and elsewhere, to an administrative and procedural problem located in North America.

⁷⁶ The problem here, however, is that developing a consistent measure of what a 'living wage' will be is a difficult task. As Ballinger argues, "[Nike] has done its studies, I've done my own studies...it is a 'he said, she said' kind of situation and it's not very helpful...Unfortunately, we are not able to say what the wage is and we're not able to have this instrument to enforce these rights" (quoted in Wokutch 2001, p.216).

There were, nonetheless, two exceptions to the conventional manner in which these newspapers framed the sweatshop issue. Each newspaper carried a report in the early part of the sample period that looked directly at the issues in the form of case studies of specific factories.⁷⁷ However, the divergent perspectives of the two stories could not have been more pronounced. The *Post* ran a feature framed primarily in terms of the attitudes of workers in one of Nike's Indonesian factories. These attitudes were cast in mainly positive terms: the workers were glad to have their jobs, they earned enough money to save and send home to their families, and the living quarters provided by the company, though small and basic, were clean and liveable. Some critical perspective was given, but it was secondary in length and prominence. In the *Times*, on the other hand, the framing of the story was more critical but the content around which it was organized was exceptional inasmuch as it focused on an aspect of work relations that disappeared from subsequent coverage, i.e. the steps taken by factory workers themselves to remedy the problems of pay, working conditions and oppressive managerial practices (viz. unionization attempts, strikes and other forms of worker resistance). The report also discussed the response these attempts met, such as various forms of worker discipline, but mainly the immediate dismissal of workers by factory managers. This was really the only time workers were represented as active agents in the sweatshop debate and given a critical voice of their own. For the bulk of the coverage, they were treated more or less passively, *subjected to* sweatshop practices and attempts at their elimination and *subjects of* debate and struggle between corporations and activists over their best interests.

⁷⁷ Richburg and Swardson, "U.S. Industry Overseas," *op cit.*; Gargan, "An Indonesian Asset is Also a Liability," *op cit.*

3. Explaining Sweatshops

Critical discourse analysts (e.g. Fairclough 1995) have drawn attention to the manner in which communicating texts contain embedded meanings that derive from the surface structure of, among other things, word choice. This process of 'lexicalization' is geared toward the emphasis or de-emphasis of certain preferred interpretations. For example, that negative opinions about undesirable, transient, asylum-seeking populations are lexicalized through terms such as 'aliens', 'queue-jumpers' or 'illegals,' stands in marked contrast to positive lexicalizations such as 'hard working' or 'industrious' to refer to the images of preferred migrant worker groups. Importantly, as Fairclough (1995) alludes, lexicalization is a process that is based in and on the broader social context, i.e. the properties of political discourse that govern word choice and meaning are not trans-historical but emerge through processes of contestation and struggle by "speech participants" (see also van Dijk 1997).

In the Nike case, the most interesting aspect of the coverage was the media's use of terms such as 'abuse' or 'violation' to explain the existence of sweatshops. The implication of this was that the labour practices and standards of corporations such as Nike were portrayed as a deviation or aberration from some kind of implied norm about what should be reasonable labour practices and standards in a global context. As Pearson and Seyfang have argued, "the complexities of working out mechanisms for implementation, monitoring, local adaptation and accountability in terms of worksites and workforces" makes the task of agreeing to a set of norms and standards very difficult

for industry, NGOs, labour organizations and governments (2001, p.54). Nevertheless, underlying the sweatshop debate there was agreement that businesses operating in an international context should be bound by a set of principles and ethical guidelines oriented toward encouraging economic and social progress in impoverished regions.⁷⁸ This is interesting insofar as the formation of the AIP (and FLA), and the subsequent conflicts between the various parties, were precisely about reaching agreement around exactly what such a norm should be. In other words, there was something of a contradiction at the heart of the coverage, particularly early on, in that it assumed a global manufacturing norm that had not yet been established.⁷⁹

Although sweatshops were portrayed as an anomalous effect of what are otherwise considered to be routine business practices, the coverage did not address or take into consideration causal claims about the structural conditions of sweatshops in any explicit or extensive way. Rather, the causal chain was traced from the nature of the industry itself through to retail outlets and, eventually, its origins were located with the agency of the consumer. Rather than locating the cause of sweatshops in the motive of

⁷⁸ While there was very limited to no discussion of particular frameworks, these 'implied norms' tended to conform with the International Labour Organization's (ILO) core Human Rights Conventions: Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention 1948 (no. 87); Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention 1949 (no. 98); Forced Labour Convention 1957 (no. 105); Discrimination Convention 1958 (no. 111); Equal Remuneration Convention 1951 (no. 100); Minimum Age Convention 1973 (no. 138). See International Labour Organization (1999; cited in and elaborated upon in Pearson and Seyfang 2001).

⁷⁹ Again, however, there was an exception to this pattern of representing sweatshop practices as an anomaly or aberration. In a column appearing in the *Washington Post* (3 November 1996, C1), Anita Chan, a labour researcher at Australian National University, argued that, in China at least, militaristic discipline (including minimum wages, compulsory overtime, authoritarian sanctions, and the collusion of local authorities in ignoring breaches of labour law and reinforcing management control) was common in labour-intensive manufacturing sectors such as the apparel and footwear industries. The implication of Chan's analysis was that far from being an aberration or exceptional practices, sweatshops were actually the logical fulfillment of the norm. Chan's argument was that sweatshops had become the visible tip of the iceberg of a typical labour process under economic globalization

TNCs to accelerate short-term shareholder value, it was consumers' twin desire for low cost, fashionable apparel, with maximum choice and frequent style turnover that was seen as the driving factor behind the pressure on retailers which, in turn, was passed on to manufacturers in the form of greater competition, tighter profit margins and the constant need to meet fluctuating demand. The end result was the kind of 'corner cutting' that resulted in sweatshop conditions for workers. As Kathie Lee Gifford stated in response to reporter questions about why her goods were being made under sweatshop conditions:

Nobody expected the huge demand there was for my line...Sales tripled Wal-Mart's expectations, and suddenly it was like 'Uh-oh, we need to get 50,000 more blouses and fast'. I think that's part of how this all came about. Maybe we just grew too fast.⁸⁰

For Gifford, the conditions under which her clothing was being made were not only an administrative oversight, but their presence emerged only as a result of the 'huge demand' on the part of consumers.

Insofar as sweatshops were seen to be the outcome of consumer demand and self-interest, there was also a paradox in this explanation, however, which is that not only was the existence of sweatshops attributed to the agency of consumers but so too was their problematization. If the production pressures that gave rise to sweatshops resulted from consumer demand, then so too was the elimination of sweatshops seen to be achievable by the demands and actions of consumers. Putting a spin on Marx's famous 'call to arms', the *Post's* E.J. Dionne Jr. wrote:

Consumers and workers of the world unite – Just do it! If you do, you can affect the behavior of manufacturing giants such as Nike, for whom image is everything...enforceable global labor standards will not come easily. In the

⁸⁰ Cited in S. Strom, "A Sweetheart Becomes Suspect: Looking Behind Those Kathie Lee Labels," *New York Times*, 27 June 1996, D1.

meantime, there is something called the marketplace, and it gives consumers the right to make judgements.⁸¹

Sweatshops had thus become defined as a 'problem' not simply because companies like Nike wished to accumulate as much profit for shareholders as they could muster by continually seeking out the cheapest source of labour, nor even because of the pressure on the part of activists which kept the issue alive in the news media. Rather, it was because of apparent growing concern by consumers about the conditions in which the products they prefer to buy were being manufactured that sweatshops had become a problem worthy of public attention. The emphasis on consumer concern was noticeably stronger in the *Post*, but it was also evident in the *Times*, particularly in its coverage of the AIP. As the coverage began to focus on the AIP and attempts to resolve the sweatshop problem, the goal of resolution shifted from improving the lives and conditions of workers to reassuring consumers about how to tell which consumer goods were 'sweat free'.⁸² It was thus not workers in less-developed countries but North American consumers who were referred to as the immediate beneficiaries of change, and improving the labour standards in overseas factories by way of a voluntary corporate code of conduct was seen as the most effective means to achieve this.

The explanation for sweatshops as an outcome of changing consumer tastes and desires clearly conforms to a liberal market ideology that puts demand in control of supply and production at the mercy of consumption. Placing power in the hands of atomized, dispersed consumers not only reduces the responsibility of corporations like

⁸¹ Dionne, "Bad for Business," *op cit*.

⁸² For example, see the pre-Christmas article by H. Hiam-White, "Their Labor, Our Gifts, Your Choices," *Washington Post*, 20 December 1998, C3.

Nike, but it also makes the issue of global manufacturing appear more complex inasmuch as there is no longer any definitive centre of power (be this a government or corporation) to which effective blame can be attributed. Simply put, blaming consumers makes the problem seem that much more abstract and slows down the prospect of taking remedial action. What this ideology overlooks, however, is the manner by which demand itself is socialized by supply, i.e. by the massive promotional apparatus that attempts (although at times unsuccessfully) to seduce consumers into desiring what producers wish to supply. Demand, therefore, is not an autonomous process, but is constantly shaped and influenced by the efforts of producers through extensive research into consumer taste and buying patterns, marketing, advertising, sponsorships, endorsements, and so on. To place a different inflection on the central tenet of agenda-setting research, although the promotional apparatus of marketing, advertising and public relations cannot totally determine what people will want, it is remarkably successful much of the time in telling them what to think about wanting.

The double positioning of the consumer as the leading *cause* of sweatshops and the source of their *problematization* points to the ways in which news discourse transforms complex structural issues into problems of consumption, but it also raises a serious question mark over the common assumption about the more or less homogeneous subjectivity of individuals in the 'consumer society' (see the collection of essays in Schor and Holt 2000). The image of the consumer whose desire for fashionable and affordable footwear and apparel is responsible for the pressure on manufacturers that ultimately leads to sweatshop conditions, clearly conforms to the model of the atomized and self-

interested subject that is the archetype of the consumer society. But how are we to make sense of the other side of consumerism, the side that exhibits empathy and concern about the ethically problematic aspects of international outsourcing? How are we to reconcile the manner in which middle-class, white college students in the West are identifying with and mobilizing on behalf of the interests of peasant, migrant female workers in overseas factories? How are we to make sense of the findings of the most recent “Americans on Globalizations Survey,” which found that more than 75 percent of respondents indicated a willingness to pay extra money for an item of clothing if they could be assured it was not made in a sweatshop?⁸³ And how are we to make sense of a growing global social movement of consumer and citizen groups in protest of the environmental and labour records of TNCs such as Nike (Klein 2000; Sage 1999)? Clearly, the subjectivity of the consumer is far more complex than neo-classical economists and consumer society theorists would have us believe. As newspaper coverage of the anti-sweatshop campaign against Nike illustrates, consumer society is more than just a ‘system of needs’ and unbridled consumption (Baudrillard 1988). Inasmuch as the capitalist economy continually seeks to reproduce its own logic and form, it is also a source of new problems and vulnerabilities (Beck 1997) in that it is at the same time a society of citizen and consumer activism. As an arena first and foremost of communication and the circulation of information, the news media is the place where this activism is shaped and its meanings are given form.

⁸³ The survey was conducted by telephone between 21 and 29 October 1999 to 1,826 adults in the United States. The short-run results are published by the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut, Public Opinion Online. Retrieved using Lexis-Nexis, accession number 034058.

Conclusion

One of the ways that transnational corporations seek to maximize their profits and increase shareholder value has been through subcontracting the manufacture of their products to other firms in global production chains. In labour intensive sectors shaped by volatile consumer demand, such as athletic footwear and branded apparel, where Nike has been an industry leader, this has been met by criticism on the part of a transnational coalition of anti-sweatshop activists that the enormous short term pressure on contractors occupying the lower positions in the production chain leads to substandard working conditions for the mostly migrant peasant young women who bear the burdens of work intensification and overtime. TNCs such as Nike, which because of their commercial success are prominent targets of such criticism, claim that they are contributing to the economic development of the regions where their goods are manufactured, that they are providing the work and job skills necessary for workers in these areas to achieve success in the 'new global economy'. Acknowledging that the complexities of global business will mean that there are always going to be isolated problems in some of its factories, Nike claims to be committed to improving worker conditions without sacrificing the quality of its products, and, certainly, though less explicitly, the strength of its stock value.

Despite the philanthropic gloss Nike bestows unto itself as a responsible corporate citizen, however, critics have been successful in defining these 'isolated' problems as the norm, rather than exception to the rule (Klein 2000). Part of the success of the anti-

sweatshop movement has been its ability to utilize news media as an institutional channel for articulating grievance claims. The empirical data presented above have shown how 1996 was a pivotal year for news reporting on the sweatshop issue, and the anti-sweatshop campaign more specifically. Despite several years of grassroots organizing by workers and non-governmental organizations to bring to light the 'realities' of global manufacturing standards and practices, it took the 'discovery' of a single sweatshop producing a line of clothing for a popular American celebrity to thrust the sweatshop issue into the media and public spotlight.

Our analysis of the framing and narrativization of the sweatshop issue in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* indicates that in contrast to critical studies which typically show powerful sources as the most prominent voices in debates over problem issues and events, in this case it was the anti-sweatshop movement that achieved a position of definitional prominence in relation to its protagonists in the corporate sector. In conforming to the conventional "claim – counterclaim" format of most news stories, the discourse was overwhelmingly framed as a conflict between activists and representatives from Nike and, to a less extent, others in the corporate sector. Government representatives were comparatively less prominent and workers were for the most part invisible, exerting a presence (as the subject of debate) only by virtue of their absence (as a news source). Although the methods used in this study cannot explain the reasons for these absences, we can speculate that in the case of the state the minimal presence is indicative of the 'arms length,' mediating role governments are increasingly assuming between the corporate sector and civil society in the period marked by neo-

liberal restructuring. In short, the lack of presence in the coverage of sources from within the US government, host governments, or supranational governing agencies such as the World Trade Organization or International Labour Organization, suggests a small victory for neo-liberalism in that the coverage has given rise to a 'consumer v. producer' discourse over, for example, a more overtly 'political' one. This characteristic of the coverage might also be explained by the fact that the issue in question implicates governments not only in North America but also in the developing regions where Nike factories are located, thus making the task of 'sourcing' government voices more difficult for journalists. Consequently, this remains a matter deserving of further investigation and interviews with news practitioners to seek answers to such matters as source selection would undoubtedly enhance the empirical results detailed above.

The analysis also indicates that the coverage was very clearly not concerned with the political economic factors that are largely responsible for the emergence of sweatshops. No discussion was offered, for example, of the pressures placed onto local governments – which are often brutal in their repression of human (let alone workers') rights – by structural adjustment programmes that encourage the formation of export-processing zones in which sweatshops thrive. Instead, the coverage tended to be concentrated around the implications that the effects of globalization (specifically sweatshops) have for consumers in the west. Although they were defined negatively as an objectionable or abhorrent feature of the global world economy, sweatshops were constructed as a problem whose roots were found in demand by a "consumerist caste" (Stabile 2000) for low-cost and fashionable footwear and apparel. Paradoxically,

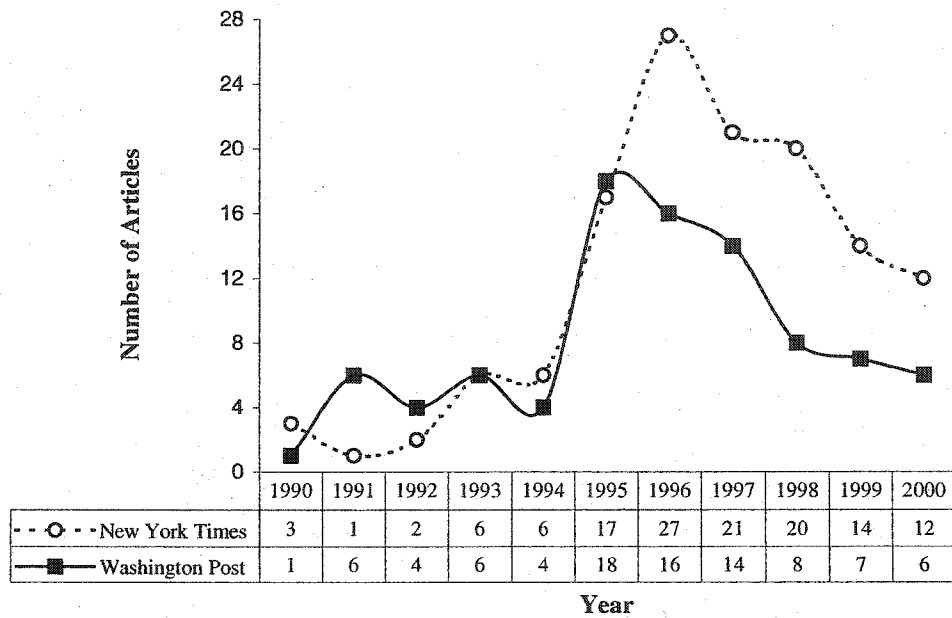
however, while the coverage located the source of sweatshop conditions in these twin pursuits of consumption, it also located the problematization of sweatshops in the agency of the consumer.

In the period since 2000, the sweatshop issue has become notably less 'visible' as a media topic.⁸⁴ In spite of the progress on the part of Nike to ensure the implementation of its voluntary code of conduct in its overseas plants, however, critics point to recurring abuses of labour and human rights and continue to exert pressure on the corporation to improve workplace standards. Across North America, under pressure from student and public interest groups, universities and other large buyers of branded apparel have begun to adopt more progressive labour codes to be proactive in ensuring that the products purchased and sold on campus do not wear the stains of sweatshop labour. The methods to accomplish this goal have changed, however, as students have become more successful in reaching agreements with university administrations without having to resort to the confrontational tactics that are the fodder of media attention and coverage. One possible side effect of this shift by activists to multilateral forms of agreement and institutional models for remedying the sweatshop problem has been that the issue has become 'less newsworthy': protests and demonstrations featuring angry and determined activists make for better copy than on-record briefings of long-term discussions among the various parties to institutional agreements over the substance and implementation of buyer codes of conduct. While this shift demonstrates an ability on the part of activists to have a hand

⁸⁴ In 2001, the *Times* ran a total of 8 articles on sweatshops (all 'hard' news) compared to only 1 article (an editorial) in the *Post*. In 2002, both newspapers ran 3 articles each, with the *Times* publishing only editorials and the *Post* 'hard' news articles.

in the shaping of policy decisions that will potentially pressure companies such as Nike to improve workplace standards, it poses the additional dilemma of reducing the issue's media visibility, which is often a necessary component to garnering popular support for progressive political causes.

FIGURE 1
Year by Year Frequencies of News Articles on Sweatshops,
New York Times and Washington Post (1990-2000)



*Note: Frequencies are total numbers of articles and do not differentiate hard news and opinion discourse.

TABLE 1
Newspaper Coverage of Anti-Sweatshop Activism (1996-2000):
Number of articles, by type of news and location in newspaper

	<i>New York Times</i>		<i>Washington Post</i>	
	N	%	N	%
<i>Hard News</i>				
Front Page	5	8.9	3	9.7
A1	18	32.1	6	19.4
Business	8	14.3	5	16.1
Sports	6	10.7	2	5.9
Other	0	0.0	6	19.4
TOTAL	37	66.0	22	70.9
<i>Opinion</i>				
Editorial	3	5.4	1	3.2
Op-Ed	9	16.1	2	6.5
Guest	3	5.4	4	12.9
Letter	4	7.1	2	6.5
TOTAL	19	34.0	9	29.0
<i>Totals</i>	56	100.0	31	99.9

*Note: A1 refers to articles appearing in the front section of the newspaper, except for the front-page.

TABLE 2
Newspaper Coverage of Sweatshops (1996-2000):
Source Quotations and Points of View (POV)*

SOURCE	<i>New York Times</i>		<i>Washington Post</i>	
	QUOTE	POV	QUOTE	POV
Activists	38.7	37.8	40.0	38.9
Corporate	34.4	34.0	38.5	41.7
AIP/FLA	8.4	11.1	2.3	2.5
Universities	7.8	8.1	5.2	4.0
Government	6.8	5.0	9.2	9.9
Other	3.9	4.0	4.8	3.0
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%
	N=181	N=556	N=74	N=229

* The coverage used to code the data presented in Table 2 consisted only of 'hard' news. Frequency was measured by counting the number of times each source was quoted or had its points of view (POV) represented in a single paragraph. When two or more sources were represented in a single paragraph, each source was counted separately. Sources under the category "other" included individual consumers and academics not affiliated with any official organization.

TABLE 3
Newspaper Coverage of Sweatshops (1996-2000):
Temporal representation of prominent activist voices (%)*

ACTIVIST	<i>New York Times</i>					<i>Washington Post</i>				
	1996	97	98	99	2000	1996	97	98	99	2000
USAS	0.0	5.9	5.9	41.2	47.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	75.0	25.0
NLC	16.7	33.3	0.0	33.3	16.7	40.0	40.0	20.0	0.0	0.0
UNITE	0.0	30.0	20.0	30.0	20.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Global Exchange	14.3	71.4	14.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	33.3	33.3	0.0	33.3
Press Change	40.0	40.0	20.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

*These figures do not capture all of the activist voices that were present in the coverage. The data pertains to groups that were most prominently featured in the news. 'Prominent' activist groups were referred to in a minimum of six news articles. An activist group was 'present' in a news article if it was identified and quoted at least once. Besides the five organizations listed in Table 3, there were twelve additional organizations identified at given times throughout the sample period, however they were not present in more than six articles. As there was often more than one activist group mentioned in a single article, the percentages do not add to 100.

** USAS=United Students Against Sweatshops; NLC=National Labor Committee; UNITE=Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees

TABLE 4
Newspaper Coverage of Sweatshops (1996-2000):
Dominant Issue Themes, by news type (%)

ISSUE THEME	<i>New York Times</i>		<i>Washington Post</i>	
	Hard News	Opinion	Hard News	Opinion
Remuneration	25.0	38.5	24.9	23.8
Working/Living Conditions	23.5	23.0	21.5	19.0
Factory Monitoring	20.6	19.2	18.0	9.5
Socio-Demographics	19.1	11.5	12.7	9.5
Union Repression	5.9	3.9	9.0	14.3
Management Practices	4.4	3.9	3.3	14.3
Other	1.5	0.0	10.6	9.5
TOTAL	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	99.9%
	N=68	N=26	N=39	N=21

*Notes: References to “remuneration” are those that address low wages or the minimum wage v. living wage debate. References to “working/living conditions” are those that address health and safety (e.g. air quality), hours of work, forced overtime and food and living quarters provided to workers. References to “socio-demographic” composition of the workforce include: largely female workforce, mostly peasant migrants from countryside and child labour. References to “union repression” involve issues of factory owners and state attempts to quash worker organization. References to “factory monitoring” are those that address the difficulties and problems of adequately monitoring factory conditions to satisfy critics.

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Promotionalism and Subpolitics: Nike and Its Labor Critics

Introduction

On May 12, 1998, Nike CEO, Phil Knight, appeared at the National Press Club in Washington to announce “new initiatives to further improve factory working conditions worldwide and provide increased opportunities for people who manufacture Nike products” (Nike 1999b). Knight admitted that Nike products – and by implication its corporate identity – had become “synonymous with slave wages, forced overtime and arbitrary abuse” (Dionne 1998, p. A7). The context for Knight’s speech was economic and political. Nike had recently suffered a significant drop in its share price in connection with the Asian financial crisis and projections about sales and profits had been revised downwards. But the speech also came on the heels of a series of public relations problems in regard to the campaign being waged by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor unions, religious groups, and other activists in the United States and elsewhere against sweatshop labor practices in developing countries. These practices included below subsistence wages, hazardous and stressful working conditions, forced overtime, long working hours, abusive management and denial of workers rights to organize independent unions.

The target of the anti-sweatshop movement has been western transnational corporations in industries such as sports apparel and footwear which rely heavily on the “triangle” or “export processing” manufacturing system where production is contracted out to companies based in newly industrialized countries such as Taiwan and Korea with factories in low wage countries in Asia, Central America, and elsewhere in the

developing world (Gereffi 1994; Korzeniewicz 1994). Nike in particular has become the principal object of anti-sweatshop criticism and the growing media publicity of the issue, especially since the mid-1990s. In its coverage of Knight's speech in the *New York Times*, it was noted that Nike had recently been "pummelled in the public relations arena" (Cushman 1998, p. D1) in regard to these criticisms. In 1997 the company was the object of critical media attention as a result of two commissioned reports of working conditions in its contract factories. The first, by GoodWorks International, gave Nike a generally favorable review, but the report was widely criticized for its poor methodology and narrow focus just as Nike was attempting to capitalize on the report through a series of publicity advertisements (Herbert 1997). The second, an audit of a Vietnamese factory by Ernst and Young that was leaked by a Nike employee, documented serious threats to workers' health and safety (Greenhouse 1997). Elsewhere in the media Nike was lampooned as a sweatshop employer in the popular comic strip *Doonesbury*. Similarly, in Michael Moore's film, *The Big One*, Phil Knight "found himself saying unbelievably callous, stupid, and uninformed things about Nike's third-world working conditions" (cited in Kuttner 1998).

This article seeks to address two questions. The first is why Nike has become the most prominent target of anti-sweatshop criticism given that its production practices do not vary significantly from those of its major competitors, such as Reebok and adidas-Saloman, or from other transnationals in the apparel and footwear industries generally. The second is why Nike has faced persistent problems in the public relations arena. We make two arguments in response to these questions. The first is that Nike is the principal

target of anti-sweatshop activism because of its symbolic as well as economic prominence. Nike has become a celebrity corporation as a result of its high-profile promotional practices, which are responsible not only for its commercial success but also for making it into a salient target for activist criticism. Secondly we argue that social activism poses a challenge for corporate communication and issues management because it is ethically motivated, has a de-centered network form of organization, and relies on the use of reflexive tactics that turn promotional power against itself.

These arguments are developed in four steps. In the first section of the article we outline the importance of promotional communication in buyer-driven commodity chains such as sports apparel and footwear. Nike has been especially adept at integrating claims to social responsibility into a promotional strategy that involves two major elements: extensive endorsements and sponsorships, and the use of information subsidies. Nike has been able to transfer the celebrity value of endorsers such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods to its own corporate identity, and achieve public prominence through its media presence. In the second section, we argue that Nike's promotional success has had reflexive effects by making the company highly visible as a target for anti-sweatshop activism. This activism, an example of what Ulrich Beck (1997) called "subpolitics," has taken the form of counter-branding Nike through using the public sphere to publicize the gap between Nike's claims and the conditions and experiences of its workforce. Because Nike is so dependent on publicity, it is vulnerable to counter-publicity. In the third section we argue that, in contrast to its promotional success, Nike's public relations response to anti-sweatshop criticism has been problematic. Nike has responded reactively

and defensively. This has allowed Nike's issues management response to be interrupted and disrupted by activists whose communication tactics stress the exposure of local crises in labor conditions. In the conclusion we assess the implications of our analysis for both Nike and the anti-sweatshop movement. Nike faces the dual problem of making substantive improvements to working conditions, wages, and workers' rights, and restoring its public credibility as a company whose claims to social responsibility are seen as sincere. For the anti-sweatshop movement, the challenge is to sustain the interest of the media and the public in its campaign in a social environment where multiple issues and problems are competing for attention and action.

Promotionalism: Communicating Corporate Identity

Nike has become a principal target of anti-sweatshop activism not only because it is the largest company in the global sports shoe and apparel industry, but also because it has achieved public prominence as a celebrity corporation. Nike has successfully integrated the way it has constructed and communicated different aspects of its corporate identity into an effective promotional strategy that associates its brand name and image with positive social values ranging from athleticism and fitness to social and environmental responsibility to patriotism (Cole 1996; Cole and Hribar 1995). Nike has been adept at using the logic of promotionalism to craft a flexible, multi-faceted identity that enables the company to represent itself simultaneously as serious and "cool," socially conscious and fashionable, earnest and ironic, image-conscious and technologically sophisticated (Goldman and Papsen 1998). Following Wernick's (1991) definition,

promotionalism entails the integration of different aspects or forms of communication to the extent that functional differences between them become blurred and fused. Advertising, marketing, public relations and other forms of what Boje (2000) called “corporate writing” such as mission statements, annual reports, and even corporate architecture are integrated into a self-referential network of signs (Cheney and Christensen 2001). So, for example, when Tiger Woods advertises Nike, Nike also advertises Tiger Woods and there is no clear or fixed distinction in their relationship between the signifier and the signified.

Promotionalism entails the management of public presence and the attempt to translate this presence into an asset that serves the corporation’s economic success and continuity. The construction and circulation of corporate identity is the mechanism by which public presence is managed (Cheney and Christensen 2001). Identity is a condensed representation and projection of the essential self that is defined in terms of positive values that transcend particular practices or circumstances and draw their meaning and resonance from the wider cultural environment in which the organization is situated. This transcendent quality indicates how identity is a response to the constant problematization of corporate practices that comes from operating in an environment where competitive success is the ruling logic, yet where different stakeholders may also have contradictory expectations of the organization’s role and responsibilities. Corporate identity, which is signified above all by the brand name, logo and slogan, comes to serve multiple functions. Externally the role of identity is to distinguish the corporation from market rivals not only economically, in terms of the quality and price of its products, but

also socially in terms of its place in the wider community. Corporate identity is a tool to motivate consumer and investor identification with the organization and its products, and a way to legitimate the corporation and its activities. Internally, the role of corporate identity is to secure unity and identification with the organization and its goals on the part of members who are functionally differentiated and stratified. Internally and externally, identity concerns the generation of trust.

Promotionalism in Buyer-Driven Commodity Chains

Although it is widely recognized that corporate identity – and the need for extensive promotionalism to publicize it – is becoming increasingly significant, that significance varies structurally. Identity and promotionalism play an especially critical role for brand name companies in buyer-driven commodity chains such as the apparel and athletic footwear industries where export-processing manufacturing is increasingly the norm. In buyer-driven chains, economic success depends on control over and heavy investment in the initial and final stages of the production process, that is, over product conception, design, and styling on the one hand, and marketing, advertising, product display and consumer relations on the other (Gereffi 1994; Korzeniewicz 1994). The intervening stages of component fabrication and product assembly are contracted out to factories in developing countries where low skilled, cheap labor – especially young migrant women who are also considered to be more compliant and reliable – is relatively plentiful (Carty 1997). These are also countries where local political elites often seek to attract foreign capital by ensuring environmental and labor standards are poorly enforced

or non-existent, and where social stability depends on authoritarian methods of social control. While promotional strategies linking product conception to marketing often emphasize the product's technological and aesthetic sophistication, production practices rely heavily on labor-intensive methods in which productivity and profitability depend on the kind of intensified labor process typical of the "bloodier" forms of Taylorism (Lipietz 1987).

Buyer-driven commodity chains entail a dissociation of production and consumption that is economic as well as geographical. Manufacturing labor costs are only a small fraction of the final price that consumers pay for the product. The total costs of promotion, including product styling and design, outweigh those of actual production as new styles, models and lines are constantly required to ensure the growth of consumer demand in what is a market of parity products. Constant product innovation and turnover mean that the brand name and logo become the principal means to stabilize corporate identity and its public reputation. In this context Nike's promotionalism has been distinct not only in its public prominence and presence, but also in the way it has attempted to mobilize the logic of "cause-related marketing" (Smith and Higgins 2000) to capitalize on issues of social responsibility and activism that go beyond (as well as including) conventional forms of corporate philanthropy (Cole 1996; Stabile 2000). Nike has sought to associate itself with the rights, needs and aspirations of the socially disadvantaged and excluded such as African-Americans, women, and the disabled by promoting a discourse of self-empowerment and affirmation through sport, fitness and physical activity (Cole 1996; Cole and Hribar 1995; Stabile 2000).

Nike's Promotional Communication Strategy

Nike's promotional strategy has involved two elements that are important in the integration of commercialism and social responsibility: the use of endorsements and sponsorships as a vehicle to promote social causes and the use of information subsidies as a way to manage publicity. Both have a dual character and function in a way that reinforces the flexibility and mobility of Nike's identity. The use of celebrity sports endorsers and the sponsorship of sporting events and activity as vehicles to promote social causes expands the meaning of both and blurs the line between commercial and non-commercial activity. Nike's products and brand name, its corporate identity, its social activism on behalf of others (especially the disadvantaged or those at risk), the identity of celebrity endorsers, and the identity of the sports these endorsers play, all feed into the promotional mix. The effects often extend beyond local or national contexts and play out at a global level, as the example of Michael Jordan illustrates (LeFeber 1999). The integration of endorsements and sponsorships enables Nike to represent itself as a socially concerned actor promoting sport as a solution to social problems. Crucially, the problems these causes address tend to be defined in a way that strips them of their material determinants; they become problems of attitude and disposition for which Nike and the corporate economy should not be held responsible. Material inequalities and social divisions are at once acknowledged and effaced through the fusion of ethical and commercial interests and the promotion of affirmative values (Cole and Hribar 1995; Cole 1996).

Nike's "If you let me play" advertising campaign vaunting the personal and social benefits of female participation in sport and its Participate in the Lives of American Youth (P.L.A.Y.) program, launched in 1994, are the most prominent examples of the integration of commercial and ethical promotionalism. Both positioned themselves as the response to a problem of social exclusion and disadvantage. This was articulated more explicitly in the case of the P.L.A.Y. program which, according to Phil Knight, was the reaction to a "crisis in America" as children were denied access to sport and play due to cutbacks in school sport programs and the lack of safety in community playgrounds (*Business Wire*, cited in Goldman and Papson 1998, p.109). The publicity campaign promoting the program on television made use of Nike endorsers such as Michael Jordan and Jackie Joyner-Kersey to narrate visual images of the "social alienation of poverty and their transcendence via sports." (Goldman and Papson 1998, p.109; see also Cole 1996).

The area in which Nike has most recently extended its endorsement and sponsorship practices is the development of sporting opportunities and rising athletes in developing countries, particularly in Asia where much of the company's production capacity is located and where much of the anti-sweatshop criticism and activism is focused. Asian countries, particularly the most rapidly developing ones, are becoming increasingly attractive as potential consumer markets. The proportion of Nike's revenue from foreign sales grew from 27% in 1987 to almost 45% in 2000 when the Asia-Pacific region accounted for 11.1% of total sales, up from 10.1% in 1999 (Goldman and Papson 1998, p.5; Nike 2000). The promotion of young Asian athletes entails the integration of what Nike (1999c) refers to as a "three-tiered...campaign." The first tier is the

introduction of a new product line, the Play Series, comprising 6 different sports-related shoes, which the company claims “delivers Nike performance technology with an accessible price.” This is part of an attempt to expand Nike’s consumer markets in Asia, which also entails the opening of “up to 20 Nike-only stores, with one Flagship Store in each key city across Southeast Asia” in partnership with “strategic retail partners” (Nike 1999c). The second tier is an advertising campaign to promote the new shoes. This is organized in terms of the slogan “It’s My Turn” and features “inspiring and aspiring young Asian athletes” as endorsers. The final tier is a series of local community development projects known as Play Zones that complete the linkages among the product, the brand, sport as an activity and value, and societal benefit. The Play Zones are a Nike sponsored project to “refurbish and upgrade adopted playgrounds, conduct maintenance work and host sporting events on-site” in six Asian countries (Nike 1999a).

Nike’s integration of communication into a broader promotional strategy has made extensive use of information subsidies. There are two main types of information subsidy, quantitative and qualitative, and Nike has exploited both (Gandy 1992). Direct or quantitative subsidies occur when one actor assumes the economic cost of generating or providing information for the use or benefit of another. In this respect, Nike provides information subsidies to the media inasmuch as it acts as a source of information about its business activities, sponsorships, community programs, and so forth. The obverse of this is that the media provide indirect or qualitative information subsidies back to Nike inasmuch as media coverage, at least good news coverage, enhances the presence and value of Nike’s identity in the public sphere. Most importantly, qualitative subsidies

enhance corporate legitimacy by displacing the source of information onto the media whose credibility is greater to the extent that it is seen to be more objective and less self-interested. Information subsidies amount to an exchange of cost and trust.

Nike's ability to make use of qualitative subsidies has been expanded by the development of the Internet as a communications tool. As part of its "nikebiz" website Nike republishes selected press coverage in edited and unedited form. While much of this consists of promotionally positive coverage – for example, the opening of a new Nikeworld store, victory celebrations by a Nike endorser, or the results of a sponsored sports event – Nike has also included some coverage of its labor practices critics, including its own FAQ page on wages and related labor rights issues, letters responding to activist groups such as the Clean Clothes Campaign, and, most recently, a twelve-minute virtual video tour of Nike factories in Asia. The website comes to play a role similar to that of the department store window in which a diverse array of items is put on display without any other overt logic determining their arrangement except a promotional one that positions the viewer as a consumer of Nike's identity who is free to pick and choose which elements strike his or her interest: products to buy, share price trends to contemplate, or ethical concerns to allay.

The website is designed to play a strategic communications role for the company in which all aspects of its marketing, promotional and public relations communications are integrated together in a networked form (Jensen 1996). The website offers a way to unify communication with different audiences and audience segments in a single virtual space. Its use as a means to acknowledge and address one's critics in a controlled

environment is valuable given the way that the actions of these different audiences, particularly consumers and investors, are interrelated. Answering one's critics is a way to display openness and reassure not only consumers concerned about the ethics of one's products, but also investors whose decisions are calculated in terms of prospective sales and revenue. Neo-liberal economic globalization has not only enhanced corporate power through de-regulative reforms, it has also created new areas of corporate vulnerability by reinforcing shareholder value as the overriding measure of corporate success and with it the critical role of the (large institutional) investor. De-regulation intensifies the likelihood of stock market volatility resulting from the rapid communication of bad publicity.

Information control becomes especially critical in an environment sensitive to bad news when desirable audiences overlap. The recent emergence of groups such as United Students Against Sweatshops as important participants in the broader anti-sweatshop movement point to the way in which middle class university students have targeted Nike's college sports apparel market as a way to press the company to accede to independently monitored codes of labor conduct. As the next generation of the professional-managerial class, university students are desirable consumers as well as potential investors. They are also already more likely to be familiar with and reliant on the Internet as a means of communication and source of information, sceptical of more conventional forms of promotionalism, and aware of and sympathetic to the arguments of Nike's anti-sweatshop critics. For an audience such as this, whose style of life is now

internationalized, the Internet offers companies such as Nike an opportunity to globalize information about local promotional initiatives.

Reflexivity and Subpolitics: The Problems of Promotionalism

The incorporation of social responsibility into Nike's promotional strategy was designed not only to enhance the serious, socially committed side of Nike's corporate identity, but also to deflect early criticism of the company for the side effects of its promotional and commercial success. To the extent that this was successful in the short-term, it has served in the longer term only to displace the object of activist criticism from the manipulation of consumers and the exploitation of urban, African-American youth subculture to the treatment of Nike's workforce in Asia and elsewhere. While the focus of anti-sweatshop activism is the material conditions of production in Nike's factories, the strategy that activists have adopted relies heavily on communication and publicity as the principal means to exert pressure on Nike. Anti-sweatshop activism has thus been able to exploit Nike's own dependence on public image and communication as a way to turn promotionalism back on itself and open up issues such as wages, working conditions and worker rights to ethical criticism.

Reflexivity: Promotionalism as its Own Problem

The pervasiveness of promotionalism speaks not only to the importance of corporate identity in the marketplace, but also to the blurring of boundaries between the marketplace and the wider social, political and cultural environment that the process of

commodification brings about. Promotionalism is directed ultimately at the production of consumption, which takes place in civil society, outside the economic sphere. Promotionalism further blurs boundaries inasmuch as it draws on and incorporates the values of civil society as a means to enhance corporate identity, particularly when identity becomes problematic. For example, Cole and Hribar (1995) have argued that when Nike lost market share and leadership to Reebok in the mid-1980s, its response was to re-focus its promotionalism on female consumers by incorporating into its advertising and other forms of communication an appeal to and celebration of women's aspirations for autonomy and self-empowerment. This was done in a way that reflected the growing hegemony of neo-liberal ideology by framing these aspirations in terms of an individualistic preoccupation with the body as power and the stylization of life through consumerism. Nike fused together images of distinct forms of power in which the body is treated simultaneously as an object capable of efficient and disciplined productivity and as a focus of self-care and concern (Foucault 1977, 1988). Similarly, Cole (1996) has argued that Nike's use of African-American celebrity endorsers like Michael Jordan to promote social causes as well as commodities makes use of racial imagery in a way that transcends and effaces specifically racial meanings. Jordan is represented in Nike's promotionalism as the personification of universal values rather than a particular community whose interests are shaped by social exclusion.

In both of these cases, Nike used promotional strategies to resolve market-based problems, in one case using cultural values to appeal to a new, expanding market segment and in the other, using a particular social identity as a way to transcend social difference

and generate universal appeal. Nike has also used promotional logic to address problems that have arisen outside the marketplace. As Cole (1996) and Stabile (2000) noted, Nike's integration of marketing and social responsibility has generally been a response to controversy and crisis originating in civil society. Nike's P.L.A.Y. program, for example, came in the wake of bad publicity Nike suffered in the late 1980s and early 1990s from its association with a wave of "sneaker crimes" when media reports of youths being mugged and even killed for their sport shoes began to circulate. The finger was pointed at Nike precisely because of the powerful effect its promotionalism was thought to have on creating a level of consumer desire on the part of those unable to afford the products. The racialized coding of the sneaker crime wave put Nike in particular in the spotlight because of the company's association with African-American sports celebrities like Michael Jordan.

What the sneaker crime crisis represents is promotionalism's reflexive character. That is, promotionalism is self-problematizing. It is not only a solution to corporate communication and identity, it is also a source of new problems that result precisely from the side effects of success (Beck 1997). By making Nike into a celebrity corporation with a prominent public profile and presence, promotional success has also made Nike into a prominent public target of social criticism levelled in terms of the putative breach between what the company claims to represent and what the effects of its practices are. The critique of Nike, in other words, is an immanent one, holding Nike up to scrutiny in terms of its own claims and identity. In the case of the sneaker crime crisis, the reflexive effect of promotionalism was confined to the negative, excessive side effects of

consumption. In the case of anti-sweatshop criticism, on the other hand, the effect of reflexivity has shifted to the sphere of production. Activists have criticized and protested the working conditions in Nike's factories in terms of a failure to respect and implement the values that Nike invokes in its claims of social responsibility and individual empowerment. Because corporate identity has to circulate in the public sphere where its meaning cannot be totally controlled, activists have been able to open up a gap between Nike's identity and image, and counter-brand the company as a sweatshop employer.

Counter-branding Nike: Activism and Subpolitics

The counter-branding of Nike as a sweatshop employer has to be seen to the context of social movement activism as an example of what Beck (1997) called "subpolitics." *Subpolitics* refers to the politicization of situations, practices and processes that comes from below the formal political system (from non-elites) and from outside it. It operates at both a more localized and globalized level than official politics and its institutional supports (parliamentarism and political parties). Subpolitics is the politics of interest groups, social movements, activism and advocacy groups whose interests radiate out beyond the sphere of institutional politics, and whose targets include other power centers than the State. Subpolitics emanates from and refers to the interstices of social life where power relations register their effects. To use Habermas's (1987) terms, if politics represents the intervention of the system, that is, the state and market economy, in the everyday life-world of lived social and cultural experience, then subpolitics represents the reciprocal feedback effect of the life-world on the system.

What motivates this feedback is a critical discourse stemming from the situated ethics of the life-world as a space where the products of the political and economic system – power and commodities – are felt. The discourse of subpolitics is an ethical-critical one that confronts the State and the market with their attempts to appropriate and exploit the normative expectations of everyday life. Central to the motivation of the anti-sweatshop movement is a belief that Nike is hypocritical in the way it lays claim to social responsibility as an instrument of commercial promotionalism yet continues to exploit young, migrant, female workers in the developing world. The logic of the anti-sweatshop critique is one of communicative action geared to mutual understanding and consensus rather than strategic action aimed at competitive success (Habermas 1987). This logic is a general feature of new social movements oriented not towards the immediate, material self-interest of participants but to questions of shared meaning and social solidarity (Carroll 1997; Jasper 1997). Many new social movements share an altruistic dimension as their actions entail an interest in the well-being of others (Melucci 1996). What this altruistic interest implies is not the kind of identity politics that characterize corporate communication but rather a politics of identification. The kind of subpolitics represented by the anti-sweatshop movement is less about identity in the sense of distinguishing oneself from others than it is about creating social understanding and support across identities. Anti-sweatshop activism involves a desire to empathize with and care about the situation, interests, and aspirations of those at a distance while assuming a critical stance towards something that is culturally and geographically more proximate, that is, the corporation.

Subpolitics also differs from formal politics in that it is oriented more to questions of tactics rather than strategy. Social movements assume a looser, more mobile and flexible form than more bureaucratically structured organizations; they are typically organized in terms of network arrangements that lack a definite center with binding decision-making power (Castells 1996). This makes social movements more nebulous, transient, and reliant on a more pluralistic range of tactics that may also lack a strong sense of overall strategy. The anti-sweatshop movement, for example, consists of a network of different groups that engage in diverse activities such as culture jamming, conventional public protests, participation in shareholders' meetings and regulatory initiatives such as the Worker Rights Consortium, and growing use of the Internet, a tool which is seen to have democratized corporate-activist relations by diminishing the corporation's gatekeeper role in the communication of critical information (Coombs 1998; Heath 1998; Klein 2000; Sage 1999; Shaw 1999).

The absence of a power center also means that the anti-sweatshop movement is dependent on drawing its power from others, particularly its adversaries. Boje (1999) referred to those of the anti-sweatshop movement as entrepreneurial activists because they imitate Nike's promotional practices through the use of counter-narratives, especially local stories of abuse told by Nike factory workers and communicated through the Internet, and public spectacles such as "shoe-ins" staged at Nike retail outlets.

This use of the public sphere to promote the counter-branding of Nike does not mean, however, that the tactics and identity of activists converge. The notion of entrepreneurial activism tends to efface crucial differences in motives and power between

corporations and their critics. Anti-sweatshop activists are motivated primarily by ethical concerns rather than material self-interest. Of the major components of the movement – labor and human rights NGOs, religious faith communities, student groups, and labor unions – only the latter have a significant self-interest at stake in the fight against Third World (as well as domestic) sweatshops. Activists' use of promotional tactics stems from the way social movements exercise power in the form of what Beck (2000) calls "judo politics." In judo politics the strength and power of one's adversaries is turned against them. This is only successful, however, as long as one lacks an equivalent power of one's own. The effect of judo politics is to create suspicion about the reputation of the opponent, not to impart his or her power to the judo politician.

To view movement activism as simply another form of entrepreneurialism is to overlook how the anti-sweatshop movement uses promotional tactics to interrupt and undermine promotional logic. By using counter-narratives and public spectacles activists have attempted to call Nike to account on the grounds of its own action claims; that is, has Nike done what it says it has or has not done? From the postmodern perspective in which the concept of entrepreneurial activism is situated, this calling to account has simply resulted in a spiral of claims and counter claims whose truth is decided by superior power (Boje 1999). In contrast to this view, however, we would argue that truth cannot be reduced to superior power. First, power relations are also relations of potential conflict and struggle in which the attempt to fix truth on the terms of superior power can be contested. In non-coercive power relations, actors have to take account of and accommodate themselves to the views of others involved. Claims making is interactive

and interdiscursive. The relationship between truth and power consists not in the way that the latter decisively determines the former but in the way either one can render the other problematic on ethical as well as factual or strategic grounds.

Secondly, power is exercised in differentiated and reflexive ways. Power exercised in one way can resist or problematize the effects of power exercised by other means. If power is the capacity to act upon or direct the actions of others (Foucault 1988), then it can be exercised through discourses whose truth depends on the deployment of ethically and factually reasoned arguments rather than promotional dominance. Narrative, for example, can be used not only to communicate identity as a means of self-legitimation, but also as an accounting device, a way of embedding reasons and arguments to provide an explanation that is amenable to critical assessment and debate. The reduction of truth to power, finally, ignores the differentiated nature of truth. Reasoned arguments problematize promotional power by also calling its trustworthiness to account. Trustworthiness is inherent in any discourse inasmuch as the latter's power depends on its being seen to be truthful as well as true (Habermas 1987). Discourses entail claims about the sincerity as well as accuracy of the claims maker. Where the anti-sweatshop movement has been successful is precisely in casting doubt on the truthfulness of Nike's claims by questioning and contesting the company's motives and practices by means of the local, situated narratives of those who are otherwise powerless.

Anti-Sweatshop Activism: Issues or Crisis Management?

By raising controversy over Nike's labor practices, the anti-sweatshop movement has not only questioned the reality of production conditions and worker rights in

developing countries but has also thrown Nike's sincerity and credibility into relief. Nike has been presented with a problem whose resolution is not only practical, but also communicational. Its communication problem is particularly acute inasmuch as issues of sincerity and credibility penetrate to the heart of corporate identity as the principal instrument and goal of promotional and commercial success. Nike's public relations response to the anti-sweatshop movement, however, has compounded this communication problem. Despite the view that corporate public relations have become increasingly proactive, Nike's response to its anti-sweatshop critics has been largely reactive, and marked by a reluctance to take seriously its critics' arguments and claims. Nike has attempted a strategy of issues management aimed at deflecting and dispersing blame, reiterating ethical commitment, and subduing controversy. Its critics, on the other hand, have relied on dispersed tactics to interrupt this strategy and re-frame the sweatshop issue as an endless series of local crises.

Nike's Response: Issues Management

Boje (1999; see also Burns 2000) identifies four stages through which Nike's response to sweatshop criticisms has developed. The first stage up to the early 1990s was one of avoidance. Nike disclaimed responsibility by displacing blame onto its contractors. From 1993 to 1996, Nike's response switched to one of denial that the problem existed in a systematic and widespread way, and pointed to its own corporate code of conduct, first formulated in 1992, as evidence of this. This was followed in 1996 and 1997 by a period of intensified publicity after the 1995 discovery of the El Monte

sweatshop in California and the 1996 exposé of Wal-Mart for sourcing the Kathy Lee Gifford line of clothing from sweatshops put the sweatshop issue back in the media spotlight. Nike claimed its monitoring system was independent and commissioned the GoodWorks International report that was subsequently criticized by the media and academic scholars as well as activists (Boje 1998). Knight's National Press Club appearance in May 1998 marked the beginning of the fourth stage and the prospect of some material improvement in working conditions.

Nike's reactive posture, its reluctance to address criticisms on major issues such as wage levels, and its continued hostility towards some critics point to the limitations of promotionalism and the difficulty that promotionally oriented issues management has in coming to terms with antisweatshop subpolitics. The heart of issues management is a concern on the part of the corporation to manage the public policy process in a way that minimizes interference in its structure and functioning by outside actors (Heath 1988). Put differently, it is about maximizing corporate autonomy and the ability to act strategically in an environment that consists of multiple stakeholders who have differential claims on the corporation's conduct. In this respect, Nike's reluctance to address the issue of manufacturing wage levels, despite the relatively small proportion of total costs they entail, represents a desire to preserve autonomy in a key sphere of the environment, the marketplace. When Nike translates social responsibility into philanthropic initiatives such as environmental projects, microloans for local entrepreneurs, or education and fitness programs in Third World countries, it also demonstrates a concern to maximize promotional returns. These are initiatives to which

Nike can attach its name and corporate identity in a more visible and lasting way than wage increases (whose visibility to investors, on the other hand, is far less ephemeral than to concerned consumers).

Nike has also attempted to manage the sweatshop issue promotionally by turning the tactics of the movement back on itself. This ranges from criticizing some activists and attempting to affix them with an identity as misguided or misinformed idealists to reverse culture jamming. Invoking its alter ego as a cool, ironic company that doesn't take life or itself too seriously, Nike offered \$25,000 to well-known consumer activist Ralph Nader, at a time when he had been speaking out publicly against child labor in Asia, to appear in a Nike commercial denouncing "another shameless attempt by Nike to sell shoes" (Lapham 2000, p.39). More recently, Nike began a new promotional campaign to sell football shoes in Australia by advertising the Web site of a supposed anti-Nike activist group. The group was fake, a product of Nike's promotional imagination; its complaint was that it was unfair of Nike to market such a superior product. The campaign was short lived, however, as real activists began decorating the ads with an alternative website address exposing the hoax, and Nike closed down the original Web site, having succeeded in getting itself into the media spotlight again (Lasn 2001).

From an activist viewpoint, this kind of reverse culture jamming reveals Nike's willingness to exploit public cynicism and suspicion that result from promotional dominance of the public sphere (Lasn 2001). From an issues management viewpoint, the resort to playing judo politics with the anti-sweatshop movement highlights the stratified, shifting nature of the corporate environment and the problems that social activism raises

for issues management. The rise of issues management in the 1970s coincided with the neoliberal turn in economic thinking as governments began to redefine their role from one of legislative and regulatory intervention to a more arms-length one of facilitation and mediation in circumstances where corporate conduct became socially problematic. This was the model adopted by the American government in response to the growing controversy about sweatshops. In 1996 the Clinton administration brokered an agreement – the Apparel Industry Partnership (AIP) – between several apparel industry companies and other interested parties including labor and human rights NGOs. The AIP, which gave rise to the Fair Labor Association (FLA), included Nike as a charter member. The formation of the AIP/FLA marked the institutionalization of sweatshops as a multilateral issue whose resolution was seen to lie in long-term consensus building around voluntary corporate codes of labor conduct, monitoring, and public accountability rather than legislative or regulatory intervention.

The construction of an issue by means of this kind of institutionalization process has two consequences for how the issue is framed and communicated in the public sphere. Firstly, responsibility for the issue is generalized and dispersed among several parties. Membership in the AIP/FLA enabled Nike to share its responsibility for the sweatshop issue with other corporate members and demonstrate publicly its willingness to resolve the problem in a voluntary way. Nike and others, such as the Gap, who are caught in the spotlight of bad publicity, are able to point to one another as evidence that the problem is systemic rather than specific or localized. Corporations are able to rely to some extent on an information subsidy from the news media where the systemic nature of

the problem has been framed primarily in terms of the volatility of consumer demand and taste rather than the imperative of profit maximization (Greenberg and Knight 2001). Second, the generalization and dispersion of the issue implicates all the parties to institutional arrangements like the AIP/FLA in the responsibility for resolution. Resolution becomes a matter of organizational politics, of negotiation and compromise. In the public sphere, where the issue is represented through the news media, the conflict tends to shift from Third World labor conditions per se to the grounds of realism in the attempt to negotiate a settlement between different institutional actors who do not include the workers themselves. The focus of debate and contestation begins to shift from substantive to procedural questions (Greenberg and Knight 2001).

Parallel with its involvement in the AIP/FLA, Nike has also sought to manage the sweatshop issue publicly through establishing its own NGO-like association, the Global Alliance for Workers and Communities, in partnership with toy maker Mattel and the International Youth Foundation. Although the stated goal of the Global Alliance is to “identify aspirations and needs of workers and then design projects to address them” such as building schools or establishing health clinics, the organization has also become actively involved in the battle of reports that has become a dominant feature of how the struggle between Nike and its critics has developed (The Global Alliance for Workers and Communities 2001). The credibility of the Global Alliance lies in its ability to appear to be independent of Nike’s control, and it is noteworthy that a report Nike recently commissioned from the organization on working conditions in some of the company’s contract factories has been critical of abuses such as management harassment of workers.

As with other reports Nike has commissioned, this one has been criticized for questionable methodology (Boje 2001). Nonetheless Nike has been able to use it as evidence of its own openness by featuring it, together with another recent critical report by the monitoring agency Verité on a Mexican contract factory, on its nikebiz website (Nike 2001; Verité 2001). Thus, Nike has begun to manage the issue by becoming an agent of criticism of itself.

Local Crisis: The Limitations of Issues Management

Nike's self-implication in this culture of criticism points to the way that the central features of anti-sweatshop subpolitics – motivation that is primarily ethical, a decentered networked form of organization, and the reflexive tactics of judo politics – have interrupted and disrupted its ability to manage claims of sweatshop practices purely as an issue. Although activists have responded to Nike on an issues level through the development of alternative institutional arrangements such as the Worker Rights Consortium, their principal response to Nike has been to focus on documenting particular instances of abuse such as denial of rights, harassment of workers, unsafe working conditions, or abject wage levels, framed as crises requiring urgent remedy. In other words, in response to Nike's attempts to manage the sweatshop problem via an issues logic, that is, as a general problem requiring multilateral, long-term systemic resolution, the anti-sweatshop movement has employed a logic of rupture and immediacy. The micronarratives that Boje (1999) has identified as a tool of anti-sweatshop activists acquire their force as part of the construction of a cumulative chain of dispersed, local

crises. The effect of this has been to split Nike's response between managing the problem as an issue through institutional involvements like the AIP/FLA and engaging discursively in local damage control exercises as new claims of abuse are raised.

What has emerged is a dialectic of issues and crisis management in which Nike's attempts to construct the issue in a systematic and manageable way are constantly punctured by activist claims about local crisis situations. The implicit effect of this is to reconstruct sweatshops qua issue as a problem of both Nike's factory conditions and its public credibility. This dialectic arises because issues management assumes a stakeholder perspective when it looks at the social environment and the latter's potential to generate problems for and interference in corporate practices. From the viewpoint of issues management, activists are framed as part of a network of stakeholders who are differentiated in terms of their status and the resources they can exercise, such as power, legitimacy and urgency, in making their claims on corporate conduct (Mitchell, Agle, and Wood 1997). The structure of the stakeholder network also determines the capacities of the membership by virtue of its density – the number of ties each member has with the others – and each member's salience and centrality to the network as a whole, that is, how prominent each is in terms of proximity to other members and control of their access to the network as a whole (Rowley 1997). Social activists are generally seen as secondary level stakeholders limited to exercising the influence that stems from the urgency and possible legitimacy of their claims (Coombs 1998; Mitchell et al. 1997).

Despite the emphasis in stakeholder theory on the differentiated status and resources of the membership, it is assumed that every member has a vested interest of

some kind in the corporation's conduct and that this interest is what defines his or her stake and the issues that arise from it. Each member puts something at risk in their relationship with the corporation (and possibly with other stakeholders as well), and also stands to benefit directly from that relationship. Vested interests imply an objective relationship of interdependency, and this has a determinant effect on how that relationship is conducted. In the case of anti-sweatshop activism, however, the notion of vested, objective interests is problematic. The notion only makes sense as the mediation of a relatively stable identity that depends on the continued realization of objective benefits and opportunities. The interest of most activists in Nike's production practices does not have a strong objective dimension; their stake does not really entail self-risk or -benefit. As a result, the definition of sweatshops qua issue cannot be reduced to or derived structurally from the vested interests or core identity of activists.

The absence of strong vested interests on the part of activists has ambivalent effects, and this ambivalence adds an element of indeterminacy to the relationship between Nike and its activist critics. On the one hand, it means that activists acquire a degree of autonomy that exceeds the resources available to them as secondary level members of the stakeholder network. Marginality and mobility are the condition of successful judo politics. Activists are able to assume an interrogator role in the claims-making process and adopt multiple, shifting tactics to press Nike for concessions that can be used as a criterion to re-assess local conditions, expose new problems and gaps between Nike's claims and practices, and expand the framework of criticism. Critique is reproduced through crisis. An example of this is wage levels where the anti-sweatshop

movement has helped to shift the debate from the question of market forces and compliance with legal minimum wage levels to that of a “living wage” that exceeds bare subsistence, allows for such items as savings and education, and is calculated according to particular local conditions. Activists have been able to build on and move beyond the commitment of Nike and other corporate members of the AIP/FLA to respect local labor and remuneration laws, and re-frame the wage issue in a new, contentious direction.

On the other hand, the flexibility of judo politics becomes indispensable since activists lack the kind of power resources that can have a direct, binding effect on Nike. Activists are stakeholders whose interests are really the vested interests of other, even more marginalized stakeholders, Nike’s Third World labor force. They represent these interests by influencing Nike through their impact on other stakeholders, whose interests and power are more central, namely consumers and investors. Their role in the network is essentially a mediated and mediating one – a politics of identification rather than identity – that functions through the rhetorical effectiveness of communicative action in the public sphere. This creates its’ own problems and contradictions. Protest movements generally are subject to cyclical patterns of activity and impact (Tarrow 1994). The absence of a structurally determined, core identity, and immediate, vested self-interest for many of those involved can compound this cyclical tendency by making commitment and participation more contingent and variable. As a result, activist communication too is self-directed to a large extent to ensure members’ identification and to counteract the protest cycle by revising and extending the framework within which the problem and its resolution are defined and made to resonate publicly (Snow and Benford 1992).

The heavy reliance on publicizing local crises also reflects the ambivalent status of more generalized means of anti-corporate activism, such as the boycott. While some elements of the anti-sweatshop network call for a boycott of Nike products, others are less enthusiastic on the grounds that boycotts are difficult to organize effectively outside specific local conditions, and that workers are the ultimate victims of any decline in consumer demand. The emphasis on pressuring Nike and other companies through the use of communicative action – letters, petitions, phone calls, reports, and so forth – nonetheless assumes that the possibility of an informal boycott by concerned consumers and nervous investors will induce Nike to comply. The translation of public communication into private action remains largely implicit and unspoken to avoid internal divisions and the possibility of public failure. The dialectic of crisis and issues management plays out as a kind of virtual public conflict against a backdrop of private uncertainty.

Implications and Conclusion

For Nike, anti-sweatshop activism has created an image problem by setting the company's self-identity at odds with a growing public reputation for sweatshop practices. Activist criticism has been able to question Nike's credibility by exposing the gap between the company's social responsibility claims and its local labor practices. At the heart of this image problem lies Nike's reactive response and the way it has subsumed management of the sweatshop issue under a broader strategy of promotionalism. Although Nike now acknowledges some degree of responsibility, the legacy of its earlier

stance of denial and evasion is a continuing perception of untrustworthiness that constrains its ability to convince critics and others that it is serious about resolving the problem. What is at issue is not simply the truth of conditions in Nike's Third World factories in an objective sense but also Nike's truthfulness in the sense of its sincerity.

Nike is now faced with two problems. The first is addressing in a substantive way criticisms of the conditions of production in its contract factories to improve the working lives and prospects of its workforce. The second is convincing its critics, particularly those at a distance from the factory floor, that it is sincere in its claims and efforts to make acceptable improvements while taking account of the way expectations and standards can be constantly revised. To address these twin problems of practical resolution and public communication, Nike needs to separate its management of the sweatshop issue from the more overtly commercial aspects of its promotionalism. Because Nike has attempted so extensively to turn its claim to social responsibility into promotional capital, its sincerity problem in particular can only be addressed successfully in ways that minimize the appearance of direct promotional benefit. Regardless of the practical steps it can take to improve working conditions, wages, and worker rights, activist criticism, public suspicion, and the uncertainty these imply will doubtless persist as long as Nike continues to treat social responsibility as simply part of a broader promotional logic and strategy.

The broader implication for transnational corporations generally is not that they should disavow socially responsible claims and practices. Ethics aside, this will continue to prove increasingly impossible as globalization extends the chain of consequences for

organizational activity and as the expansion of commodification continues to make the values of civil society crucial to the construction of corporate identity and the legitimacy of corporate practices. Rather the implication is that corporate social responsibility should be conducted and communicated separately from efforts to enhance market position. Corporate social responsibility should address its audience – inside and outside the corporate organization – as a community of citizens rather than simply a market of consumers and investors. It should recognise and be informed by the capacities of citizens for ethical-critical reflection and not see them simply as a limitation on or distraction from the short-term manipulation of consumer or investor desire. This involves a different kind of risk-taking from that associated with competitive success alone.

For the anti-sweatshop movement the challenge of communication is one of both access and content. Although the Internet has something of a democratizing effect on the capacity to communicate, it functions primarily as a tool to inform and motivate those who are already aware of and sympathetic to the anti-sweatshop campaign. Initial awareness still relies on “old” media such as face-to-face communication, public spectacles, and coverage in the mainstream news media. The effectiveness of these is dependent on the cyclical character of protest activism and impact and the way that social problems and causes vie for attention and support. Content can offset this dependence in the sense that social movements need to build on and renew the way they frame social problems and their resolution. The sweatshop issue is a complex one; the antisweatshop movement has been most effective in drawing attention to aspects such as wage levels

that can be framed and communicated in a simplified but effective way, such as comparing the average Nike worker's wages to the sums paid to top Nike executives or celebrity athletes. The movement will have to continue to develop the framing of key issues like wages in an accessible yet innovative way, especially if it is to attract the attention of the elite mainstream media whose influence is essential in legitimating the issue but whose own search for new story topics and angles creates its own cyclical effects.

As economic globalization creates the conditions under which new forms of subpolitics can generate new axes of identification that cut across geographical, social, cultural and political distances, transnational corporations will see their symbolic power challenged in the public sphere. Despite the dominance of promotionalism, the public sphere has not lost altogether its function as an arena of critical discourse and debate that can counteract the reduction of communicative action to an affirmative instrument of strategic action. The reflexive, self-problematizing nature of promotionalism on which the antisweatshop movement has drawn in its ethical critique of Nike is one aspect of the much broader reflexivity of late modernity in which problems arise as the side effects of past success (Beck 1997, 2000). As economic globalization extends and intensifies the logic of market relations, transnational corporations such as Nike, which are the principal agent of this process, will be confronted increasingly with this reflexivity in the form of mobile, diffuse, and de-centered subpolitics. This subpolitics, whose authority rests only on its ethical resonance, will continue to turn the power of publicity back onto the

marketplace and reclaim the values of civil society as an affirmation of identification, mutual understanding, and social solidarity, rather than competitive success.

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CONCLUSION

Introduction

The primary objective of this dissertation has been to examine the role of news media and definitional struggle in the context of the neo-liberal turn in economic policymaking and the rise of reflexive modernity. Treating neo-liberalism as both a policy framework and political ideology, my interest has been to consider how this mode of governance becomes subject to a process of *problematization* by social and political actors in various positions and locations in the public sphere. The questions of how news media both represent the policymaking process *and* operate as a field in which political actors struggle to impose their preferred definitions over this process, have been of central concern, especially given the strategic importance such definitions can have for future courses of action.

Given the discursive and material dimensions of both news production and policymaking, the dissertation argues that problematization is a process that cannot be separated from the structured power relations that imbue modern democratic societies. While structure cannot determine agency in the final instance, struggles to define social and political reality cannot take place without paying consideration to the actually existing systems of production that surround both policy and news making. Two comparative case studies have been examined in an effort to address various dimensions of these processes. The articles that comprise Chapter 2 outline the media politics surrounding the debates over market-based electricity restructuring in Ontario, while those in Chapter 3 have examined the debates around global sweatshops and, particularly,

in relation to the anti-sweatshop campaign against the global sports company, Nike. Both cases have entailed an analysis of media reporting and representation of the issue, and an examination of the public relations strategies and positions of the key participants to the debates.

In this final chapter, my objective will be to summarize the findings of these case studies in order to flesh out their similarities and differences and to draw some broader conclusions about the role and function of news media in liberal democratic societies. This will entail a revisiting of the broader theoretical frameworks and debates that helped guide the research. The chapter concludes with some suggested directions for future studies.

Neo-liberalism, Reflexivity and Problematization

Neo-liberalism as Policy and Ideology

Both the case of electricity restructuring and debates over global labour standards indicate that neo-liberalism is foremost a *policy framework* that signifies a shift from a collectivist agenda to one that prioritizes the expansion and liberalization of the market.⁸⁵ As evidenced in both of these cases, this embrace of the market as the preferred mechanism for coordinating social and economic life is conventionally associated with the transnational flow of capital, labour, and commodities. As Teeple has argued, in this

⁸⁵ Although, as Pierson (1994) has noted, neo-liberalism is differentially applied across geo-spatial contexts and a distinction must be made between 'success' as a policy framework and ideological success. Indeed, as Teeple suggests in a footnote, the term neo-liberalism is often used to describe a particular 'agenda,' which thus "denotes a coherent programme of *things to be done*" (1995, p.169, emphasis added). As both case studies (but particularly the first one) suggest, neo-liberal agendas are frequently not as coherent or programmatic as advocates and critics alike maintain.

period of transition to a world economy the policy frameworks of nearly all the industrialized nations have become more or less uniform: “policies reflecting the demands of internationalized capital, yet at the same time spelling out the conditional end of the nation-state and its associated political alternatives and social reforms” (1995, p.74).⁸⁶ Whether this has entailed the elimination of existing social programmes and services, such as a public, not-for-profit electricity system in Ontario, or the pre-emptive privatization of industrial relations policy in regions not yet economically developed to the level of core and semi-periphery nations, it is clear that neo-liberalism entails the articulation of a set of rules and principles for the regulation and management of the economy in accord with market priorities.

I have argued, however, that while it is useful and important to address the policy characteristics of neo-liberal forms of governance, this is a phenomenon that entails much more than merely official proclamations, techniques and instruments of economic management. To conceptualize neo-liberalism only in terms of its policy dimension therefore is to overlook how the ideals and beliefs associated with this political framework become entrenched in everyday political and public discourse and behaviour. Although policies are formulated and developed within the context of what Peter Hall calls a “policy paradigm” (Hall 1993), to truly take ‘effect’ in everyday life policies must also resonate with the lived and mediated experiences of individuals and groups, and thus sustain themselves ideologically (Hay and Rosamond 2002).

⁸⁶ Yet, as Pierson (1994) reminds us, the extent to which retrenchment initiatives actually achieve their putative aims is a subject of considerable debate.

In accounting for the ideological dimension of neo-liberalism, I have situated the research within the radical tradition in media sociology, which is grounded in the spirit and conceptual architecture of Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony and has been developed by theorists such as Stuart Hall (1977, 1986, 1988; also Hall et al. 1978). In doing so, I have argued that to the extent that this policy framework has been a 'success', this has been due to an ability on the part of neo-liberal advocates to articulate market priorities as common-sense and address individuals in their capacity not only as 'citizens' but, more crucially, as 'consumers' of public goods and services. In the case of electricity reform, it was found that the discourse constructed the pertinent policy reform issues as a matter in which economic priorities prevailed. Individuals were thus positioned in the news coverage as 'consumers' concerned about the implications of deregulation and privatization for rates, and for how to minimize the state's role so as to provide for greater individual purchasing choice and power. Although there was some limited discussion of the impact of the policy on the environment and political/cultural sovereignty, these concerns were considerably less salient. In the case study of the debates about sweatshops and global labour standards, the news coverage also articulated a consumerist discourse, in which sweatshops were constructed as a 'problem' in terms of how individuals can best shop for 'sweat free' goods and what kinds of pressures (e.g. boycotts) they can exert onto retailers and producers to effect change. As such, sweatshops were defined largely as a problem of 'consumption' rather than 'production,' and the source of this problem was located within the agency of the consumer rather than in the structural conditions and pressures associated with economic globalization.

Although strongly informed by the traditional critical approach to media analysis, this dissertation has also remained sensitive to revisionist critiques of this perspective (Schlesinger 1990; Miller 1993, 2002; Deacon and Golding 1994; Davis 2002). In attempting to overcome what has traditionally been a rather simplistic interpretation of Marx's famous aphorism that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (1978, p.172), this revisionist critique insists that we must address the question, first, of *how* ruling ideas rule and, second, of the extent to which marginalized groups acquiesce or resist those ideas.⁸⁷ In both of the case studies examined here, I attempted to address these questions by considering how political actors utilize resources and position themselves in relation to their policy opponents via media and public relations campaigns. This has involved the analysis of communications tactics and strategies that powerful *and* marginal political actors employ to influence how definitions of the policy process and meanings about it are constructed and disseminated.

Reflexive Modernization: Neo-liberalism, Contingency & Communication

I have also examined these cases in relation to theories of 'reflexive modernization' and 'risk society', expressed most cogently in the work of Ulrich Beck (1992, 1996, 1997; Beck et al. 1994). To account for the contributions of these theoretical concepts to the study, however, our steps were traced back to one of Beck's predecessors, Niklas Luhmann. In *The Differentiation of Society* (1982), Luhmann was concerned with

⁸⁷ Critiques of this perspective by Schlesinger and Miller, in particular, mirror in several ways the debates over Hall's work that appeared on the pages of the *New Left Review* in the 1980s. Bob Jessop and his colleagues (1984, 1985), in particular, took Hall (1988) to task for overstating the role of ideology and thus becoming a strategic, if unwitting, apologist for the New Right in Britain.

developing a theoretical framework for addressing the ways in which social systems attempt to reconstitute themselves, a process he argues is accomplished through reducing 'complexity'. According to Luhmann, embedded within any social system (political system, news organization, &c.) is a multitude of events and circumstances that in isolation or combination with other events can potentially undermine the ability of a social system to reconstruct the conditions that make possible its overall reproduction. In the case of the restructuring of the Ontario electricity sector, these contingencies took the form of so-called unanticipated market 'realities' (e.g. an uncooperative heat wave and reduced generation in the province's nuclear plants) but also social movement activity on the part of policy critics in the courts of both the law and public opinion. In the case of Nike, this logic was even more pervasive in that the notion of 'contingency' featured as a core component of the anti-sweatshop movement's overall public relations strategy – in contrast to Nike's attempts to manage the sweatshop issue multilaterally and in systemic terms, the anti-sweatshop movement continually pointed to instances and events which showed that Nike's claims to being 'responsible' were out of step with the reality of what was happening in its various subcontractor factories.

Conceptualizing contingency as the dominant logic of late modernity, the dissertation has taken up Luhmann's interest in determining the kinds of mechanisms and strategies political actors employ to effectively manage contingency. If the social system is to survive, Luhmann argues, "it must have a way of putting this complexity into a manageable form – it must determine what aspects of the environment it will consider relevant for its operations, and it must establish specific means for coping with those

aspects” (1982, xxvi). In attempting to manage the social harms that neo-liberal policies frequently entail, I have argued that political actors normally devise political and communication strategies designed not to claim credit for actual or anticipated benefits but to avoid blame for real or perceived harms or loss (see also Pierson 1994; Weaver 1986). Given that the mass media is a dominant field in which meanings of the political process are shaped and in which those meanings pose strategic consequences for the course of future action, concerns over how policies will be represented are of particular concern and thus the strategies political actors employ tend to be articulated discursively.

Luhmann’s general theoretical schema has found its way into this dissertation via a discussion of Beck’s concepts of ‘risk society’ and ‘reflexive modernization’ (1992, 1996, 1997; also Beck et al. 1994). Beck argues that the present age of advanced capitalism (or late modernity) is a society of evermore and sustained risk and uncertainty because the ‘accomplishments’ of the industrial period of early modernity – technological rationalization, progress, ‘control’ over nature, and so on – have created a range of *side effects* (pollution, ecological degradation, &c.) that threaten to undermine this era’s very ‘success’.⁸⁸ It is this *reflexivity* in the project of modernity, cast as a form of systemic self-confrontation, which, Beck argues, opens the field of contingency to new

⁸⁸ For Giddens (1990), the theme of risk is taken up in considerations about the ways in which modern life is imbued with “manufactured uncertainty”. In contrast to the notion that in the postwar era of the welfare state risks could be calculated in ‘actuarial’ terms – i.e. where potential outcomes could be reasonably predicted – in late modernity it is not only increasingly difficult to calculate such risks but doing so may actually prove to be more harmful to society. Bauman (1995) pursues this line of thought further, arguing that the political vacuum created by the withdrawal of the state from the administration of everyday life leaves individuals to construct and reconstruct their identities and ways of life in fundamentally new ways. Moreover, anticipating some of the arguments in this dissertation, Bauman writes, “[t]he huge State-wide garden has been split into innumerable small allotments. What used to be done in a condensed and concentrated fashion...is now done in an uncoordinated way by commercial companies, quasi-tribal groups, or the individuals themselves” (pp.173-4).

possibilities for social and political activity and activism. Given that risks and uncertainties can be made visible and meaningful only when they are defined within knowledge-producing social systems such as the courts, parliament and, for our purposes here, mass media, considerations about communication and information become crucial. However, this is not to say that these risky conditions emerge objectively or naturally – rather, they are, as Giddens (1990, 1991) argues, “manufactured”. The result is that individuals and groups have become increasingly aware that they are caught up in a world of ongoing contingency, of one event after another that they can neither fully understand nor control in any meaningful way. Communication becomes important in this sense because political actors must be able to address not only the material well being of the ‘contented’ majority but also their commonly shared experience of anxiety and risk. Because market-based solutions to economic and political needs contribute to, rather than alleviate, this sense of ontological insecurity, this creates a political market for ‘reassurance’ and ‘persuasion’ (Marlow 2002). Politicians must therefore evoke anxiety in order to reassure, and information becomes an essential tool in their communicational armature. This does not mean, however, that there can be no contention or resistance. As Beck (1992) argues, while the risk society is in one sense an “information society” it is also a society in which “new antagonisms grow up between those who *produce* risk definitions and those who *consume* them” (p.46).

These antagonisms are new in two ways: first, and most apparent, the substantive nature of the side effects with which we are now faced are ‘new’ to the extent that although they have “always been part of the process of modernization, they have long

been ignored” (Holzer and Sørensen 2003, p.81). For example, pollution caused by rapid industrialization and the ecological impacts of urbanization were part and parcel of the early phases of modernity, however they failed to be seen as a ‘problem’ as such, and consequently failed to be subject to processes of problematization because the presence of these issues were often defined in terms of satisfying particular needs relevant to that period (e.g. the overcoming of scarcity), and also because many victims of such problems were workers and other marginalized groups. For Beck, the unpleasant side effects of industrialization and urbanization could be ignored because these processes “could rely on a strong narrative justifying its *main* effects: progress and wealth creation” (ibid). The second way in which these antagonisms can be seen as ‘new’ is that, in reaction to the accumulation and concentration of these side effects, the meaning of politics in modern society has been recast such that political action is no longer concentrated within the arenas of parliament and the party political and corporatist systems of the postwar tripartite consensus. Beck argues that because the harmful side effects of modernity can no longer be externalized (e.g. to the inner cities of advanced nations or, further, to China, Mexico, or Vietnam), the basic premises of modernity (progress, wealth creation, &c.) can also no longer be taken for granted, and the accumulation and concentration of harmful side effects in a variety of substantive areas (e.g. environmental issues, international human rights, and in some jurisdictions public sector reform) has reached a boiling point. Beck’s main contribution here is that the very meaning of politics has changed such that whereas politics in early modernity was restricted to the actions and activities of elites and to the defence and legitimization of power, privilege and authority,

politics in the age of reflexive or late modernity has been restructured and individualized. In short, what is fundamentally new in the late modern era is what Beck refers to as the *subpoliticization* of society.

For Beck, the subpoliticization of society may be ‘observed’ in several locales. In arguing that politics has erupted beyond the formal boundaries of the formal state and corporatist system and no longer requires the legitimization of a democratic process, the most notable loci of political action is to be found within social movements and other citizens initiative groups such as those discussed in this dissertation. But subpolitics does not end here, for Beck argues that the opportunity to fill the vacuum created by the retreat of the state “can always be seized and used by the opposite side or party for the opposite goals” (1997, p. 101).⁸⁹ In the Nike case, for instance, the company’s attempt to establish its own non-governmental organization (NGO), the *Global Alliance for Workers and Communities*, might be suggestive of the ways in which corporate subpolitics can operate. Yet, as I have attempted to argue, an important limitation of Beck’s thesis is that he does not develop this point in any significant way, focusing rather more attention to the actions of new social movements over those of corporate and state actors.⁹⁰ Moreover, by associating state activity purely with the need for legitimization, Beck also

⁸⁹ It is in this regard that I would suggest that Beck’s notion of subpolitics makes considerable theoretical advances over more conventional social movement literature. We have not entered, in Meyer and Tarrow’s (1998) terms, a ‘social movement society’, rather the nature of politics is such that the logic and form of new social movements (de-centeredness, less institutionalized, tactics over strategy, emphasis on the communicative) has been articulated by not only progressive causes opposed to rapid political and economic transformation, but also on the part of powerful actors, such as corporations. I would also go beyond Beck to note that subpolitics has pervaded the state apparatus as well, as formal political actors (e.g. parties) increasingly enter into coalition frameworks with grassroots activists. The NDP’s role in the Ontario Electricity Coalition is suggestive here.

⁹⁰ But see Holzer and Sørensen’s (2003, pp. 87-91) fascinating application of subpolitics to a discussion of the corporate-led socially responsible investment (SRI) initiative.

overlooks the ways in which subpolitics potentially operates on a state level. As I have attempted to address in chapter 2.2, the overlap in strategy and political activity between the official political and non-institutional members of the Ontario Electricity Coalition suggests a much greater complexity in the nature of politics in this framework than its original formulation suggests.

Summary of Key Findings

Upon first blush, the two cases examined might appear to share little in common. In the first place, whereas one case study accounts for the politics and media and PR activity surrounding domestic energy policy in Ontario, the other examines debates over global labour standards and in particular the transnational anti-sweatshop movement and its campaign against Nike. Aside from the respective substantive and geo-spatial differences in these policy areas, a second key difference between these cases is the identity of the 'powerful' actor in each debate. In the case of electricity, the political actor with all of the privileges and benefits (authority, resources, accredited expertise) of the 'primary definer' is the government and its political appointees (e.g. quasi-independent committees), while in the sweatshops case the elite actor is a transnational corporation headquartered in the United States but operating globally. Although both are power centres and thus depend for their institutional legitimacy upon a (relatively) centralized apparatus of decision-making, one of these relies exclusively upon the authority accrued by the democratic process (i.e. elections) whereas for the other this legitimacy is obtained through the construction of a branded identity embodied in the logo and its associated

meanings. This difference in the identity of the powerful actor also gave rise to different forms of elite promotional activity as well as different resistance tactics on the part of critics. For the anti-sweatshop movement, this meant using the mass media as an initial and preferred site for its activities (although as has been shown these activities branched out into other policy venues over time). In the case of the campaign to halt the privatization and deregulation of the Ontario electricity industry, this activism was waged principally in other 'forums of public opinion' such as the legislature, courts, and in local communities, but with a reflexive awareness that news coverage would follow. A fourth key difference between these cases is that although both the anti-sweatshop movement and the coalition opposed to market-based electricity reform shared common characteristics regarding organizational dynamics and tactics, the former was motivated primarily by altruistic goals of improving working standards and life opportunities for people with whom they share no identity or material connection, whereas the latter was driven both by a common vision of an accountable, regulated public utility, as well as clearly self-interested and material goals (e.g. rates, jobs, &c.).

Despite these immediate case-specific differences, however, both issues are remarkably similar in several key respects. First, both are examples of policy areas that have been subject to considerable politicization and social movement activism in recent years. While there is a considerable history to the anti-sweatshop movement at the local level (domestic sweatshops have been seen as a 'problem' since the late nineteenth century), globally the issue of sweatshops did not become identified as a publicly recognized 'social problem' until the mid-1990s, well after international outsourcing

commenced as a key accumulation strategy for global businesses. And in the case of electricity restructuring, although there are areas outside of Ontario where there has been considerable opposition to utilities privatization and deregulation, public resistance to market-oriented utilities reform within this province (and elsewhere in Canada and the United States) has been quiet, if not absent altogether.⁹¹ Second, this absence of opposition early on was disrupted by the logic of contingency, as resistance and subsequent shifts in policy direction were sparked (in both cases) by a widely recognized though unrelated ‘event’ that, in the nomenclature of policy studies, ‘punctuated’ the existing state of policy equilibrium (e.g. Baumgartner and Jones 1991): in the case of electricity, the California disaster and subsequent Enron scandal and in the Nike case the ‘discovery’ of sweatshop conditions in factories producing for the Kathie Lee line of clothing sold at Wal-Mart stores, and at El Monte in California. Third, and most significantly, these are exemplary cases of where communication strategies and PR activity on the part of critics, combined with putative ‘failures’ on the part of elites to manage the policy process, interrupted that process and preferred definitions of it. In both cases, the critics incorporated the logic of contingency into their overall communication

⁹¹ An interesting comparative case to Ontario is the restructuring of the electricity industry in Mexico. In both regions, economic resources (including energy) were developed to be symbols of public prosperity and sovereignty – in Ontario, under Conservative MPP Adam Beck in the first decade of the twentieth century and in Mexico under General Cardenas in the 1930s and 40s. However, also in both cases, the rationale on the part of the political leadership to open the energy market to competition was the same: an aging infrastructure in need of improvements and a lack of financial resources (or political will) by the state to pay for it. However, whereas in Ontario there was at first little to no resistance to privatization and deregulation, in Mexico, by contrast, resistance has been fierce (if not futile, given the military takeover of the port of Veracruz at gunpoint to privatize it). Moreover, in both cases American political and economic interests have helped drive policy ambitions to integrate both regions’ electrical systems with the United States. And in both cases, although privatization and deregulation appeared to be a *fait accompli* popular resistance (in Ontario in 2002 and in Mexico in 1998) was mobilized to disrupt the policy process. On the case of Mexico’s electricity privatization, see Bacon (2002).

strategy, by focusing on particular events, highlighting these as the 'norm' rather than the 'exception', and thus puncturing the attempts on the part of the powerful to manage the issue strategically and multilaterally. The result of this is that although a neo-liberal policy agenda has become hegemonic both in Ontario and globally, these are two cases where neo-liberalism has been subject to considerable criticism and subsequent policy backtracking.⁹² And fourth, while resistance to neo-liberalism indicates that this policy framework is not a *fait accompli* both cases illustrate that a neo-liberal ideology has been partially embedded into the popular discourses of both policy areas. While the Ontario Electricity Coalition succeeded in shifting the framing of the electricity reform issue away from an economic benefits discourse to a discourse of economic harms, the government and its supporters achieved a partial victory in having news coverage articulate the issue of electricity reform in primarily economic terms. Similarly, in the Nike case while there was considerable criticism of the company's labour practices and its sincerity on the matter of instituting reform, the news discourse was dominated by an economic, i.e. consumerist, logic that underplayed the structural conditions responsible for sweatshops and posited consumerist modes of problem resolution.

⁹² In Ontario, the passage of Bill 210, which *inter alia* placed a cap on rate increases for a period of four years, signalled an end (at least temporarily) to all hope and effort in achieving sufficient regulatory liberalization to encourage competition. In the other case, although Nike continues to outsource the majority of its manufacturing to subcontractors located in countries where wages and labour standards remain low, the company was forced as a result of movement activism to take considerable steps in improving factory monitoring codes and practices and thus encouraging greater accountability and transparency.

Electricity Restructuring in Ontario: Toward a Tentative Conclusion

I have subtitled this section 'Toward a Tentative Conclusion' because the issue of electricity reform in Ontario remains in a state of perpetual uncertainty. Although the Conservative government maintains an unwavering commitment to transforming the electricity market from a 'not-for-profit' to a 'competitive' framework, others, particularly those who occupied 'insider' positions in the policy process and advocated openly in favour of market reform, disagree and counter that the 'mixed' policy framework currently in place compromises the financial stability of the entire electricity industry. According to Tom Adams, a former member of the government's 1998 Market Design Committee and Executive Director of the pro-competition pressure group, Energy Probe, the decisions to subsidize consumers by capping rates and requiring Ontario Power Generation (the state owned generating monopoly) to spearhead new generation projects will not only do little to encourage individual consumers to reduce their energy use but it will also discourage private companies from investing in the province's energy market.⁹³ Although Energy Probe does not contest the government's estimates that the new legislation will not have any deleterious long-term effects, it does argue that, "the [government's] track record so far and the outlook going forward is for drastic taxpayer

⁹³ The legislation in question (Bill 210) would see private generators continuing to be paid the 'market' rate. Any monthly difference between the market rate and the government's imposed fixed rate is to be subsidized by taxpayers. For critics like the Ontario Electricity Coalition, this is a clear signal that the government is trying to buy time and appease taxpayers while remaining committed to the principles of a competitive market. According to the Ontario Electricity Coalition, as of June 2003, the taxpayer subsidy has exceeded \$1.5 billion. See OEC, "Eves clings to Hydro privatization." News release. 4 June 2003. Retrieved online at <http://www.electricitycoalition.org>.

impacts.”⁹⁴ For Adams, the introduction of Bill 210 in November 2002 effectively ended the province’s short-lived experiment with a competitive electricity market and the people of Ontario will be ‘worse for the wear’. Policy ‘outsiders’ such as the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Canadian Energy and Paperworkers’ (CEP) union, and other affiliate members of the Ontario Electricity Coalition, argue that although the price freeze was a ‘victory’ for the movement, until the government commits itself fully to returning to a publicly owned and regulated model, the economic devastation warned by groups such as Energy Probe will be brought to bear. In contrast to Energy Probe and other advocates of market-based solutions for reforming the electricity market, the OEC maintains that the government is not to be trusted and that the legislation is merely a temporary PR solution that will be changed following the outcome of the next election. In any event, until that election is called and its outcome contested, the future of electricity policy in Ontario hangs in a precarious balance.

Despite this uncertainty about the future of electricity policy in Ontario, we can, however, reach some conclusions about the role of news media and definitional struggle in the debate thus far. Some of these conclusions I have already alluded to in the discussion above and most of them are outlined in considerably greater detail in the articles that constitute the first section of the dissertation. For reasons of brevity, I will discuss these findings here in combination, and in doing so address the questions of

⁹⁴ Energy Probe news release, 8 March 2003. Received via electronic distribution on 10 March 2003. Critics such as the OEC agree that the long-term economic impact of the government’s current policy position will be harmful to the provincial economy. Whereas Energy Probe has denounced a competitive electricity policy framework as all but ‘dead,’ the OEC suggests that the devil is in the details and until the government commits itself firmly and unambiguously to a public, not-for-profit framework, the province’s energy sector remains at risk.

which aspects of the policy became the subject of attention and which were downplayed or ignored; why certain evaluations of the policy tended to shift over time; and what factors contributed in the end to the government's ultimate failure in implementing its policy objectives.

As we have seen, the intensity of newspaper coverage of electricity reform was often out of line with both the policy timetable itself and its broader political and economic implications. Indeed, while there were several important periods in the policy's introductory and developmental phases that were worthy of media attention, this formative period in the policy history seemed to pass by with only a modicum of coverage. This is particularly important when we consider that a paradigm shift in electricity policy from a public to a private model was not addressed in either the 1995 or 1999 election campaigns. Thus, if we are to consider seriously the 'Fourth Estate' role that news organizations are to play in a liberal democracy, in this instance (although with some exceptions) the watchdog appears to have been focused upon other matters – it is incumbent upon us to consider the reasons for what appears to have been an initial lack of enthusiasm and interest in this policy on the part of the media and public.

I have argued that this initial lack of attention to the issue of electricity reform (from 1995 until December 2001) is due to three interrelated factors. First, the period in and around the 1995 election was marked by what Liberal energy critic Sean Conway described as a 'consensus for reform' of the electricity industry among all three political parties. Although there were differences in opinion as to what such reforms would look like, there was little disagreement on the part of each party that the industry was in

financial difficulty and required significant administrative streamlining. For example, although the NDP was in principle opposed to the idea of competitive reform, it was under the leadership of Maurice Strong, appointed by NDP Premier Bob Rae in the early 1990s to head up Ontario Hydro, that the seeds of deregulation were first planted. Under Strong's leadership, the workforce at Ontario Hydro was reduced by nearly 20 percent in 1993 and while the Tories would later fault the NDP with mismanaging the economy, it was under the Rae government that the utility's financial difficulties (created under four decades of mostly Conservative governments) were brought under control. This nominal support for the 'logic' of competitive reform on the part of the NDP and the unambiguous support for deregulation on the part of the Liberals meant that there was little if any party conflict over the policy early on. With little intra-party conflict, therefore, the issue's level of newsworthiness was considerably low.

Second, this limited attention to the policy over much of its history was also due to the fact that the harmful side effects that would have made the policy 'worthy' of media coverage were, at this stage, largely 'prospective'. For example, while there were critics who pointed to the possibility that deregulation would cause rates to increase or reduce the ability of governments to protect the environment these were only theoretical outcomes that would not materialize for some time. Related to this is that when compared to other policy proposals of the day – military-style boot camps for young offenders, contentious overhauling of education funding formulae, 'work for welfare' legislation, and so on – the rather complicated nature of electricity restructuring reduced its overall level of salience. Given that news coverage of policy reform tends to conform around the

standard frames of conflict, disruption and harm, without an actual 'victim' to whom potentially harmful effects of reform could be affixed, the issue remained relatively abstract. A consequence of this is that despite the significance of the proposed reforms the coverage relied to a large extent on a limited range of primarily government sources (and arm's length appointees) and policy proponents. In large part this was because these sources possessed the most up-to-date information and could credibly speak to the status of the policy process.

The third main reason for the issue's limited attention in the first six years of the policy campaign has to do with the PR strategy of the government and its supporters in the business sector. The thematic structure of the coverage demonstrated that the framing of electricity reform tended to cohere around an economic frame in which priority was given to the impact of the policy on rates and debt, and the investment opportunities that could be obtained by introducing a competitive framework. The obverse face of this, of course, is that rates would continue to rise, debt would accumulate and opportunities for market growth would be stemmed as a result of continuing government intervention into an area of 'the economy' in which the state should not exercise direct administrative control. Journalists, it was noted, did not come to this preferred framing of the issue on their own but rather reported on how electricity reform was being framed by the policy actors they most frequently sourced. From government public relations staffers who indicated the targeting of business reporters, to policy 'arbiters' (Deacon 1996) such as Energy Probe, or to members of the various 'independent' restructuring committees appointed by the government, the preferred framing of this policy as an 'economic issue'

conformed to the Tories' broader neo-liberal agenda of reducing taxes and curbing the interventionist role of the state and thus also explains some of the notable blind spots in the coverage (e.g. impact on environment, economic sovereignty, &c.). Furthermore, even critics who were forced to respond to the 'business case' for competitive reform, the question of economic implications remained a question of considerable priority.

If the first six years of the coverage was characterized by a lack of media attention and an overall dominance by pro-reform sources and viewpoints, the final and most crucial phase of the coverage can be characterized by a widening of the discourse and greater participation on the part of previously marginalized and critical voices. In addition to arguing that the change was due to the very nature of neo-liberal reform and the PR strategies used by the government to promote it, I have shown that the problematization of the issue was also influenced by the formation of the Ontario Electricity Coalition.⁹⁵ Consisting of policy actors from the formal political and corporatist systems, notably the NDP and representatives of the labour movement, as well as a range of informal actors from within the environmental movement, citizens' advocacy associations, and individual citizens, the OEC employed a repertoire of contention tactics to disrupt and interrupt not only the policy process but also the preferred meanings of it. These involved using the courts to pursue a litigation strategy that would not only halt the privatization process but also reveal its questionable legality,

⁹⁵ The emergence of the OEC as the broad voice of opposition was mirrored by the shift in position taken by the Power Workers Union following the release of the Andognini Report in 1997 (see article 2). The PWU had in the policy's most formative years been the most consistently critical voice in the debate and its subsequent news coverage. The rise of the OEC (in particular the role played by the two main unions in that coalition) and changing position of the PWU introduced a dimension of 'divisiveness' within the labour movement that corresponded neatly with journalistic 'news values'.

in accord with continuing to use the legislature to voice official opposition to the policy and its effects as well as campaigning on the issue in other 'policy arenas' such as the media but more crucially in numerous communities across the province. Although the OEC and other pressure groups opposed to the reforms did not obtain a considerable presence in the news coverage, it is clear however that the breadth of their actions was likely a contributing factor to the policy's ultimate demise.⁹⁶

After market opening, the logic of contingency reared its ugly head and 'spoiled' the government's claims that the policy would be beneficial and positive: skyrocketing prices, revelations of corporate impropriety, differential economic impacts on vulnerable populations (e.g. pensioners, single mothers, families with disabled children, &c.) and increased calls on the part of the market operator for the public to curb consumption or risk the possibility of blackouts. These issue characteristics corresponded to the kinds of 'news values' that would place the policy's efficacy into question and helped sharpen critical attention on the government to act in order to stem the problems at hand. These issues were also made more newsworthy by the experience of California. Although it is arguable that the differences in policy design between these two jurisdictions could have ruled out a truly 'objective' comparison, the ability of journalists to locate the issue within a pre-existing news framework surely contributed to the changes in how the Ontario situation was reported.

⁹⁶ A methodological limitation of the news analysis is that I have focused (for sufficient reasons) on only the largest circulating daily newspapers in the province and thus have not examined the texture and tone of coverage in the smaller, more regionally focused dailies, or in community newspapers. Given that much of the OECs media strategy involved having local activists request meetings with editorial boards and write letters-to-the-editor and op-ed columns to their local newspapers, it is possible that news discourse at the local level would have placed a higher emphasis on the voice and viewpoints of the OEC than what was found in the larger papers. An empirical test of this will have to remain the focus of a follow-up study.

Another crucial factor in explaining the shift in the issue framing was the cracks that emerged within the so-called 'consensus for reform.' Although the Liberals had embraced deregulation and NDP support had been tentative enough to not offer considerable resistance in the policy's formative years, both parties were able to stake out an unambiguously critical position on the issue of reform following the government's December 2001 announcement to privatize Hydro One. The increased presence of both the Liberal and NDP as critical voices in the latter phase of the coverage speaks to this change. The second, and arguably more crucial, dimension of this crack in the sphere of elite consensus was found within the ranks of the Tory party itself. In the wake of considerable evidence (e.g. massive price spikes, lack of private sector investment, delays in construction of new plants, &c.) that deregulation and privatization was not meeting its stated objectives, several party backbenchers, one cabinet minister and the Speaker of the House, all called on the government to intervene with some form of price relief. Although this change in party consensus did not reach 'crisis' proportions as, for example, in the case of the major divisions within the ranks of the Major government at the time of the 'poll tax' fiasco in the UK (see Deacon and Golding 1994), the analysis does demonstrate that within the Ontario government there was no longer unambiguous agreement that deregulation and privatization should proceed apace.

Finally, it should be noted that the volume and tone of media attention to this issue – both at the evaluative and interpretative levels – were not uniform across the sampled news outlets. Although there was considerable uniformity in terms of when news coverage tended to rise and fall, the matter of *how* the issue was reported was less

consistent. As shown, the greatest volume of news coverage of electricity reform was found in the *Toronto Star* and it was this paper that was the only consistently critical news outlet in terms of evaluating both the merits and ideological parameters of the policy. And although an economistic frame was clearly prominent throughout the coverage in this paper, the *Star* also attended to the issues of how the shift in policy would affect the environment, the province's political and economic sovereignty in relation to other jurisdictions (namely the United States), and of the legitimacy of the issue given that the Tories had not made reform of such a fundamental public institution an election issue. By comparison, coverage in the *Globe and Mail*, *National Post* and *Toronto Sun* was much more supportive of the government's policy direction, particularly early on, and its framing was thus more circumscribed. As time wore on, however, these media began to waver in their support of the government, although support for the concepts of deregulation and privatization remained steadfast. Overall, the government's failure to communicate its policy goals through these three papers in the final implementation stage was at an *evaluative* rather than an *interpretative* level insofar as there was little if any fundamental challenge to the ideological parameters of the government's case for market-based reform.⁹⁷

Nike and Its' Critics: The Sweatshop Debate

⁹⁷ This distinction between the 'evaluative' and 'interpretative' dimensions borrows from Deacon and Golding's conclusion of local 'poll tax' press coverage in the UK, which they found to be contained by the structure of national debate. Whereas the 'evaluative' dimension of the coverage addresses the question of whether the policy in question is seen as good or bad, the 'interpretative' dimension asks which aspects of the policy are reported?

As with the first case study, media reporting of the sweatshops issue evokes a similar range of analytical questions. Why were some aspects of the broader debate ignored in the coverage? Why did media evaluations of the issue shift over time? And how were the perspectives of the main participants to the debate framed and how were these actors positioned in relation to one another?

Like its competitor corporations in the footwear and apparel industry Nike has pursued a commodity chain production system of manufacturing since the 1980s, however sweatshops did not come to be defined as a global social 'problem' until the mid-1990s. Analysis of news coverage of the sweatshop issue reveals that two significant events – the discovery of sweatshop labour in the El Monte factory in California in 1995 and labour and human rights abuses in an offshore factory producing for the Kathie Lee Gifford label in 1996 – thrust the sweatshop issue into the media spotlight in an unprecedented way. Although in the early 1990s there were some instances of media attention to this rather 'dark side' to economic globalization, for the most part news reports of sweatshops were sparse and disconnected.

While these events help to explain why the general issue of sweatshops emerged as a particularly contentious characteristic of globalization, they do not explain why it was that Nike in particular became the most visible and sustained target of anti-sweatshop activism. In seeking an explanation, then, for why Nike and no other company was targeted for its labour standards and practices, we argued that this was due to a combination of factors, but particularly to the side effects of Nike's promotional strategy and the media and PR strategies of the anti-sweatshop movement.

The articles in Chapter 3 suggest that Nike became a prominent target of activist criticism because of the way it has fashioned itself as a celebrity corporation that embraces and promotes an ethic of individualism, independence, freedom, and transcendence. In and of themselves these ideals are not problematic – indeed, they are values that are very much worth promoting. The problem, however, lies with the apparent contradiction that exists between these ideals and the ‘reality’ of the workplace conditions where Nike products are actually made. It was this disconnect between the lack of opportunities for the subcontractor workers that produce for the company and the values the company uses to promote its products to consumers in the West, which raised the ire of anti-sweatshop critics. Nike has been the primary target of criticism because it is far and away the most omnipresent company in its industry. This is reflected by the “one country, one company” approach to activism that non-governmental organizations such as Press for Change have pursued in relation to Nike. According to Press for Change founder and chief spokesperson, Jeff Ballinger:

“There were other players as bad and other factories as bad, but there was nobody who was ubiquitous. Nike was there and they were everywhere, and I could take advantage of this ‘\$20 million in 1 year to Michael Jordan’ and say in *Harper’s Magazine* that this is 44,900 years this woman from central Java would have to work in this Nike factory near Jakarta to earn that. So, cheap shot? I don’t know, I plead guilty. Are they scapegoated? Yes, of course. It’s a terrible ‘globalization has lots of major dislocations.’ I’m not going to apologize for a strategy that basically worked. It raised a lot of consciousness” (quoted in Wokutch 2001, p.223).

Nike’s responses to activist criticism have been varied, ranging from outright denial that a problem exists to displacing blame for its actions onto other actors, to admissions of responsibility and public declarations to ameliorate the problem. As we have shown, Nike has attempted to manage the sweatshop issue multilaterally, by

dispersing responsibility and blame for the problem onto the industry as a whole. Its involvement in the Apparel Industry Partnership (and later the Fair Labor Association) is touted by the company as evidence of its commitment to seeking long-term solutions and improvements in its labour standards and practices. Despite attempts to manage the issue in this way, however, activists have continually pointed to specific instances of abuse and violations of the company's own labour codes as evidence that voluntary monitoring does not work. As has been argued, the anti-sweatshop movement has used a 'crisis' communications mode of PR to puncture and problematize the 'issues' management approach taken by the company.

News coverage tended to represent the issue primarily as a binary struggle between producers and consumers – government actors, whether American, host country or supranational, were conspicuously absent as dominant sources to the coverage, although this was slightly more evident in the case of the *Times* than the *Post*,⁹⁸ and workers themselves were found to be 'absent referents,' subjects whose best interests were the reason for struggle but who nevertheless rarely spoke directly for themselves. It was shown that initially the most visible critics in the discourse were labour rights advocates and NGOs, such as the National Labor Committee, UNITE, Press for Change, and Global Exchange. Over time, however, as a result of a series of protests across university campuses in the United States, the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) became the most visible critic in the coverage. This had two effects on the tenor

⁹⁸ Interviews with journalists would answer the question of why this was the case. One could explain the slightly higher level of government sources in the *Post* to the greater proximity of that paper's reporters to the centre of political decision-making.

and tone of the issue framing, as well as the impact on how Nike's policies regarding its labour standards and practices would subsequently be revised. First, whereas Nike and its supporters could more easily discredit labour activists for acting on the basis of material self-interest (i.e. to bring jobs back to the U.S.), the students were more difficult to handle because, first, they are exemplars of Melucci's (1996) "new social movement" actors, motivated by altruistic more than material goals, and second, because of their privileged status as 'preferred consumers'.⁹⁹ Second, and of greater significance, the success of students in pressuring university administrations to adopt progressive 'buyer codes' of conduct shifted attention in the coverage away from a focus on the tactics activists were using and the reasons they were protesting, to an analysis of the nature of the codes and details of their negotiations. Consequently, as the issue 'matured' the coverage tended to focus much more on procedural matters, such as areas of conflict between the different parties concerning what should and should not be in a particular code of conduct. In other words, coverage of the problem shifted discursively from being a substantive issue situated in factories in Asia, Central America and elsewhere in the global periphery, to an administrative and procedural problem located in North America.

Lastly, although the views and perspectives of activists achieved a significant level of prominence in the coverage relative to Nike and other elites, the thematic structure of the coverage was nevertheless more heavily weighted toward the interests of capital and a market ideology. Our discourse analysis of media reporting of the issue

⁹⁹ Importantly, however, this does not mean that the viewpoints and interests of the other anti-sweatshop organizations receded from the coverage – given the sharing of information across organizations and the involvement of the American labour movement in providing funding and training for student activists, those actors still remained prominent in how the issue was defined as well as having an indirect influence over how the corporation's policies would subsequently change.

indicates that the sweatshop debate was framed more as a consumer-producer issue than a political one – the cause for sweatshop labour was shown to be complex, however the primary causal source was located not in the system of global manufacturing but in the actions and behaviours of consumers. Consumers were established paradoxically as both the cause of sweatshops as well as the source of their problematization. Sweatshops thus became a ‘problem’ not because companies like Nike used the ‘rules’ of the global economy to seek out the cheapest sources of labour in order to return greater shareholder value to its investors, but because of the growing concern on the part of consumers about the conditions under which their favourite t-shirts and running shoes were made. As a consequence of this, it was not workers in overseas plants but North American consumers who were narrated in the coverage as the most obvious or direct agents of change.

Implications and Additional Contributions

In the space that remains my objective will be to consider some of the broader implications of this comparative case study into the media politics of neo-liberalism. The focus on electricity restructuring and the debate over sweatshops and the campaign targeting Nike are important not only because they are of a general political interest, but also because both cases have presented an ideal opportunity to explore broad issues in the communication of politics and policy.

The first key lesson to be drawn from this study is that consideration about communication and the role of the media in explaining the outcomes of the policy process demands greater attention on the part of sociologists in particular, but social

scientists more generally. Scholars and activists concerned principally with the material implications of these or other policy debates might argue that relative to the *real* effects of (in this case) electricity restructuring or global manufacturing, the question of how these kinds of issues are *represented* or portrayed are of secondary importance and should not be overstated. Indeed, this was an argument I confronted on more than one occasion with the activists I met with, who maintained that while the role of the media in policy debates is important, academics should focus most of their attention to highlighting and contesting the harmful effects of neo-liberal policy decisions on individuals in the context of their everyday lives. Without at all diminishing the importance of focusing on the material dimension of policy issues, I argue that not only do we obtain a more complete understanding of the broader political construction of policies through addressing how policy issues are framed and narrated, but indeed it is both analytically and strategically problematic to impose a rigid distinction between the material dimensions of politics, on the one hand, and the role of media and communication, on the other. Moreover, as the empirical studies of how the media represented these respective issues have shown, public attention and pressure on the powerful (on the Ontario government; on Nike) to slow down and amend (or some would say 'abandon') a policy direction(s) did not correspond directly with the material consequences of the policy but emerged largely in the process of discursive struggle. However convinced we might be of the importance of materiality (and this *is* important), political economy can never be self referential and it is only through the ideas actors hold

about a context in which they find themselves, rather than the context itself, that informs how they think and act in relation to it (Hay and Rosamond 2002, p.148).

The second lesson to be drawn from this research (although particularly in the electricity case) is the need to go beyond the basics of the influential 'primary definition' framework (Hall et al. 1978) for the analysis of the relationship between the media and politics. In the case of reforming the Ontario electricity sector along market lines, the government appears to have had all of the advantages and qualities of a 'primary definer'. Aside from its authority as the most 'newsworthy' source of all (Knight and Curtis 1987), the government had over much of the policy's history unique access to both specialized information and journalists, and was able to control the timing of its policy announcements. The research also shows that this policy was driven primarily by a neo-liberal ideology aimed at transforming citizens into consumers while curbing the putative excesses of the public sector. Although the eventual fate of this policy issue hangs in the balance, the government's inability to move forward with the privatization of the transmission system and the major problems it has experienced in its deregulation agenda illustrate how the definitional advantages accrued to primary definers can be eroded by an inability to effectively manage contingency. 'Accredited sources' such as the government and its agents can find themselves on the defensive and increasingly unable to control the parameters of definitional struggle and debate. Power is thus not only a material resource but also a symbolic and cultural one, and success in the definitional field might not be as dependent upon political and economic dominance as previously thought. Not only can marginalized sources successfully compete with their more

powerful protagonists to 'win' in the arenas of policymaking and public opinion, but elite sources can also lose their credibility and control over the situation if they fail to contain tensions and divisions from within the power structure. At the same time, however, this is not to say that media discourses will not still be interpretatively constrained by a dominant ideology – indeed, the research (in both case studies) also indicates that while channels of mass communication may be open to critical voices, this is not necessarily the same thing as saying that they are as open to critical viewpoints.

Following this second point, the third important lesson to be drawn is that marginalized groups are considerably more capable of disrupting and interrupting the policy process and definitions of it than many critical sociological accounts of the media and public policy have suggested. The results of the two case studies examined here indicate that when provided with political, legal or ideological opportunity, non-official sources can succeed in battling with more powerful actors for the hearts and minds of the public, and that this can also translate itself into victories on the policy front as well. While it would certainly be overly optimistic to suggest that in both of these cases the social movements were overwhelmingly victorious on both the media and policy fronts, there is room for some 'pluralistic optimism' (Davis 2002) that the ability and opportunity to communicate and be heard is less restricted now than was the case around the time when the 'primary definer' framework was originally formulated. It is still important to recognize, as others have done (Deacon 1996) that even among critical non-elite sources, those who most often succeed in terms of interrupting the policy process and changing its dominant meanings are those with greater resources and who prioritize

communication with news media as a key part of their broader issues management strategy.

Possible Directions for Further Thought and Study

On the basis of the arguments and evidence presented in this dissertation, and apropos the broader theoretical implications outlined above, I would like to conclude with some discussion about some possible avenues for future thought and study. One can never pursue every strand of analysis and inquiry in the course of a single study, but it is important nevertheless to pose new questions and raise suggestions that might be picked up down the road and/or by other scholars. Some of these have already been identified above in relation to the electricity case, such as the need to expand the news analysis to a comparison between the larger-circulating daily newspapers and smaller dailies, and of conducting more in-depth interviews with journalists to learn more about choices in issue selectivity and salience. These observations and suggestions can extend also to the Nike case, although in terms of a comparison across newspapers a preliminary gathering of the data shows that the issue was of considerably less interest to the smaller, regional dailies.¹⁰⁰

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, neo-liberalism is both a policy framework and a political ideology. However, following the lead of Foucault (1979), numerous scholars have argued that neo-liberalism is a project that goes beyond concerns about policy and ideology only – as a mode of regulation and discipline, neo-liberalism's

¹⁰⁰ The exception to this trend, however, was *The Oregonian*, published in the same state where Nike's corporate headquarters is located.

most novel 'invention' is the way in which it focuses upon the moral regulation and governance of individuals (Barry et al. 1996; Burchell et al. 1991; Miller and Rose 1990; see also Larner 2000). Conceptualized as a 'rationality' of government or, more specifically, a 'governmentality,' neo-liberalism is more properly understood as an "ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics, that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power" (Foucault 1979, p.20). Fundamental attention is paid in this formulation of neo-liberalism to the whole host of ways in which forms of knowledge and practice render different aspects of social and economic life "thinkable and calculable, and amenable to deliberated and planful initiatives" (Miller and Rose 1990, p.3). In short, whereas the analysis of neo-liberalism as a form of policy focuses upon the political and economic goals and objectives of statecraft, and an ideological analysis of neo-liberalism concerns itself with the ways in which these goals and objectives (e.g. policies) work to limit the range of possible meanings by reducing difference, complexity and contradiction to 'common-sense', an analysis of neo-liberalism as a form of governmentality is concerned with the ways in which these goals and objectives are rendered practicable and knowable by individuals through a number of mundane and taken-for-granted activities and procedures in their everyday lives. It addresses how neo-liberal forms of rule instantiate themselves into the minutiae of everyday life to regulate all aspects of subjectivity (from economic decisions such as investment to the emotional and psychological).¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ The emphasis here is on 'regulation' as opposed to 'control' or 'domination'. Neo-liberal forms of rule

Approaches to neo-liberalism that address this framework's governmental rationality re-specify the citizen as an active agent who is not only capable but also obliged to be responsible for fashioning the course of her/his own life. For example, several recent studies have pointed to the ways in which the self-help literature industry articulates the self as an object to be fashioned and stylized in order to navigate successfully the (structured and manufactured) contingencies of everyday life. According to Rimke (2000), "self-help literature, which exalts the individual over the social (and negates the inherent sociality of being) is elaborately consistent with the political rationalities promoted in advanced liberal democracies" (p.62; cf. Redden 2002; Miller and McHoul 1998). Drawing on the governmentality literature, to govern in a neo-liberal way means to govern "*through* the freedom and aspirations of subjects rather than in spite of them" (Rose 1996, p.155). This implies that self-help texts both assume and demand that, "everyone is or can be free...The therapeutic governance of the self-helper centres on healthy subjectivities, which are designated as the wellsprings of freedom, responsibility and choice" (Rimke 2000, p.73).¹⁰² Governing one's body to become

are conceptualized by Foucault as 'productive' insofar as they do not restrict or delimit individual action and behaviour, but rather incite individuals to manage their bodies in particular ways that happen to be amenable to state concerns. Central here is Foucault's conceptualization of neo-liberalism as a technique or 'art' of management. While he is often criticized for downplaying 'ideology' and the role of the state, Foucault always insisted that his concern was to investigate how governmental projects could align individual activities alongside state goals and objectives. As he argued in an influential essay, "I do not mean in any way to minimise the importance and effectiveness of State power. I simply feel that excessive insistence on its playing an exclusive role leads to the risk of overlooking the mechanisms and effects of power which don't pass directly via the State apparatus, yet often sustain the State more effectively than its own institutions, enlarging and maximising its effectiveness" (1980, p.73).

¹⁰² Part of the reason that Foucault and his successors have been so heavily criticized has been their apparent lack of political engagement. Preferring a genealogy of the present to a criticism of the past, governmentality scholars eschew a specific political programme in favour of an attempt to chart the fragility of political projects and the complexity and contingency of rationalities of rule. However, this is not to say that there can be no political implications for these types of analyses. As some have shown, governmentality studies are aimed at generating a different mode of progressive thought and action, of

“healthy, wealthy and wise” thus not only enhances individual autonomy and self-sufficiency, but it also works to support the objectives of the neo-liberal state for individuals to take care of and think about themselves in particular ways (Nettleton 1997).

Although the governmentality literature has been more concerned with rationalities of rule than with the “messy actualities” of specific state programmes and policies (Larner 2000, p.14), there is much to be gained from these studies for developing an empirically focused critique of neo-liberalism. Using as an example the electricity and Nike case studies, we might seek an examination of the ways through which, “by their own means or with the help of others” (Foucault 1988, p.18), individuals transform themselves into ‘consumers’ in relation to certain state policy objectives and goals, and in how certain ways of thinking and acting get incorporated into everyday life to attain a state of happiness and freedom that is consistent with the core tenets of neo-liberalism, viz. individual wealth, independence from collectivities and economic security. In what ways, for instance, might consumers have ‘taken up’ the discourse of individual ‘right’ and ‘responsibility’ to contract with the electricity provider of their choice? What kinds of changes might individuals have made to their shopping habits having become ‘aware’ of the sweatshops issue? Or, when hydro prices began to climb, what techniques or strategies might individuals have used to maintain or enhance their economic security? What modifications to their daily lives would individuals have had to make in order to accommodate themselves to the contingencies of a competitive electricity paradigm?

generating a “post-social politics” (O’Malley et al. 1997, p.504) that will seek the holes and dislocations in governmental projects in order that critical responses and interventions can be made.

Such strategies and techniques might have ranged from the radical (e.g. 'stealing' hydro) and exceptional (e.g. 'going off the grid' with self-sufficient energy such as solar panels) to the humble and mundane (e.g. hang-drying laundry instead of using the electric dryer, re-fitting one's home with more energy-efficient windows and lighting, consuming more 'fresh' food that does not require as much refrigeration or cooking, &c.).

A second possible avenue for further thought and research would entail continuing recent efforts at "rethinking" Ulrich Beck's concept of subpolitics (see Holzer and Sørensen 2003). In many ways, such a rethinking would parallel neatly with the aforementioned objective of incorporating a governmentality approach for the study of neo-liberalism. In this dissertation, I have focused primarily on what Holzer and Sørensen, following Beck, describe as the 'active' dimension of subpolitics: the contestation by predominantly social movement organizations of the core objectives of modernity. What hasn't been examined, however, is the 'passive' side of subpolitics, which "refers to those actions that may be described in terms of politics from an observer's point of view but are not conceived of as inherently political within the field of action itself" (Holzer and Sørensen 2003, p.82). Such types of subpolitical activity Beck ascribes to the field of science and technology, particularly the academic and research community. An example here would be the Human Genome Project, whose researchers are not driven by an explicitly *political agenda* per se but whose projects yield outcomes that pose considerable consequences for human society and thus 'set into motion' a range of (active) subpolitical action and behaviour (p.84).

To use the case studies explored in this dissertation, it would be interesting to pursue these different dimensions of subpolitics to explore *inter alia* the subpolitical activity of corporations or quasi-corporate actors, such as policy think tanks. On the one hand, business decisions (e.g. to pursue new labour venues where workplace standards are weak or easily ignored in practice; to outsource key facets of business activity to non-unionized workers; to redesign utilities bills that will ‘break down’ every component of the ratepayers’ costs, &c.) produce side effects that have a direct impact on the working, recreational and living conditions of individuals and groups. Although these decisions might reinforce a particular political ideology or articulate a policy framework, they are not in and of themselves necessarily political statements. Rather, they only become political (or politicized) when they directly affect another actor and set into motion a political reaction. On the other hand, as suggested in the findings presented by Carroll and Shaw (2001), corporate decision-making is also *actively* subpolitical insofar as business groups and policy think tanks attempt in various ways to directly influence the policymaking and news process by engaging in all kinds of ‘behind the scenes’ activities, such as lobbying and public relations (see also Miller and Dinan 2000). Indeed, this is of marked importance in an era of rapidly expanding neo-liberalism – the declining power of the legislature in relation to the growth industries of PR and lobbying provides a fruitful opportunity and avenue for further research.

This segues, finally, into a third possible avenue for future research, which is the growth and expansion of the public relations state in Canada. In contrast to the available empirical literature on this subject in the UK (Davis 2002; Miller and Dinan 2000), in

Canada there has been considerably less scholarly attention paid to the role of private public relations consultancies or to the growing prioritization within the agencies of the state to PR.¹⁰³ I have attempted to take a small step in filling this gap by addressing the expenditures by the Ministry of Energy for the promotion and issues management of the electricity issue, however this is only a very small step indeed and hardly scratches the surface of the subject. In large part, and particularly as it concerns the state, this has been due to two major problems: the first is associated with primary data gathering, as government information on such expenditures and priorities is not collected or collated in a manner conducive to research or, as I experienced in the context of the research on electricity reform, freedom of information requests; the second, and arguably more challenging dilemma, is the fact that within the private sector there is little regulation or control over how PR is defined and practiced. Unlike in the UK or United States, the public relations profession in Canada currently suffers from a 'weak' sense of vigilance over professional identity and ideology, as there is no monopoly on what PR 'actually' is or who counts as a 'real' PR professional. Nevertheless, this is not to say that the role of PR is not significant to politics in Canada. As Fox (1999) has recently argued, "[i]n recent years, spin doctors have positioned themselves as the stage managers of politics" (p.260) – and so long as policymaking at the national, subnational or supranational level continues to be tilted in the direction of the market, lobbying, public relations (the industry and the techniques), and other technologies of influence and persuasion will

¹⁰³ The notable exception here is Peter Johansen's (2001) recent study of the Canadian Public Relations Society.

continue to serve as an important means by which these changes are made possible and their contingencies managed and controlled.

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