FRAMING THE WRITERS STRIKE:  
A COMPARISON OF NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF THE 2007-2008 WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA STRIKE

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By  
ANNÉE TOUSSEAU

Dr. Tim P. Vos, Committee Chair  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled


presented by Année Tousseau,

a candidate for the degree of master of journalism,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

_________________________________________________________________________
Professor Tim P. Vos

_________________________________________________________________________
Professor Earnest Perry

_________________________________________________________________________
Professor Wayne Wanta

_________________________________________________________________________
Professor Victoria Johnson
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Année Tousseau
Dr. Tim P. Vos, Thesis Supervisor

ABSTRACT

In November 2007, the Writers Guild of America, the labor union representing U.S. film, television and radio writers, called a strike targeted at the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, a trade association representing over 350 entertainment production companies. Eventually over 12,000 writers joined the strike, which ended in February 2008. Production on many television programs ceased, which made this strike immediately visible to a large number of Americans – the national television audience. Informed by a critical theory perspective and guided by the principles of qualitative textual analysis, this study examines framing of the strike in three major newspapers: the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and the New York Post. The Post’s and the Journal’s mutual parent company, News Corporation, had a financial stake in the strike; it owns the Fox television networks and film production studios, and is represented by the alliance. The New York Times’ parent company, in contrast, did not have a stake in the strike. The results show that though the three newspapers used different assortments of frames to cover the strike, they all framed it negatively – by emphasizing “damage” caused by the strike, promoting consumer values and marginalizing the guild. Ultimately, this study affirms the literature describing media coverage of labor, and furthers the understanding of the relationship between media ownership and content.
CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

The purpose of this textual analysis study is to examine newspaper coverage of the 2007-2008 Writers Guild of America (WGA) strike. Specifically this study engages the following research questions:

- What frames were present in newspaper coverage of the writers strike?
- Did newspapers whose owners had a financial stake in the strike frame it differently from those who didn’t?
- Did tabloid newspapers frame the strike differently than “serious” broadsheet newspapers?

The writers strike began on November 5, 2007 and officially ended February 12, 2008. It occurred when the Writers Guild of America West (WGAW) and Writers Guild of America East (WGAE), trade unions composed of writers in radio, television and film, went on strike against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), a trade organization that represents over 350 producers in negotiations; member companies include corporations such as CBS, MGM, NBC, News Corporation, Paramount Pictures, Sony Pictures, the Walt Disney Company and Warner Brothers. Every three years the guild negotiates a contract with the AMPTP that determines terms of employment for its members. In fall of 2007, negotiations around the agreement reached an impasse. Two of the most important issues surrounding the disagreement were residuals – writers’ compensation for subsequent airings or purchases of a program – and compensation for material written for the Internet. Union jurisdiction over reality-show
and animation workers was also on the table. Production on popular television shows and films ceased as more than 12,000 writers joined the strike. Celebrities, actors, and other entertainment industry professionals joined the picket lines.

In the United States, organized labor is an institution in decline. In the past fifty years, the American organized labor movement has shrunk in size in terms of members. According to the Department of Labor, in 2006, 12 percent of all employed wage and salary workers were union members, down from 12.5 percent a year before and compared to about 35 percent in the 1950s. Today’s unionized workforce includes 15.4 million workers. Clawson and Clawson (1999) and Heshizer (1985) have attributed this decline to growth in the service-sector economy, outside the traditional manufacturing and “blue collar” sector that served as the historic base of union membership. Clawson and Clawson (1999), Heshizer (1985) and Goldfield (1987) furthermore link the decline in union membership to coordinated efforts by industry to weaken organized labor and tarnish its image; federal law allowing employers to prevent unionization; and changes in public policy favoring employers. Clawson and Clawson (1999) and Goldfield (1987) lay some of the blame for the decline on union failure to actively recruit new members in the decades following World War II; given an expanding labor force and without aggressive recruitment strategies, unions became more thinly dispersed in the labor force. Clawson and Clawson (1999) also point out that during the same time period unions by and large did not take pains to mobilize the increasing numbers of women and minorities entering the workforce.

Media scholars (e.g., Goffman, 1974; Gitlin, 1980; Gamson and Lasch, 1983; Gamson and Modigliani 1987; Entman, 1989 and 1993; Pan and Kosicki, 1993; Ghanem,
1996; Hertog and McLeod, 2001) have used the concept of framing to describe how the media structure their delivery of information, privileging certain interpretations of events or situations by inclusion or exclusion of certain facts and details, and through stylistic choices. News reports about strikes contain frames, for example, which might encourage the reader to make conclusions about what caused the strike or who is to “blame” for it, or who is most significantly affected by it – as well as who isn’t.

This study proposes to use textual analysis to examine newspaper framing of the writers strike – it cannot answer how the coverage of these strikes affected public perception of the strike or the guild, and it does not describe the process of framing as performed by journalists and editors as they reported and wrote about the strike. But the question of how the strike was framed is worthwhile as the body of literature and especially in-depth studies of media coverage of strikes and organized labor actions is quite small. Furthermore, as we shall see, when it comes to studies examining media coverage of strikes within the entertainment industry, the literature is especially lacking. Examining media coverage of a media workers’ strike also presents an opportunity to see how the press responds to a strike that affects workers in a similar industry.
Frames and Framing

In seeking to examine coverage of the writers strike, this study uses the concept of the frame as the primary object of analysis. Framing theory directly challenges the idea that there is an “objective” take on the events the media reports; it also challenges the traditional colloquialism that the media “hold up a mirror to society” (Mindich, 1998). Goffman (1974), in one of the earliest explanations, defines frames as “schemata of interpretation” that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences and life experiences. Gitlin (1980) emphasizes both this cognitive aspect of framing and the idea of a frame in text. He defines frames as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation of selection, emphasis and exclusion employed by journalists that become the routine organization for visual and verbal news texts” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 10). Frames, in other words, provide a way to understand the world and are the means by which writers construct a coherent reality from an otherwise chaotic or meaningless jumble of events. By defining frames as patterns, Gitlin emphasizes the cumulative nature of frames, which are present not just in a single text but across texts. This definition implies that a study of media frames of an event should examine texts across time; this will allow the researcher to capture these framing patterns and the process of a frame becoming routine, a process described by scholars such as Tuchman (1978) and Reese and Buckalew (1994).
Gitlin’s concept of framing is pertinent to a study of coverage of the writers strike because the definition stems from his study of the activist group Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960s. The Writers Guild of America is a different kind of group in that it is larger, with more formalized structure including bylaws, an organizational hierarchy and more material resources. It does not explicitly seek to bring about social change in society, instead seeking to advance the economic interests of writer members by bargaining collectively with entertainment companies. However, both groups used protests to vocalize their concerns and so some cues may be taken from Gitlin’s study of Students for a Democratic Society. Gitlin identified specific framing devices in media coverage of the group’s protests: “trivialization” of the protesters’ language, dress, age, style and goals; “polarization” – emphasizing counter-demonstrations and placing ultra-right and neo-Nazi groups as equivalent extremists; emphasis on internal dissent within the group; and “marginalization” – showing demonstrators to be deviant or unrepresentative (Gitlin, 1980, p. 27). These frames may be present in media coverage of the writers strike, given the use of protests by both groups.

As defined by Entman (1989) in one of the most cited definitions of the concept, framing is “selecting some aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (p. 350). Entman (1993) further explained that salience means making something more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to an audience; bits of information can become more salient “by placement or their repetition, or by associating them with culturally familiar
symbols” (p. 53). His definition goes further than Gitlin’s (1980) because it describes how frames not only organize texts but promote one version of reality over another, by privileging certain interpretations of events and advancing ideas about what they mean. Furthermore, Entman’s definition is useful because it is more explicit about the elements of a text that may reveal the frame. By combing texts and identifying problem definitions, causal interpretations, etc., the researcher can make conclusions about the frame that structures the text.

In the same way, other studies that link frames to specific elements in the text are useful because they name concrete textual devices and patterns that researchers can use to locate and describe frames. Here the theory of the frame very clearly implies a method of analysis. Gamson and Modigliani (1987) conceptualize the frame as the central organizing idea or story line in a news article that provides meaning. Gamson and Lasch (1983) wrote that there are five devices that signify the uses of frames: metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) later used this approach in their study of the nuclear power discourse. They found that readers encounter these devices not as individual items but as “interpretative packages” that give meaning to an issue. Packages also work over time, incorporating new events into the interpretative frame.

Ghanem (1996) identified four categories of framing: subtopics, affective elements, cognitive elements, and framing mechanisms, which include photographs, quotes, headlines and subheads. All these mechanisms contribute to a frame’s salience. Ghanem (1996) also emphasizes that the frequency with which a topic or a stock-phrase is mentioned is one of the most powerful framing mechanisms. Hertog and McLeod
(2001) further identified components of the frame. A common feature of most frames is a central conflict, indicated by the choice of actors presenting ideas and speaking within a text. Other “building blocks” of frames, according to Hertog and MacLeod (2001), are master narratives that organize disparate ideas and information about a topic. An example of this might be the idea of “progress,” which organizes history as a forward flow driven by developments in technology. Myths, widely shared and understood cultural ideas, are also an element of frames; they are often not specifically alluded to in text, but only revealed upon a closer reading.

Pan and Kosicki (1993) describe news texts as a form of discourse consisting of four structural dimensions: syntactical, script, thematic, and rhetorical. The syntactical dimension refers to the total structure of the story – headline, lead, episode, background, and closure. Scripts, according to van Dijk (1991), are story lines that give events narrative structure. Thematic structures refer to an idea or argument that attempts to explain the problem or tension in the story. Finally, rhetorical devices refer to stylistic choices journalists make in presenting material. By looking at these elements within a news article, Pan and Kosicki argue, one can draw systematic conclusions about the text’s frames.

It is important to note the boundaries of the concept of the frame and the limits of its explanatory power. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) caution that frames and their effects on an audience are two discrete topics and must be treated as such. Much research, they note, shows that the effects of a frame are determined by what the audience brings to the table; just because a topic is framed in a certain way does not mean that individuals will accept it. Frames privilege a certain reading of the text, suggesting a particular
interpretation or discouraging another. Because frames cue pre-existing knowledge into play, an individual may reject the interpretation the text privileges. However, frames do have power to affect individuals’ perceptions. Tversky and Kahneman (1981) demonstrated the power of framing in their research around question wording. They found that the way a question was worded affected a person’s answer, with even simple word changes leading to readers answering questions in drastically different ways. Nonetheless, the point remains that media researchers should not assume that because a frame is present it holds sway over an audience. This leap is not warranted from a text-based analysis; audience research would be required to say something about effects of frames. Similarly, the concept of the frame as it appears in text does not necessarily reveal anything about framing as a process or explain how frames made their way into the text. On one level, frames are in texts because journalists (like anyone) use these schemes to perceive reality and then write about it. A text-based analysis of frames in coverage of the writers strike would not be able to explain how or why journalists came to rely on particular frames to understand and write about the strike. Tuchman (1978) offers a glimpse of this process in her ethnography of newsrooms; she points to news workers’ professional norms, practices and the organizational structure and culture of the newsroom as particularly influential in determining how the women’s rights movement was covered in New York newsrooms in the 1970s. But again, this is outside the realm of a study of frames as they appear in texts.

This study employs Entman (1989) and Gitlin’s (1980) definition of the frame. The study’s methodology will draw from Gamson and Lasch’s (1983)’s five elements; Pan and Kosicki’s (1993) explanation of text structure; and Hertog and MacLeod’s
discussion of master narratives and myths to identify frames in and across news texts about the writers strike.

**Link to Critical Theory**

Both Entman and Gitlin’s explication of the frame are particularly enlightening and useful for a study of media coverage of a strike by an organized labor group. These definitions imply a struggle over meaning that ultimately leads back to the question of power.

“Frames bear the imprint of power because they register the identity of actor interests that competed to dominate the text,” (Entman, 1993, p. 53), Entman writes. Carragee and Roefs (2004) engage this point when they conceptualize news stories as forums for “framing contests” in which people, groups and institutions compete by sponsoring their definition of the news. The ability of a frame to dominate news discourse depends on “its sponsor’s economic and cultural resources, its sponsor’s knowledge of journalistic practices, these practices themselves, and a frame’s resonance with broader political values” (Carragee and Roefs, 2004, p. 216). This of course implies that those who have the resources – such as public relations campaigns – to promote their frames to news organizations have an advantage in these contests. Tuchman’s (1978) sociological study of news workers’ practices revealed that “those who hold recognized reins of legitimated power clearly have more access to the media than those who do not” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 133). But it should be noted that frames advanced by the government or other powerful institutions will not always win the favor of the journalists and editors who create the news. Ryan (1991) emphasizes how social movements who seek to
challenge the status quo can successfully “talk back” to the media. Her analysis of a
Boston hotel and restaurant workers’ union revealed that the union was able to appeal to
the media by conveying a “clear and positive” message, and by publicly framing their
position on contested contract negotiations with appeals that referred to justice and
democracy – ideas that resonate with broader American values. Despite this success Ryan
also argues that the mass media are “among the most important institutions maintaining,
reinforcing and reproducing existing inequities in power” (Ryan, 1991, p. 7). Essentially
this is a Gramscian (1992) take in that it sees the media as a key part in the creation of
hegemony – the consolidation of power through the construction of alliances and
integration of subordinate classes and groups through consent. Power is not only
maintained via coercion or the threat or application of brute force. Rather, by accepting
the frames and definitions of events promoted by political elites, the media can be seen as
doing the work of creating and maintaining elite power. This acknowledgment of the
media’s role in maintaining hegemony means that media texts must be read with a critical
eye.

The purpose of critical discourse analysis as defined by Wodak (1995) is to
“analyze opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance,
discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (Wodak, 1995, p. 204).
Flairclough (1992) provides a comprehensive look at critical discourse analysis in his
work *Discourse and Social Change*. One dimension of critical discourse analysis,
according to Fairclough, is the analysis of concrete elements of text such as choice and
patterns in vocabulary, grammar, cohesion and text-structure. In analyzing the concrete
elements of the text, attention should be given to speech acts and how quoted utterances
are selected and contextualized, and to coherence and intertextuality, which refers to how
texts refer to other texts. Fairclough (1992) says that the way texts are written sheds light
on struggles over norms, attempts at control, and also resistance against regimes of
power. Larsen (1991) also follows this critical approach when he writes that “the
deciphering of latent meanings through qualitative content analysis implies a
decomposition of ideology and a critique of its social origins with a view to critical

A similar critical perspective informs this study because deciphering frames is a
critical process. And although much of the literature on media coverage of strikes (e.g.
Tasini, 1990; Puette, 1992; Martin, 2004; Kumar, 2007) does not explicitly identify with
critical discourse analysis, it has a critical component in that it not only describes what’s
present in the text but makes an argument about what the text *does*, in arguing which
ideologies are reinforced and which actors are supported, and which ideologies and actors
are marginalized. The study might also be seen as taking the critical discourse analysis
approach in that it recognizes newspaper coverage of the writers strike as part of the
American discourse around organized labor and economics more generally. It recognizes
that the goals of the organized labor movement and the specific goals of the guild may
conflict with those of the for-profit companies and corporations that own media outlets
covering the strike. This may result in frames that privilege the powerful.

**Ownership and Content**

Similar to Ryan (1991) several critics have argued that the commercial news
media reinforce the status quo as well as uphold and rationalize inequitable distributions
of power – by nature of their being commercial businesses that seek to maximize profit. This question of ownership is central to Herman and Chomsky’s (2002) theory that commercial media operate under a “propaganda model” in which the media serve the “powerful societal interests that control and finance them” (Herman and Chomsky, 2002, p. xi). Their case studies of media coverage of the Guatemalan, El Salvadoran and Nicaraguan elections in the early 1980s argued that the media framed the elections in the first two countries as legitimate and democratic, while painting the Nicaraguan vote as a farce, following the American government’s interests in these nations. McChesney (2004) points to “a system of profit-driven journalism in largely noncompetitive markets” (McChesney, 2004, p. 57) that produces journalism which fails to check the interests of the powerful. Bagdikian’s (1997) critique of the media focuses on the concentration of ownership within the media industry, and the fact that many media outlets find themselves inside conglomerates with interests in other industries such as finance, insurance, telecommunications and defense. NBC News, for example, is owned by General Electric. Bagdikian (1997) argues that this results in news that is skewed in favor of owners’ corporate interests.

These critical insights are useful and provide a rationale for examining the relationship between media ownership and media content. To study this relationship, Gilens and Hertzman (2000) write that researchers should examine coverage of issues for which different media owners have different interests; the question should be whether news content differs according to different interests. A suitable topic must have received substantial coverage, have clear implications for the media owners, and have different implications for the interests of different corporate owners. Gilens and Hertzman (2000)
took this approach in their analysis of the impact of newspaper ownership on coverage of one aspect of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 – the loosening of TV station ownership caps, which allowed companies to own more TV stations. Prior to the Act companies were limited from owning more than 12 TV stations nationwide or owning stations that reached more than 25 percent of the nation’s viewers. Clearly this was an issue that affected media companies in a material way – especially those approaching the limit. The researchers found that newspapers that stood to gain from the proposed loosening of TV ownership caps had more favorable coverage of the proposed changes, with positive consequences outnumbering negative consequences by over two to one. But the coverage of this issue in newspapers owned by companies that did not stand to gain was overwhelmingly unfavorable, with negative consequences appearing over three times as often as positive consequences. In this case ownership clearly translated into different coverage. This research suggests that for a study of the writers strike, it might be useful and telling to compare coverage across ownership lines, because the ownership of these companies may have had specific interests in the outcome of the strike and the contract negotiations being disputed. At least one film and television production company represented by the AMPTP was also bound, through ownership by the same parent media company, to news outlets covering the strike. News Corporation, which owns 20th Century Fox film production studios, and the Fox television networks, also owns the New York Post, the Wall Street Journal and other papers outside the U.S. that covered the strike. One might expect these papers to frame the writers strike in a way that supports the parent company’s goals and to portray the strike negatively.
“Tabloid” versus “Serious” News

Commercial or business concerns can influence the content of the media – the previous section showed instances of newspapers’ financial interests coloring their coverage of the Telecommunications Act. One of the main contentions of the cultural critics is that whether part of a corporation or within a smaller company, commercial newspapers must maintain profitability. These bottom line concerns may weigh out over other commitments – such as the goal of producing objective journalism. Some newspapers are said to differ from others in the degree to which market concerns dictate their content. Sparks and Tulloch (2000) use the terms “tabloid” and “serious” journalism to refer to this difference. The “serious” model of journalism seeks to inform the public about politics and the public sphere, while the “tabloid” model seeks to make profit by attracting readers, viewers and listeners with sensational entertainment designed to excite, thrill, shock and titillate – often at the expense of truth. Researchers (Sparks and Tulloch, 2000; Connell, 1998; Eide, 1998) also use this “tabloid” versus “serious” journalism distinction to describe the writing styles, tones and contents of the two types. According to this research the essential features of a tabloid are first and foremost, sensationalism, followed by an emphasis on entertainment news over political and economic news. Connell (1998) also adds ideational and linguistic populism to the list of defining characteristics of the tabloid. Franklin (1997) says the main features of tabloid journalism are its “insensitive conjoining of the sentimental and the sensational, the prurient and the populist (Franklin, 1997, p. 3). Eide (1997) writes that the tabloid is preoccupied with moral disorder and threats to everyday life. Sparks and Tulloch (2000) give a thorough description of tabloid news:
It devotes relatively little attention to politics, economics and society and relatively much to diversions like sports, scandal, and popular entertainment; it devotes relatively much attention to the personal and private lives of people, both celebrities and ordinary people, and relatively little to political processes, economic developments, and social changes. (p. 10)

It should be remembered that this distinction between serious and tabloid journalism is not a simple bifurcation; rather, “serious” and “tabloid” journalism can be seen as opposite ends of a continuum.

According to Sparks and Tulloch (2000) the most serious papers (exemplified by *The New York Times*) concentrate almost exclusively on the world of politics, economics, and structural changes in the world; the serious-popular paper puts a strong stress on visual design, and contains a large dose of scandal, sports and entertainment while still demonstrating some commitment to the stuff of serious news (exemplified by *USA Today*). The newsstand tabloid has a strong agenda of scandal, sports, and entertainment but may actively campaigns on political issues and in elections or project an overt editorial voice. And the “pure” tabloid is the supermarket tabloid. Meanwhile, the pure tabloid story – which may appear in all but the serious papers – is the story about the sexual dalliances of a famous athlete or other celebrity.

Connell (1998) found that politics was the most frequently mentioned topic in British broadsheet dailies, but human interest topics were most frequently mentioned in the tabloids. Personality-based news was also found to be a major feature of tabloid reporting, and while several tabloids did cover political and economic affairs, these articles referred to ordinary people much less than the dailies. Tabloid political news
largely featured officials such as the prime minister, presidents of other countries, and
members of parliament.

Given this discussion of tabloids, it is possible to conjecture how tabloids might
cover the writers strike. With the emphasis on sensationalism and the lack of economic
news, we might find that a tabloid covers the writers strike less than a more “serious”
paper, or not at all. However, because the strike is entertainment-related and celebrities
participated in it, this could make it at home on the tabloid pages. The “populist” style of
the tabloid could mean that the strike would be framed from the view of the “average
citizen” or television viewer – a “when’s my favorite show coming back on?” frame.
Technical descriptions of contract negotiations or in-depth explorations of the structure of
the entertainment industry, for example, would not be expected. Finally, the tabloid’s
focus on the personal may translate into a stories lack of context about the strike; one
might expect stories about one person’s dramatic incident on the picket line, for example.
CHAPTER THREE
Review of Literature

No studies of media coverage of the 2007-2008 writers strike have been located. However, there is a body of research that describes media coverage of labor unions in general. Some of this explicitly refers to frames. Much of this literature is focused on media coverage of unions of “blue collar” workers; few studies have specifically analyzed media coverage of “white collar” unions like the Writers Guild of America.

Extent of Coverage

Research on the extent of media coverage of labor unions – how often they get coverage – shows evidence of a selection bias. The thrust of the research indicates that union activities don’t often make the news, and when they are covered, it’s usually because of a strike. Tasini (1990) found that in 1989, the ABC, CBS and NBC evening news programs devoted 1.2 percent of their total air time to labor unions stories. Almost three-fourths of that coverage was devoted to the Eastern Airline strike. By comparison, business and economic reporting (including stories about retail sales, corporate mergers, trade deficits, interest rate reports, Dow Jones averages) received almost double the amount of coverage. In 1989, The United Mine Workers of America took over a southwestern Virginia coal field owned by the Pittston Coal Group. The strike was a major event because it was the first time workers had taken control of a plant since the 1937 takeover of a General Motors plant by workers in Flint, Michigan. Tasini reports that the initial plant takeover merited one sentence in USA Today and two brief mentions
in the *Wall Street Journal*. The national press did not give the strike much more coverage over the course of its nine month ordeal. The *Washington Post* followed the story with the most consistency, but the stories appeared in the paper’s regional section. On television over the course of these nine months, the strike merited 22 minutes and 40 seconds of coverage between the 3 television networks mentioned above. The first mention of the strike on television came 25 days after it began.

Martin (2004) notes that in the 1990s, the five largest labor stories concerned strikes: the 1991-94 shutdown of a General Motors plant in Ypsilanti Township, Michigan; the American Airlines flight attendant strike of 1993, the 1994-95 Major League Baseball strike; the 1997 United Parcel Service (UPS) strike; and the 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference in Seattle. Erickson and Mitchell (1996) studied *New York Times* coverage of management-union settlements and found a decline in the coverage of these stories as the actual number of strikes declined. Settlements and negotiations were more likely to get coverage if a strike occurred. Similarly, Schmidt (1993) found that the number of stories about labor unions in the *New York Times* had declined steadily from over 200 in 1946 to about 30 in 1986. This coverage increasingly focused on strike activity, even while the actual number of strikes had decreased steadily. Finally, in their analysis of major newspapers, Jarley and Kuruvilla (1994) found that labor union news had largely moved from the front pages of the papers in the 1930s-1950s, to the labor page in the 1960s-1970s, to the business page in the 1980s.

What can be concluded from this literature is that coverage of labor unions has also declined over time but is increasingly focused on strikes – even as strikes involve
fewer workers, union members or otherwise. Clawson and Clawson (1999) found that between 1969 – 1979, strikes involved 950,000 persons each year; from 1987-1996, strikes never involved more than 500,000 per year, despite a larger labor force.

**Organizational Resources**

Tellingly, accompanying the overall decline in coverage is a decrease in the resources newspapers devote to reporting on labor unions. Martin (2004) notes that in 2002, there were only five full time labor reporters working in the United States. Workplace and business coverage has largely replaced the labor beat. In one of the few accounts of labor reporting written by someone who used to do the job, Serrin (1992) describes how he was hired by the *New York Times* to cover anything related to work, but became convinced that he had to do more coverage of unions, to make up for what he saw as its paltry coverage compared to other institutions. He describes his colleagues’ distaste for the labor beat – their impressions of it as dead, dreary and just generally not “sexy.” Those who wanted to advance their careers saw the labor beat as a dead-end job. Meanwhile, Tasini (1990) sent a two-page survey on labor reporting to the 100 largest circulation papers in 1989. What he found lends support to Serrin’s anecdotal evidence. Workplace and business beats had largely replaced labor beats. The typical reporter covering labor issues was a white, middle-class male assigned to the business desk. Reporting on labor took up no more than 20 percent of his time.
Content of Labor Coverage

Martin (2004) writes that instead of facilitating the Habermasian public sphere ideal, the news media promote a consumer sphere, in which all public actions are defined in terms of appropriate consumer behavior. Thus, the coverage of strikes and other labor union tactics is often focused on the impact on consumers – the availability of goods and services, prices and the effect on the economic community at large. The effect of this consumer-oriented framing is that the media is often critical of labor’s actions and “enthusiastically supportive” of management. After analyzing what he saw as the five largest labor stories of the 1990s he argues that five frames dominate coverage: the consumer is king; the process of production is none of the public’s business; the economy is driven by great business leaders and entrepreneurs; the workplace is a meritocracy; and collective economic action is bad. It is significant that Martin includes the 1994-1995 Major League Baseball (MLB) strike; this provides one of the few analyses of coverage of strikes involving higher-paid professionals, not rank-and-file blue-collar or manual laborers. The writers on strike did not earn as much as some of the famous MLB athletes, but they are creative professionals, who earn more than the coal miners, airline attendants or delivery truck drivers at the center of the other strikes Martin analyzes. The element of celebrity in the MLB strike, which involved famous athletes, also provides a point of connection to the writers strike, as some of the striking writers were well-known in their own right and famous actors and celebrities also took to the picket lines in support. Given these differences between the MLB and the writers strike, and other strikes involving lower-paid workers, it’s significant that coverage of the MLB strike still falls in line with the pro-consumer, anti-labor frame seen elsewhere.
Puette (1992) argues that the image of labor in the media is one of corruption, greed, self-interest and power. He also cites an interview he conducted with John Grimes, a former labor writer for the *Wall Street Journal*. This reporter found that when he was in the field reporting on a strike, the local reporter assigned to the story was often the local newspaper’s police or crime reporter. Puette says that the association of labor action with crime reporting is probably the single most damaging bias affecting the labor movement. He argues that two main themes typified the coverage of the United Mine Workers of America Pittston Coal Field strike of 1989. First, the union’s efforts to employ peaceful tactics of civil disobedience were largely ignored. Second, the issues of the dispute were either not treated or were expressed from an employer’s perspective. The union was portrayed as outdated and irrelevant in the contemporary business world.

Kumar (2007) analyzed the media treatment of the 1997 UPS strike. She argues that the mainstream media’s initial coverage of the strike minimized its significance, but that in the second week of the strike, some media outlets (the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and ABC television network) began to discuss larger issues behind the strike, and more broadly, workers’ issues. The Teamsters, the union that organized the 185,000 striking workers, were able to “win” public favor in a highly politicized atmosphere where people were forced to choose sides. However, shortly after the strike was over and its impact had passed, meaningful debate about workers’ issues died down.

In Britain, Wade (1985) did a content analysis of media coverage of the 1984 National Union of Mineworkers’ (NUM) strike and found that the coverage of the strikes emphasized and exaggerated violence and, by using what she termed the “language of war” – words such as battle,” “army,” “troops,” – the media painted an overly-violent
image that belied the sometimes tense but mostly monotonous experience of picketing and policing the picket lines. The strike was seen as a threat to “democracy” and “a man’s right to work,” and not as a labor dispute over the British coal industry. Wade ascribes an institutional bias to many of the reporters covering the strike, who found it easier to talk to official sources rather than those behind the picket lines.

Studies of media coverage of strikes involving white-collar workers, especially within the media industry, are particularly pertinent. These studies fit in with the general thrust of the research on media coverage of other types of strikes: evidence of a similar pro-management perspective is found here, too. Brennan (2005) analyzed coverage of the 1967-1977 *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* strike, which occurred when about 1,100 members of the Los Angeles Newspaper Guild went on strike against the Hearst Corporation, over a dispute about wages. Brennan found that a pro-labor perspective was virtually absent. “The strike coverage in local and national newspapers, *Time* newsmagazine, and the trade publication *Editor and Publisher*, focused on the violence of the strike and the damage the unions were inflicting on the newspaper” (Brennan, 2005, p. 71). A pro-management perspective was framed via word choice and an emphasis on negative consequences for Hearst management.

Tracy’s (2004) analysis of coverage of the 1965 American Newspaper Guild strike against the *New York Times* corroborates Brennan’s study. Four frames emerged from an analysis of 44 articles from 23 newspapers and an unspecified number of articles from magazines. The “victimization of technology” frame cast strikers as opposed to progress; the “sincere bosses, underhanded unions” frame gave the impression the employers were acting rationally, while the union was not. The “cheerful mediator celebrities, grim-faced
unionists” frame celebrated the activities of independent mediator Theodore Kheel, juxtaposing his assertions against more staid remarks by labor leaders. And finally, in the “public as victim” frame, the focus was on how the strike affected the public, pointing the finger of blame at labor. Tracy writes that in the end, the reading public was given a certain perspective of the 1965 strike largely defined through its representation by an American commercial press with interests similar, if not identical, to the New York newspapers being struck. (p. 7)

**Statement of Research Question**

In sum, the research on media coverage of strikes indicates a persistent trend of pro-management and anti-labor framing. From this one might expect coverage of the writers strike to follow in a similar vein. Specifically one might expect articles to frame the strike in terms of production companies’ costs or losses; the impact of the strike on consumers, or use frames that portray unions or strikers as greedy, self-interested or irrelevant in the business world. However, it’s significant to note that the literature is overwhelmingly focused on strikes that occurred before 2000. This could beg the question if anything has changed in the past decade or so. Clawson and Clawson (1999) noted a few new campaigns emerging in the 1990s: the Justice for Janitors campaign, for example, was innovative because it made appeals to workers outside its Los Angeles base, and made attempts to mobilize the local Hispanic community by framing their issues in terms of justice for the entire community. In 2005, several unions broke off from the AFL-CIO to form the Change the Win Federation. Their name suggests an attempt to establish a rhetorical break from the past; tactics described on their Web site
make explicit mention of grassroots organizing. Scholars (e.g. Goldfield, 1987; Clawson and Clawson, 1999) faulted the organized labor movement for failing to mobilize and recruit new members, as well as ignoring the experiences of working women and minorities. These events may be signs of a shift in the larger landscape of American organized labor, possibly contributing to an environment where strikes might be framed more positively.

In addition, it should be noted that the literature is overwhelmingly focused on coverage of strikes involving industrial or blue collar workers, not white collar or creative professionals. However, the lone study examining coverage of strikes of higher-paid workers, Martin’s (2004) analysis of the 1994-1995 MLB strike, still falls in line with the overall thrust of the research.

Framing theory explains how the textual elements in a news article privilege certain interpretations of the event or situation being reported. The critical theory perspective argues that the media, by accepting the frames promoted by the powerful, create reports that maintain their power. The literature on media coverage of strikes is grounded in this critical perspective and provides evidence that frames promoted by management are accepted much more often than those promoted by striking workers and their unions. The critical perspective furthermore provides a rationale for examining the relationship between media ownership and media content. A news organization’s commercial ownership and its commitment to profit may influence the content of the news produced. Scholars describe tabloids as being more committed to making a profit than providing information.
Given this, the research question that will guide this study is: What frames were present in newspaper coverage of the 2007-2008 Writers Guild of America strike? Other research questions which will be addressed include:

• Did newspapers whose owners had a financial stake in the strike frame it differently from those who didn’t?

• Did tabloid newspapers frame the strike differently than serious newspapers?
CHAPTER FOUR
Research Design and Methodology

This study seeks to examine newspaper coverage of the writers strike in the New York Times, the New York Post, and the Wall Street Journal. The main research question that will guide this study is: What frames were present in coverage of the Writers Guild of America strike in the New York Times, the New York Post and the Wall Street Journal frame the writers strike? The study also addresses the following questions:

- Did the Wall Street Journal and New York Post, whose mutual owner had a financial stake in the strike, frame it differently than the New York Times, whose owner was unaffected by the strike?
- Did the tabloid New York Post frame the strike differently than the serious Wall Street Journal and New York Times?

These newspapers were chosen because they are non-niche, mass-market dailies with large circulations above 500,000. Each covered the strike from beginning to end, and each published more than 40 articles on the event. The Post is referred to as a tabloid, while the Times and the Wall Street Journal are regarded as serious newspapers. The Times is owned by the The New York Times Company, while News Corporation owns both the Post and the Journal. The corporation formally acquired the Journal when its takeover of Dow Jones, the Journal's parent company, was officially finalized on December 13, 2007 – in the middle of the writers strike. News Corporation owns 20th Century Fox film production studio and 20th Century Fox Television network, and is
represented by the AMPTP. The corporation had a stake in the outcome of strike negotiations with the guild.

The Wall Street Journal and the New York Post were chosen because their parent company had a stake in the strike; both should be included because despite their common ownership, they represent different spots on the tabloid vs. serious journalism continuum. The Post is referred to as a tabloid while the Journal is more “serious” and might have more legitimacy as a purveyor of information as opposed to sensationalism. Including both News Corporation papers might be a better way to examine differences in coverage along lines of ownership – to just compare the Post and the Times’ coverage of the strike might show that the two used different frames to cover the event, but these differences could be due to these papers’ other characteristics. But if the Post and the Wall Street Journal, two stylistically different newspapers with the same owner, use similar frames in their coverage of the strike, while the Times uses a different frame, this might be a stronger suggestion. Of course, it would not prove that frames were linked to ownership, but this study has the potential to provide cues for further research that might be able to study this more definitively.

The strike formally began on November 5 and ended on February 12, when striking workers voted to end the strike. Articles from the period between October 1, 2007 and March 1, 2008 are analyzed; this starting date captures coverage of a meeting of WGA members and leaders that authorized the guild board to call a strike, and any articles published in the wake of the strike’s formal end. A search on LexisNexus brings up 122 articles from the New York Post, 60 from the Wall Street Journal, and 97 from
the *New York Times* during this time period, for a total of 279 articles among the three newspapers.

This initial population must be narrowed to a more manageable number that will allow for the close reading necessary for textual analysis and for the completion of the study in the time allotted to the researcher to finish it. When settling on an appropriate sample size, the researcher’s goal is to capture the widest range of messages relevant to one’s study. But as Altheide (1996) notes, at the beginning of a study it may be difficult to know what this range is and what number of articles may capture it. Another consideration when creating a sample is the fact that frames emerge over time across texts, as Gitlin (1980) emphasized. A sample of articles on a strike that lasted five months should draw from the entire period, so a purely random sample would not ensure this distribution. Other textual analyses of frames in newspaper coverage of an event (e.g. Brennan, 2005; Tracy, 2004) used about fifty articles from multiple newspapers.

Therefore, the sample will be narrowed down. The first article from every sample of each newspaper will be selected, as well as roughly every fourth article after that. This will yield a smaller, more practically manageable sample that still preserves the rough proportional balance of the original sample of 186. This sample will yield 28 articles from the *Post*, 24 from the *Journal* and 28 from the *Times*, for a total sample of 80 articles.

It is possible to study frames using quantitative methods – for example, Bantimaroudis and Ban (2001) performed a quantitative analysis of framing choices by *The New York Times* and *The Manchester Guardian* of the 1991 Somalia crisis. This involved counting the number of occurrences of the words “warlord” and “factions” in
the newspaper accounts. However, in the same study these researchers also conducted a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the news, which was a necessary and important component of the research as it provided for more richness of detail in their discussion of frames. Hertog and McLeod (2001) seem to agree that qualitative methods are well suited for analyzing frames when they write that “qualitative studies of frames are in some way inevitable. Researchers must apply their cultural expertise to induce the meaning of texts” (p. 152).

For this study, qualitative research methods will allow for a more richly textured description of frames and their components – something quantitative methods could not accomplish. For one, counting the number of occurrences of key words or phrases would not yield the latent meaning and ideology present in the text. In addition, an important component of textual analysis is seeking out what is not present in the text – what is left out, who is not allowed to speak, and what is implied. It would be difficult to operationalize what is not present in the text and apply it in a quantitative analysis. As proposed, this study will be quantitative only in the sense that it will take note of the frequency of occurrence of certain themes or stylistic choices if a pattern occurs – but this will be meant to supplement, not constitute, the analysis of the text.

This study will use textual analysis to identify and examine frames present in newspaper coverage of the writers strike. Larsen (1991) provides a good mindset with which to approach textual analysis when he writes that the text should not be regarded as having a fixed meaning. Instead, it should be thought of as “an indeterminate field of meaning in which intentions and possible effects intersect. The task of the analysis is to
bring out the whole range of possible meanings, not least the ‘hidden message of the text’ (Larsen, 1991, p. 122). This approach will guide the textual analysis.

According to van Dijk (1991), textual analysis of the news involves discourse analysis. The text contains several elements; knowledge of these elements in turn inform the analytic process and lend rigor and focus to any explanation of the text. Texts, according to van Dijk (1991) have both a local and global coherence. Local coherence refers to the way propositions in the text are bound together by relation of time, condition, cause and/or consequence; facts refer to each other in such a way that they make sense. Global coherence, as explained by van Dijk (1991) refers to themes or topics in text that reveal its most important information. Related to this is the idea of the superstructure – “an abstract scheme, consisting of conventional topics that specify what the overall function is of the topics in the text” (van Dijk, 1991, p. 114). In the news, the superstructure of the text is its organization into the headline, lead, main events, background information, verbal reactions, and comments.

Other elements of the text include scripts, “culturally shared, conventional knowledge representations about well-known episodes of social life” (van Dijk, 1991, p. 117). Another important concept in textual analysis is implication – what is not explicitly said but what the reader may be called on to infer, based on their background knowledge. Implication can involve entailments and presuppositions, as well as association and suggestion. Related to this is the concept of irrelevance – in the news, the inclusion of details which do not inherently relate to the topic or subject at hand, but whose inclusion may influence the reading of the text. van Dijk (1991) mentions as an example of irrelevance in a news article about a protest, the inclusion of the cost of busses used to
transport protestors – suggesting that the protestors, whatever their reason for protesting, are wasteful.

Similarly, a final component of the text, according to van Dijk (1991) is its style – how what is said is said. There are many different ways to say basically the same thing, so the choice of one style over another has ideological implications. The use of passive voice in the news accounts is one particularly telling example of style, as it hides the subject or actor, especially in negative situations.

Given this discussion and the definition of frames presented in the theoretical background section, it is possible to come up with some questions that will guide this research of frames. After addressing each article, the researcher can then set about trying to detect patterns that emerge across the sample, and make conclusions about the way the newspapers in the sample framed the strike. The attached protocol lists the questions that will guide the textual analysis and notes to which scholars each question is attributed.
Overview

Twenty-eight articles from the New York Post were sampled. The paper mostly focused on the strike’s effects and used six frames to tell the story of the strike. Many of these frames are consumer-oriented and overlap, and many articles employ more than one frame. However, each of the following frames describes a clear pattern in the Post’s coverage:

1. disappointed, victimized viewers
2. the consumers’ needs matter most
3. the show must go on
4. networks and shows in peril
5. innocent bystanders
6. inexplicable, unsolvable strike

Disappointed, Victimized Viewers

In the beginning of the strike, viewers figured less prominently in articles. But by December, the television audience started to figure as a character of its own, presumably as more shows went into hiatus and networks exhausted their supply of episodes completed before the strike. The Post often used the word “fan” in place of “viewers” or “audience.” This word choice is significant because it implies someone who would presumably care deeply about a show and notice its absence more than just a “viewer” or
a member of the “audience.” Fans as well as viewers were mentioned in the lead of “‘Desperate’ Fans Won’t Get Answers Soon,” “Down in Flames – Fans Fume Over ‘Heroes’ Deaths,” “TV Repeats Turn Off Fans – February ‘Sweeps’ to Take Hardest Hit from Strike,” and “All’s Not ‘Lost’ – If Strike Ends Soon, There Could be Complete Season.” In these and other articles, the viewers were portrayed as victims left hanging after their shows were stalled; and angry fans disappointed with disruptions to their favorite programs and botched attempts to work around the strike. In many of the articles, viewers were said to be sick of repeats. Above all, they demanded new episodes.

“‘Desperate’ Fans Won’t Get Answers Soon” advised fans of “Desperate Housewives” to “hold on tight” since they would be left hanging for a long time. The headline plays on the title of the show while characterizing fans as desperate for a new episode. The show had halted production right after the broadcast of an exciting episode: “Smacked by a tornado that left destruction and death (yes, but who?) all along Wisteria Lane, the show will likely remain a cliffhanger until the Hollywood writers’ strike is resolved.” Here the article has implicitly advocated for a quick end to the strike, without a recommendation for how it should end. The article makes the fan’s victimization the most salient or important theme in the article, and then it identifies the strike as the source of this problem. Given this and the fact that the article does not describe the issues behind the strike or even identify the parties involved, it seems to advocate, above all, a quick end to the strike – by whatever means.

“All’s Not ‘Lost’ – If Strike Ends Soon, There Could be Complete Season” also explicitly linked the end of the strike to positive outcomes for fans of “Lost.” “‘Lost’ is finally getting found next week – huge news for the show’s loyal fans,” the lead stated,
referring to a broadcast of eight new episodes completed before the strike began. Later on, the article explains the relationship in the headline by stating that if “the strike were to end immediately, the producers of ‘Lost’ could conceivably finish an additional eight episodes and meet their goal of 16 for the season.” The article does not recommend how the strike should be resolved – just that it should be resolved quickly. The most important thing is to get the show back on the air.

In “Down in Flames - Fans Fume over ‘Heroes’ ‘Deaths’” fans of the show were angry that the show’s producers had hastily tied up multiple storylines in a “season finale” in December rather than wait until the strike’s end to conclude the season. While the fan’s wrath seemed to be directed at the producers’ decision to force a premature conclusion, the article referred to the producers’ decision as a “clever writers’ strike-proof season” and claimed they had “tried to treat their viewers respectfully before running out of episodes due to the ongoing writers strike.” In doing so it gave the impression that the strike was ultimately to blame for the disappointing ending to “Heroes” – producers had tried to make the best of a bad situation. The article also included a quote from a fan saying it was a “shame” that viewers had been “cheated” amidst all the “melodrama” of the strike. “Melodrama” implies something silly or frivolous; the implication here is that the strike has been waged for no real significant reason. There is no other description of the issues behind the strike, the parties involved, or any developments – the strike is just “melodrama” that has cheated viewers and created problems for producers.

One exception to this “disappointed, victimized viewers” frame was “Writers’ Strike Doesn’t Rate With Viewers” which noted that, despite predictions to the contrary,
there had been no evidence of a mass exodus of viewers from television – viewers were simply watching less T.V. However, “TV Repeats Turn Off Fans – February ‘Sweeps’ to Take Hardest Hit From Strike,” published just two weeks later was more in line with the overall depiction of the viewers: it claimed that they were now sick and tired of watching the same old thing.

The Consumers’ Needs Matter Most

The “consumers’ needs matter most” frame is tied to the “disappointed, victimized viewer” frame. Many of the articles that emphasized viewer victimization never questioned the viewers’ displeasure with reruns or their ravenous hunger for new programming. Their displeasure was newsworthy in and of itself; it didn’t require any more explanation for it to be news. The implicit assumption here is that their satisfaction as television consumers matters most. In other words, as the business cliché goes, “the customer is always right.”

In articles like “‘Desperate’ Fans Won’t Get Answers Soon” “Down in Flames - Fans Fume over ‘Heroes’ ‘Deaths’” “All’s Not ‘Lost’ – If Strike Ends Soon, There Could be Complete Season” the viewers are victims primarily because they are seen as consumers without anything to consume. Other articles told from a pro-consumer frame were those about televised awards ceremonies such as the Golden Globes, the Oscars and the Critics Choice Awards. Two examples were “Red Carpet Red Alert; Strike Endangers Oscar” and “Red Alert! Writers’ Strike Translates Into Dreary, Dead Carpet at Critics’ Choice Awards; Carpet Bomb.” The first article warned that the writers strike had already “derailed the People’s Choice Awards – and the Oscars could be next.”
People’s Choice Awards were “stung” when the guild “nixed” a waiver request to use scripted content. The article also said that the Golden Globes faced a similar situation after being denied a waiver by the guild, and that the guild had refused to allow the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to use its writers on the Oscar telecast. The overall impression of the guild here is that it was controlling and perhaps stubborn or impassive – the only information the reader receives about the guild is that (for reasons which aren’t explained) it has refused requests to allow three awards shows to proceed as normal.

The second article, a fashion piece written after the Critics’ Choice Awards, lamented the loss of the red carpet spectacle at the Critics Choice Awards. It wasn’t shy about assigning blame for the participants’ boring attire. Its lead read: “If the red carpet at last night’s Critic Choice Awards was dull, you have a bunch of schlubby writers to thank.” Nominees and presenters “played it low-key, bordering on the non-descript” on the red-carpet. The “you” in the lead includes the viewer as one of the losers in the ordeal. The logic of the article was unambiguously laid out in the text: “Writers picketing a show = no stars = no red carpet = no fashion show.” It rolled out a host of victims – up and coming actresses, who missed out on the chance to make a memorable fashion statement to generate some buzz for themselves; designers, who missed one of the biggest advertising nights of their year; and entertainment magazines like Us Weekly, whose editor pointed out that those who enjoyed the glamour of Hollywood would be missing out: “No best-dressed, no ‘whatweretheythinking,’ no fashion police, no quizzes, no polls.” The article read like an accounting of victims from the strike, with no discussion of the background issues behind it.
Late-night television was a popular topic in the Post’s coverage, and its return to the air was addressed with a pro-consumer frame. Furthermore, the fact that late-night television was a popular topic in the Post’s coverage (5 articles out of 28) supports the “consumer matters most” frame. This is because these shows were most visibly affected by the strike since they are filmed the day they air, not prepared in advance. Other shows had halted production, but for a time, they had backlogs of episodes completed before the strike. These shows were less newsworthy; only one article focused on them. The assumption here is that the strike’s disruption of a show becomes newsworthy when the audience notices it – and gets angered by the reruns, as the previous section described.

“TV Repeats Turn Off Fans” reported that viewers were getting “a growing sense of déjà vu” and were “already sick of watching the same thing.” The central problem in the article is that viewers’ expectations weren’t met: “For the first time since the writers’ strike began in November, fans are facing a sea of repeats when they would normally get fresh episodes of their favorite shows.” Viewers were “used to reruns during December and January” but they “have come to expect first-run episodes heading into February.” Instead, they received the “sea of repeats” – likely an exaggeration. The viewers’ dashed expectations meant the networks would suffer: ABC and CBS, which had aired repeats, had both “taken a beating” and their ratings were down by 26 percent and 30 percent, respectively. However, not only was the strike to blame – the networks themselves were also to blame, because they had antagonized viewers. The criticism was directed at the networks because they had disappointed their consumers. This was seen in “TV Repeats Turn Off Fans – February ‘Sweeps’ To Take Hardest Hit from Strike,” which reported that viewers were sick of the “sea of repeats” caused by the strike, causing ABC and
NBC to suffer ratings losses. But in addition to the “onslaught of mid-season repeats,” the networks were also to blame for viewer dissatisfaction:

The situation is exacerbated by the fact that the networks have already been loading up on reruns during the regular season to cut down on programming costs and fill gaps in their schedule. Ad buyers blame the incessant reruns for years of declining broadcast ratings. (p. 38)

In this article the viewer’s dissatisfaction with television was the main point. The networks and their “sweeps week” would take a hit, but they were also partially to blame for this, because they had disappointed their viewers.

**The Show Must Go On**

In many *Post* articles, there was an implicit assumption that a television program mattered more than the means by which it was produced. In other words, shows were more important than those who created them; a corollary to this rule is that late-night hosts were more important than their writers. This can be called the “show must go on” frame because the driving logic of the frame is that the show should not be interrupted—no matter the strike. If a show was off the air because of the strike, it should return. Ratings were also emphasized over other aspects of its production; strong ratings were celebrated.

Many articles that discussed the return of late-night television prior to the strike’s end used this frame. “Shave, Dave! Late Night Guys Shooting For Same Day Return,” published December 14, reported that several late night hosts were planning to return to their shows on the same night, to avoid any one of them being singled out for public vilification by the guild. The article minimized conflict and presented the idea of their
return before the strike’s end as a universally favored development. It said that the shows “did not want to alienate their union writers,” but that it was becoming increasingly clear “to both sides” that they would need to come back before the strike’s end. Exactly why they needed to do this was not explained. If the shows did return, the article claimed the late-night writers would understand; it quoted one of Letterman’s staff who supported his return. The guild’s reaction to the return of the hosts was not included; the only mention of the organization was the reference to the late-night shows’ fear that it might publicly humiliate one of the hosts.

In “Late Night TV Gets Comic Relief – Dave & Jay Strike Funny Bones in Return” the “show must go on” frame dominated because the article primarily functioned as a celebration of the return of late-night television. The article characterized the return as a “relief” from reruns; the return of the two hosts was furthermore portrayed in terms of a competition which Leno won: “Both of their monologues were hilarious, but David Letterman needed an entire staff to write his, while Jay Leno wrote his all by himself. Advantage: Leno!” Leno’s ability to deliver a funny monologue written all by himself was celebrated as proof of why he is known as “the hardest-working man in late-night.” Moreover, Leno was seen as having been “disadvantaged” because he didn’t have his writers, while a deal Letterman made with the guild allowed him the “benefit” of using his writing staff. Framing the writers work as an “advantage” and “benefit” to the hosts places the hosts as the main characters of concern, and sidelines the writers. Their work is for the benefit of the host; it isn’t integral or essential to the show.

“Strike Gold – Colbert, Stewart Doing Just Fine” also used the “show must go on” frame. The article began with a blunt dismissal of the writers and their work: “So
who needs writers, anyway?” it asked in the lead. Both “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart” and “The Colbert Report,” had returned with no writers and “without missing a beat.” Their ratings were the same as before the strike, and had actually increased in the coveted 18-34 year-old demographic. The article ultimately promoted a view that the process of the shows’ production didn’t matter. The final outcome or product – whether the show was funny and had secured high ratings for advertisers – was the main concern.

“Letterman Reruns Boost Him in Late-Night War” also fêted a program for scoring big ratings, and played up the ratings competition between David Letterman and Jay Leno that was seen in “Late TV Gets Comic Relief.” The article claimed that the strike “might be the best thing that ever happened to David Letterman.” This was because ratings for repeats of “The Late Show with David Letterman” had indicated that people who usually watched “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno” had switched to watching Letterman. While the strike was said to have cost him about $5 million in lost wages, the strike still meant that in terms of numbers “Letterman hasn’t been this close to Leno in years.”

Finally, “Coming Soon! Write On! Shows Aim for April Return” also operated on the assumption that the shows themselves mattered more than those who created them, or even the circumstances that allowed them back on air. It emphasized the shows’ return rather than the writers’ return to their jobs. In the headline the shows “aimed” for a return; the lead also ascribed human actions to them: “April is going to be the new September as TV shakes off the effects of a 101-day writers strike and prime time’s biggest shows get set to return.” The article also reported that the “long strike will, however, spell the end - at least for this year – of the popular serial shows “24” and
“Heroes.” The return of the late-night writers was addressed similarly to how the return of the late-night shows was addressed: the writers were sidelined and the hosts were the main characters: “The end of the strike will mean late-night hosts Jay Leno, Conan O’Brien, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert will get their writers back later this week.” This privileges the host over the writers, who, in this sentence, belong to the hosts.

**Networks and Studios in Peril**

Besides viewers as victims, networks and the entertainment industry were also seen as victims of the strike. Negative words like “threat” and “fear” as well as battle words like “hit,” “casualty” and the word “battle” itself all created the sense that networks and shows were in danger. Instead of showing how they were involved in the strike, or describing any role they played in creating the conditions that lead to the strike, they were seen as only on the receiving end of the strike. This is especially interesting, considering the use of the battle metaphor – which implies a fight between two sides. Somehow, the networks were victims of a battle in which they were fighting.

“Reality Check: Threat of Writers’ Strike Looms Over Ad, TV Biz” used this frame. The headline makes the strike sound sinister and frightening by using “threat” and “looms.” The article began and ended by emphasizing fear in the entertainment industry. The lead read, “Fear of a possible writers’ strike is rapidly spreading from Hollywood to Madison Avenue.” The final sentence in the article is a quote: “The fear is that it [the strike] could really strip the momentum of scripted programs.” Several times the article emphasized negative consequences of the strike: the strike would be “bad news not only for networks and studios but also for advertisers;” it would constitute another “hit” to
ratings and could prove more “damaging” to the networks than the 1988 Writers Guild of America strike. The current strike would “force the major networks to air reruns and reality shows after burning through their stockpiles of scripted episodes;” the strike’s timing was also bad because the networks were already “having a hard enough time” delivering the ratings they promised advertisers when they sold the ad space. Besides fear, the only other word that is repeated is “walkout” – which may be a more negative word for “strike.” It seems to emphasize the act of leaving one’s job, instead of a purposeful action, and could indicate shirking responsibility.

“Quitcoms Hit TV- Writers’ Strike Closes Down More Shows” victimized not only networks, but also shows and viewers. The headline highlighted the fact that more shows had been shuttered. The lead listed six shows that were “victims of the industry’s paralyzing writers’ strike,” and reported that CBS’s Monday night lineup was “particularly hard hit.” The article said that viewers wouldn’t feel the effects immediately, since there were “several episodes in the can,” but predicted that after a few weeks, audiences would be left hanging because the strike was set to become a “drawn-out battle.”

Published November 19, “Striking Home Walkout Puts Next Fall’s TV Schedule in Peril” predicted dire outcomes for networks if the strike didn’t end soon. The article noted in the lead that the strike was already bringing a premature end to the current TV season, and was now “threatening” to delay development of next fall’s schedule, too. If the strike didn’t end soon it would “disrupt the entire program-development process for the 2008-2009 season” and “prevent pilots from being shot in the spring, which means the networks will have no new scripted comedies and dramas ready for the fall.” Other
verbs and phrases used to describe the strike’s effects were “unravel,” “truncate,” “halt” “inflicted damage” and “claimed its first casualty,” indicating a reliance on war imagery. The article also predicted that shows would find it difficult to reconnect with viewers after long hiatuses. Finally, the article seemed to suggest that by being on strike, the writers weren’t doing what they should: “Now is the time when TV writers are supposed to be pitching ideas for new shows as part of the annual ‘pilot’ process. Instead, they are walking the picket lines over how they are paid for shows streamed or downloaded from the Internet.” The article also used the word “walkout” in the headline and “walked off the job” elsewhere in the text; again, these terms may have stronger negative connotations than “going on strike” or “striking,” and could indicate shirking responsibility.

**Innocent Bystanders**

The *Post’s* coverage of the effects of the strike was not limited to its impact on networks, shows, and viewers. In some cases, those affected by the strike were framed as “innocent bystanders” caught in the middle of the strike.

“Payroll Company is Casualty of Writers Strike” reported that that Axium Entertainment, an international entertainment payroll company had closed – “a situation that rippled from New York to Hollywood.” The article described employees huddling together to cry while others passed around a bottle of whiskey. Much of the article was devoted to emphasizing the company’s reach – it was a “major back-office operator;” it had offices in Los Angeles, London and Toronto; it handled payroll services for hundreds of production companies. The article reported that the company’s closure meant that
“hundreds, if not thousands” of people wouldn’t get paid. The article noted that the company’s “acquisitions binge” was to blame for its financial problems, but said that the strike was the tipping point. The headline, however, chose to emphasize the strike over the acquisitions binge and portray the company as the strike’s victim. In another case of a headline overstating the text, “Industry Quaking on Warner Layoff Plans” described Warner Bros. announcement that it planned to lay off up to 1,000 employees due to the strike. The article reported that the studio was following the directive of the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act, which requires large employers to provide 60 days notice before mass layoffs. No other film studios were said to have plans to fire employees. Not until the final paragraph is a more critical angle examined, with one entertainment lawyer saying that the notice was probably a negotiating tactic because “the studios want to continue emphasizing the collateral damage of the strike.” With this suggestion in the text and the lack of evidence to support the idea that the industry was “quaking,” the headline drastically overstates the case. In doing so, it did exactly what its source mentioned: emphasized the strike’s collateral damage.

Furthermore, in “Actors Union Defends Ellen,” daytime talk show host Ellen DeGeneres, who continued to host her show during the strike, was portrayed as an innocent bystander being attacked by the guild. The article described her as “the biggest celebrity so far caught in the middle of the contentious strike.” The WGA and AFTRA (no explanation in the text on what this acronym stands for) were at “war” – the guild had attacked her as a scab, and AFTRA had defended her, saying she was legally required to honor the no-strike clause in her contract. In the last paragraph the article noted that the
fight over DeGeneres “promised more trouble” when actors supporting the strike would be threatened with firings.

Finally, though its main characters were late-night hosts David Letterman and Jay Leno, “Riding Out; Walkout Costs Jay and Dave 100G a Night” used the “innocent bystander” frame because it focused on the salary losses late-night hosts Jay Leno and David Letterman, the highest-paid TV stars, suffered in supporting the strike. What made them “innocent” was that there was no mention that these two men were guild members; instead of portraying the two as performers who had a stake in the strike, it portrayed them as foolish for supporting the writers’ fight. It also ascribed motives to Leno and Letterman for supporting the strike: “Crossing the picket lines of the people who write most of their jokes would be a foolish career move. And besides, both late-night veterans are wealthy.” No quotes from Leno or Letterman supported this conclusion. The message here was that the hosts only supported the writers out of self-interest, not because they agreed with the writers ideologically or believed that what they were asking for was fair. It also implied that supporting a strike is a luxury that only the wealthy can afford.

**Inexplicable, Unsolvable Strike**

Because many articles emphasized the strike’s effects on companies, television shows and viewers, the strike itself appeared as a common character in the *Post’s* coverage. Note that in many of these stories, “the strike” was a character – not the Writers Guild of America, or even writers on strike. In these stories, the strike controlled the action – it did x to y – and was defined and described mainly by its effects on other entities, not as a conflict between management and labor or even a result of human action
and decisions. This frame exists almost entirely because of the lack of background information about the strike and the tendency of the Post to write about the strike’s effects. It was also achieved, perhaps, by the brevity of the Post’s articles, which averaged 390 words.

An example of the use of this frame is found in “Reality Check – Threat of Writers Strike Looms Over Ad, TV, Biz.” In this article there was no information about the issues behind the strike or any news about developments in the strike. Nor were the names of the two players in the strike – the guild and the AMPTP – mentioned. The strike was simply the background condition that was threatening the entertainment industry, and which would force networks to rely on reruns and stockpile completed episodes. The use of the word “force” here also heightens the sense that the strike was unstoppable or unsolvable, because there didn’t seem to be any way for the networks to resist – they were being forced to make changes. Finally, the use of “threat” and “looms” almost makes it seem like the strike is some mysterious cloud casting a shadow over the entertainment industry – something unsolvable and unstoppable.

Other articles that used this frame include “Letterman Returns Boost Him in Late-Night War,” “‘Desperate’ Fans Won’t Get Answers Soon,” “Down in Flames – Fans Fume Over ‘Heroes’ ‘Deaths,’” and “Strike Takes Out ‘Lost’” and “All’s Not ‘Lost’ – If Strike Ends Soon, There Could be Complete Season,” and “TV Repeats Turn Off Fans – February ‘Sweeps’ To Take Hardest Hit From Strike.” None of these articles offered any background information about the issues behind the strike, identified the key players in it, or announced developments in negotiations. In these articles the strike was simply an existing condition or situation that affected other entities, in almost every case negatively.
– with the exception of “Letterman Returns Boost Him in Late-Night War,” in which the strike gave Letterman an advantage in the ratings.
Overview

Twenty-eight articles from the New York Times were analyzed. The five most prominent frames in the Times’ coverage were:

1. victimization
2. strike as business opportunity
3. conflict and crisis within the guild
4. radical, belligerent guild
5. the show must go on

Victimization

Many of the articles identified those affected by the strike and framed them as victims. Within this “victimization” frame, primary emphasis was placed on who or what was hurt (or might be hurt in the future) by the strike, and/or whose “normal” way of operating or doing business was disrupted.

In “As Writers Strike Looms, Stakes Are Higher for TV Than Film” the primary victims of the strike are networks and “show runners” – those writers who also work as producers for television shows. The headline’s use of the word “looms” is significant, because it carries a negative connotation; a verb like “approaches” could have been used, but “looms” implies that the strike is something potentially sinister or threatening. This word choice, and the mention of “stakes” is the first signal of the victimization frame: the
reader learns that the strike is to be feared and that the ultimate object of concern is “TV” – which is to say, television networks. Within the article, the central question is whether the show runners will do any producing work while on strike as writers:

Certainly Mr. Baer and the dozens of other producers who also serve as writers on some of television’s biggest hits, and are members of the writers’ union, would be not able to do at least half their jobs. Whether they could perform any of their duties – or whether most television shows would have to shut down production almost immediately – is an open question. (p. B1)

It is significant that the question is framed in terms of the show runners’ ability to do their jobs and what the guild’s strike rules allowed them to do. The alternative would be to frame the question as a matter of the show runners’ choice. Instead, the article sets the show runners up as victims whose actions are controlled by the guild; they may want to work, but they won’t be able to if there is a strike. Further along in the article they are said to be confused and unsure about what the guild’s strike rules allow, and nervous that they might risk losing lucrative production deals if they do as the guild advises and refrain from all work. The final quote in the article is from a show runner, who says that if there is a strike, “we won’t have any choice but to shut down shortly after.” The article links the show runners’ ability to do their jobs with the ability of the television series to continue production; the president of ABC Entertainment is quoted indirectly, saying that he believes that the guild’s strike rules mean that shows such as “Grey’s Anatomy” and “Desperate Housewives” “would have to shut down production almost immediately” if the guild calls a strike. It is significant that guild leaders or anyone in a position to explain the strike rules are not quoted. Parts of the rules themselves are quoted (without attribution to a person) and are not explained. Given that the article frames the central
question as what show runners are “allowed” to do, this seems like a major omission.

Also absent from the article is any explanation about the issues contributing to the strike. The strike is an unexplained condition – apparently, without solution or remedy – which victimizes the show runners and the television networks.

Another article that relied on the victimization frame to discuss the strike was “‘SNL’ Is Ready To Make Up for Lost Time (Clinton and Obama, Beware).” The article, published February 21, focused on SNL’s return to the air after production had stopped for the strike. “SNL” is portrayed as a victim of the strike, rendered vulnerable by the time off the air, its future uncertain. In the second paragraph, the article notes that the 1988 Writers Guild of America strike “severely hurt” the show and lead to a 40 percent drop in ratings. Then the article turns to “SNL” producer Lorne Michaels:

But these are desperate times for television shows. Mr. Michaels says he recognizes that ‘SNL’ needs to establish a pattern of viewer expectations because the show is vulnerable in ways it never has been before. (p. E1)

The strike “wiped out” nine episodes during the “worst possible time” – the election season. The article notes that the last show before the strike was the highest rated ‘SNL’ show of the year, and then it was “abruptly shut down.” The article emphasizes what the show missed during the strike: “And there was so much delicious political material to come. ‘We missed Mike Huckabee,’ Mr. Michaels said. ‘We never got our shot at Mitt Romney.’” The article relied on eight quotes from producer Lorne Michaels and two from Seth Myers, head writer. Myers was on strike; the article reported that he was often outside the General Electric building in New York, where “SNL” is performed. The article quotes him saying that the media “called the election eight times” while “SNL”
was off the air, which contributes to the sense that the show missed out on good comedy material and was victimized by the strike. It also quotes Myers describing the picket line: “We formed a wisecrack circle,” he said. He added the writers at least “stayed in shape” with all that walking and “not having money for food.” This description of the picket lines is not addressed further; it seems to be merely a humorous aside. The article lacks quotes from Myers or other “SNL” writers explaining why they chose to strike, or what they felt they gained from the strike, nor does it explain the issues behind the strike. These additions might provide an alternative to the dominant victimization frame; as it is, the victimization of the show is the most salient point.

“TV Writers’ Strike Leaves Jilted Authors Looking for a Bully Pulpit” puts the victim frame to use when discussing the effect of the strike on the book publishing industry. The article reports that “The Colbert Report” and “The Daily Show with John Stewart” have established themselves as “prime movers” in the book world; appearances on these shows are “highly coveted” by authors and publishers because they can propel a book to bestseller status. With these shows on hiatus during the strike, the authors are “jilted” and “left” out, as the headline suggests. They miss an important platform to promote their works. The article starts out with an example of one author’s experiences:

David Levy’s publisher had built his entire book tour around a scheduled appearance on ‘The Colbert Report’ last Monday. But then the members of the Writers Guild of America went on strike, leaving Mr. Levy to promote his book ‘Love and Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships’ (HarperCollins) through radio interviews and answering questions from about 70 people who attended a reading at the Museum of Sex in Manhattan. (p. B7)
Though the article labels Levy’s book “eccentric,” which might marginalize its importance, it lends urgency to the situation by stating that the public will also lose out because the shows allow for discussion of important issues. The article gives the last word to an author of a book about torture: “‘Keeping the issue of torture in front of the American people is extremely important,’ said Ms. Greenberg… ‘And there are very, very few venues, especially on television, that keep it in front of people.’” The central conflict this article addresses is the strike versus public information or enlightenment. Like many articles in which the victimization frame dominates, the issues behind the strike are not addressed.

“In Writers’ Strike, Actors Turn to Temp Jobs to Make Ends Meet” used the victimization frame to discuss the impact of the strike on actors. The lead emphasized that because of the strike “many actors are being forced to take holiday-related temporary jobs to get by, according to staffing agencies and actors’ organizations.” The article furthermore emphasized that these individuals weren’t “stars” but “actors who have a foothold in the industry and just need to pay the bills.” Overall, the actors are shown as cheerful workers; down on their luck, but trying to make do. “It started out as a holiday temp job, but I really got to like working here,” one actor says. Another actor is quoted as saying, “Nobody’s too proud when it comes to making ends meet.” However, other, more extended examples make their victimization apparent:

Mr. Phillips has been in series like ‘Law & Order’ and ‘Rescue Me’ and soaps including ‘One Life to Live’ and ‘All My Children,’ and he is in the forthcoming ‘Sex and the City’ film. But he said he had four children to support. He has resorted to selling off part of his CD collection and other possessions on eBay. (p. A45)
By mentioning the series and films the actor has appeared in, the reader learns that this is a working actor who has achieved some success in the business – but now reduced to selling his possessions on eBay. The last word in the article further emphasizes their victimization. A witness describes the scene at a rare casting call for a film: “It was in a church basement, and I saw a lot of actors going from the audition line right to the soup kitchen. I am not kidding: they said they had no money.”

“Strike Opens New Window on Hollywood,” published November 16, focused on the strike’s impact on the non-celebrity, “below the line” workers that make up the bulk of the entertainment industry, including writers. It described them as out of work, facing uncertainty about their jobs and ability to pay their bills, and watching their expenses more carefully. Significantly, it suggested in quotations that the writers chose to go on strike and be out of work, while other unemployed entertainment workers didn’t have a choice and were “collateral damage” of the strike; while the article did not provide alternative viewpoints or counter-quotes, and so ultimately promoted that the idea the strike’s effects on these “innocent bystanders” were more significant.

The Times’ discussion of the strike’s impact on the Oscars and the awards season also relied heavily on the victimization frame. In “Strikebound, The Globes Scale Back,” published a few days prior to the ceremony, the strike was “playing havoc with the awards season” and had caused the Hollywood Foreign Press Association to turn the Globes into a simple press conference without a broadcast:

There may be parties afterward for those who prevail, but the black-tie alcohol-flowing celebration itself will not go on – brought down by the threat of pickets from striking writers’ guilds and a vow from the members of the Screen Actors Guild not to cross the lines. (p. C1)
The word choice – “brought down,” “threat of pickets” and the headline’s use of “strikebound” – victimizes the ceremony, and identifies the strike as the aggressor. Elsewhere, the strike was said to have “shut down virtually all scripted television programming, forcing the networks to ratio episodes of whatever dramas and comedies they have remaining.” The reaction from involved is negative: the article reports that the decision to “junk a festive part of Hollywood’s yearly awards ritual came as a shock to many of the usual players in the fun;” a producer nominated for an award described the situation “lousy.” The ceremony’s cancellation was also linked to the victimization of the public, similar to “TV Writers’ Strike Leaves Jilted Authors Looking for Bully Pulpit.” A quote from the president of press association in the fourth graph (the first quote in the article) reads, “We are all very disappointed that our traditional awards ceremony will not take place this year and that millions of viewers worldwide will be deprived of seeing their favorite stars.” There is no information or quotes to counter this interpretation; the following paragraph quotes the guild’s strike coordinator, who says that the guild will not lift the “picketing threat” until it was certain the event wouldn’t be an awards ceremony “disguised” as a news conference. This is the second use of the “picketing threat” phrase, and the only quote (albeit indirect) from the guild. However, a few more paragraphs down, the article does provide some background on the strike that explains the guild’s decision to picket the ceremony: the article noted that NBC, which had planned to broadcast the ceremony, is majority-owned by General Electric, one of a “handful of big corporations” that have broken off negotiations with the writers, and the guild has been trying to “force” the companies back to the bargaining table. However, because the majority of the article focuses on the effects of the ceremony’s cancellation,
the most salient and forceful point the article makes is the victimization of the ceremony and those involved with it.

“Atonement Wins Best Drama at Globes” continued the Time’s coverage of the Golden Globes cancellation the day after the press conference. The article said that the ceremony was “derailed” by striking screenwriters, and noted that the foreign press association, NBC as well as caterers, florists and party planners “took a big hit from the lack of wattage and pomp.” “Absent stars on the podium and on the carpet, the hope of picking up any steam from the event was thwarted by labor strife.” Similar to “Strikebound, the Globes Scale Back,” the article used the phrase “picketing threat” twice to describe the guild’s decision to picket the show. The main point of the story referenced a show-business cliché, which emphasized the difference between normalcy and the reality of the ceremony: “In a town predicated on the fact that the show must go on, this show most certainly did not.” However, the article did provide an alternative to the victimization frame, because it quoted a producer for two films who said, “I really care about the fact the strike is still ongoing. That is much more important than the Globes or any parties. There’s a real battle with real stakes that simply has to outweigh the temporal pleasures of both a party and an awards show.”

**Strike as Business Opportunity**

The second notable frame in the *Times*’ coverage be labeled the “strike as business opportunity” frame – almost the direct opposite of the victimization frame. In these articles, the strike was acknowledged to have damaged networks, but it was also
portrayed as a potential business opportunity for them, mostly in that it represented a chance to trim costly production practices and create a more efficient, cheaper program development process. This frame operates wholly within the management’s perspective, since the main question it answers is, how will management be affected by the strike? Several articles mentioned, as an aside, that networks might use the strike as an opportunity to examine their businesses, but in three articles the idea constituted a frame.

“Strike Touches a Ritual for Wooing” reports that the strike had “threatened the normal timetable for developing prime-time series” and caused several networks to seriously considering scrapping their “upfront” presentations, which are shown to advertisers to introduce new programs for the following television season and initiate the purchase of ad space. The article emphasizes that the presentations were “big, garish shows” costing upwards of $3 million, “a costly chore and mainly a bore” for the networks to stage. If scrapped, the networks would both save money and appeal to advertising clients desirous of a more personal ad-buying experience. The article quoted NBC Universal CEO Jeff Zucker saying that the strike “made it easier to make a lot of tough decisions” and a CBS spokesman characterizing the strike as “an opportunity to work with our clients to reinvent the process in a way that better serves networks and advertisers.” The article also called attention to the television program development timetable:

The development cycle, he [Zucker] said, is another area where ‘everybody continues to do business the way they always have.’ That has meant a glut of shows all being worked on at the same time from the fall until spring. The glut has produced intense demands for the best writers, actors and directors at the same time, ensuring that costs remain high. (p. C1)
This is a management or macro view of production – a view of the entire process, with a focus on its cost to management – and not so much a labor or individual worker perspective.

Similarly, in “Networks Ponder Poststrike Landscape” the *Times* reported that “network and production studio executives are expressing hope that one outcome of the strike will be a different and, much cheaper, process for getting scripted shows on the air.” The article emphasized the “bloated” cost of producing pilot shows by noting that “networks generated dozens of pilots this season at a cost of tens of millions of dollars, only to see the vast majority scrapped like a pile of defective toys.” Finally, “Viewed from all Angles, Who Won?” noted that although the strike had hurt networks, there was still “plenty of opportunity to start fresh in the post-strike era, particular in the areas where [ad] agency executives would most like to see change.” The article noted that ad agencies would be glad to see the “upfront” network presentations scrapped, and would rather see a year-round television season – moves network executives said they were considering, due to the strike. The article addressed the television development cycle as well. It extolled the cost-saving benefits of a year-round television season over the traditional September to May model, in which pilot production is clustered during the fall, allowing writers to command higher salaries because of increased demand for their services. The article said that “if the industry adopted the year-round model...there would be less of a feast-or-famine mentality in buying commercial time;” it also noted that the shift would “benefit” networks by saving them money “because they would no longer need scores of pilot episodes of prospective series to be produced each spring in advance of the pilot season.” The article mentions that these potential chances could have the
“unintended consequence” of lowering writers’ incomes – although if something is foreseen as a potential side effect, it is perhaps dubious to call it an “unintended” consequence. Other than this mention, these potential developments are presently positively. This underscores that the “strike as business opportunity” frame is a frame that promotes management’s perspective over labor’s. The benefits of the strike are benefits for networks and their parent companies, not individual workers.

**Conflict and Crisis Within the Guild**

The *Times* at times portrayed the guild as fractured or facing a “critical moment” that would test its solidarity. This frame can be labeled the “conflict and crisis within the guild” frame.

“In Writers Strike, Signs of Internal Discontent over Tactics” said the guild’s “militant tactics” might be creating “fissures” within the guild. The article pointed to a “growing unease” among some guild members that the strike might be damaging their public image and well-being without making a “dent” in the companies. The article quoted Jon Stewart, who had returned to his “Daily Show” and criticized the guild for signing an independent agreement with David Letterman’s production company and not others. It also quoted a writer who was provoked by the Golden Globes shutdown to circulate an email within the guild: “It’s very easy if I am a big-time writer to sit on a picket line. It’s not as easy for a person who is on the way up or things are just starting to happen,” he wrote. While the article reported that it was uncertain whether the tactics would provoke “organized resistance,” at least fifty writers had formed a “network of dissent” within the guild.
Similarly, “Writers Strike Tests the Mettle of 2 Outsiders” profiled David Young and Patric Verrone and described them as facing a critical moment in their staying power. The article pointed to the contract agreement brokered between the Directors Guild of America and the producers’ alliance, which had addressed many of the issues over which the writers were striking:

Within Mr. Verrone and Mr. Young’s own union, a growing contingent, many with rich careers now on hold, is eyeing the directors’ settlement as a path to immediate peace, even though its terms fall short of the writers’ demands. (p. A1)

Here the use of “demands” and “path to immediate peace” suggest a battle. Essentially Verrone and Young were facing a crisis – “The moment promises a severe test of their staying power,” the article wrote. “As pressure for settlement has built within the guild, that solidarity has frayed.”

Radical, Belligerent Guild

In several articles, conflicts between the producers and the guild were framed as struggles or battles between two entities grappling for control. Although battle imagery was used to describe the conflict between the two, the guild was framed as belligerent and radical. The characterization of the networks and studios was less prominent

“Both Sides of the Writers Strike See New Media Future at Stake” stated outright that the strike was a fight for control in its lead:

The nearly month-old strike has entered a new and perhaps uglier phase, revealing the conflict for what it has been all along: not so much a tiff over industry economics as a struggle for power over Hollywood’s perceived digital future. (p. C1)
Actions on both sides were phrased in terms of a battle – guild leaders “dug in” and companies “uncorked an offensive of their own;” both sides were said to be determined and resolved to maintain their positions. It also characterized the guild as belligerent. It stated that the Guild had “angrily rejected an elaborate package of new proposals from their employers just hours after it was presented” and “bitterly complained” that the package was merely a public relations ploy that did not meet their “demands;” studio executives were said to be “shocked” at this turn of events and “derided” the union leaders’ stance as misguided. The article explained the guild’s position by stating that one of its core “demands” was an “insistence” on new-media compensation at a multiple many times what writers had received for years from DVD sales. It explained the network and film studios’ position by noting that the executives “described their cause as a necessary struggle against union-imposed pay structures and restrictions that, if accepted, would keep their companies from operating effectively in a rowdy Internet world that has already badly damaged the music and news industries.” This phrasing – the guild’s “demands” versus the networks’ “cause” – further contributed to the sense that the guild was acting aggressively and belligerently, while the networks and studios were doing what they thought was right. Because the article failed to evaluate the claims of each side (i.e., would the guild’s requests really be the death of the industry? What is the Guild’s issue with the current payment scheme? Why isn’t it enough?) the article ultimately promoted a view of the strike as an attempted power grab by a belligerent guild.

“In Writers Strike, Signs of Internal Discontent Over Tactics” also characterized the guild leadership as belligerent. The first article described the guild leadership’s
methods – filing a legal complaint against the AMPTP with the National Labor Relations Board, boycotting the Golden Globes, and picketing “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno” – as “militant” and “hardball” tactics characteristic of blue-collar labor. A quote compared the strike to a boxing match: “‘It’s a classic rope-a-dope, like the Ali-Foreman fight,’ said John Ridley, referring to the 1974 boxing match in Zaire in which George Foreman outpunched Muhammad Ali for seven rounds, only to fall exhausted in the eighth.” In this metaphor the guild is Foreman, punching away at Ali, lying against the ropes in the boxing ring, waiting for Foreman to tire himself out. The use of “militant” to describe the guild’s leadership is the most striking aspect of this article, as it puts the guild outside the realm of reasonable or rational, civil behavior. The goal of the strike, again, seems to be power – to make a dent in the companies, to hurt them – not to secure better pay.

“Writers Strike Tests the Mettle of 2 Outsiders” also contributed to this characterization of the leadership as militant while questioning the guild’s solidarity. The article characterized Patric Verrone, president of WGA West, and David J. Young, his chief lieutenant, as two zealous, steadfast “outsiders” leading the writers on a “rebellion.” Verrone is described in the lead as a “sporadically busy comedy writer with a law degree” and Young is a “plumber turned hard-bitten labor organizer;” together the two “upended” Hollywood and took the entertainment business on a “wild ride.” The characterizations of the pair weren’t completely negative – the article said that guild members largely supported them, and their cause had won support from a public who got their basic message: “greedy corporations were not sharing enough with those who did the work.” However, ultimately the article questioned the effectiveness of their tactics, as
it emphasized that “pressure for a settlement has built within the guild” and its once-strong solidarity was “frayed.”

Jay Leno’s return to “The Tonight Show” was also reported as a conflict or feud between him and the guild, and again, an image of the guild as fractious came through. The headline of the article that announced his return almost speaks for itself: “Leno’s Return Dominates Late-Night TV, and Strikers Complain.” The writers were “complaining” that Leno could not write and perform his opening monologue, per strike rules. However, Leno and an unnamed “Tonight Show” writer said that the guild had promised it would not “hassle” him for doing his monologue as usual. The conflict was important, the article claimed, because if Leno is able to continue doing his monologue in subsequent shows, it could open the door for the other hosts to do the same. The treatment of the conflict between Leno’s and the guild’s versions of the situation was treated in a back-and-forth manner; the article did not clearly endorse one or the other. However, the headline’s use of the verb “complain” ultimately casts doubt on the guild’s position. Overall, what we see in this article is the guild attempting to control a performer’s behavior and threatening disciplinary action on him – for no articulated reason.

The Show Must Go On

A final frame in the Times’ coverage focused on television shows and how they coped during the strike. The focus on the fate of the final product – the program itself – rather than the process of its production. In many of these articles, the role of the writers on these shows was viewed as incidental and not key part of their creation. In addition,
articles about late-night television programs emphasized ratings competitions and what the hosts were “able” to do. “The show must go on” is a label that describes the frame’s logic with regards to the television shows – their uninterrupted continuance is the goal, and their return to normalcy is celebrated.

David Letterman’s production company negotiated an individual contract with the guild, and his writers returned to work in early January; Jay Leno did not negotiate a deal with the guild, but returned to the airwaves without his staff of writers and wrote his own monologue – a situation that led to a “feud” with the Guild, as described in the previous section. The hosts’ return to the airwaves were described in terms of a ratings competition – Letterman’s contract with the guild was at first considered an “advantage” for him; he would be able to rely on his writers for jokes and win higher ratings, while Leno and the other late night hosts such as Conan O’Brien, who could not rely on writers, were “disadvantaged.” Later, Leno’s ability to win the ratings competition against Letterman, despite not having the advantage of his writers, was celebrated in “Leno’s Art of Late-Show Maintenance.” The lead asked, “How does he do it?” and noted that the strike had had a “liberating” effect on him, allowing him to return to his stand-up comedy roots, and beat the odds, which were stacked against him.

“Producers Say Writers Could Return on Monday” announced that the strike could be settled soon, and was framed in terms of what would happen to the shows once the writers returned to work. The article anthropomorphized the shows – “The Daily Show and “The Colbert Report” were “prepared to welcome writers with open arms,” while “Saturday Night Live” might get “its” writers back the following Monday – implying that the writers belong to the show, and not the other way around. The article
also noted that the end of the strike would “relieve the stress many of the shows have felt
in trying to find guests fill their couches during the strike.” “Late Night with Conan
O’Brien” had scheduled guests “with fingers crossed.” The overall effect was that the
programs were the main characters – they were more important than the people involved
in their production.

“Writers Strike, All but Settled, Quiets Hollywood’s Rattling Sabers” also placed
a primary importance on the programs. The article announced that the end of the strike
was imminent, which meant that the “switch that controls the television business is
expected to be flicked on all the way,” restoring all the programming that had been
interrupted by the strike. The main concern of the article was to assess the fate of various
programs, and the business “fallout” from the strike for the networks. The program
“Heroes,” which was cancelled for the rest of the television season, “fell victim” to its
dependence on special effects, which take a long time to create. The ABC broadcast of
the Academy Awards was the show that benefited the most from the strike’s end.
Overview

Twenty-four articles from the Wall Street Journal were analyzed. The Journal focused on the strike’s impact on the entertainment industry; the coverage included discussions of damage inflicted on entertainment companies; which companies could better withstand a strike and what companies were doing to protect themselves. Six frames that the Post used to cover the strike were:

1. victimization
2. strike as business opportunity
3. radical, belligerent guild
4. guild is more to blame than the producers
5. questioning the strike
6. entertainment industry as a machine

Victimization

A major frame in the Journal’s coverage was concern for how the networks and studios would be affected by the strike. Along with this emphasis on the strike’s effects on networks, the Journal also focused on the tactics the networks used to protect themselves.

In “For Studios, Weeks of Cushion,” the Journal first addressed the question of how the strike would affect the networks. The article was framed in terms of striking
writers’ attempts to shut down film and TV production, and networks’ attempts to contain damage. It described writers picketing the set of “Desperate Housewives,” attempting to disrupt production, although ultimately the producers managed to shoot the day’s scenes as planned. Coupled with the lack of background information about the issues behind the strike made the strike in this article seem simply like an effort on the part of writers to disrupt television shows. This, in turn, set the networks up as the victims attempting to defend themselves or carry on with their business. Even though a robust advertising market was expected to provide a cushion for the “vulnerable” networks, they would suffer a “downward spiral” if the strike “dragged on” past January. And if the strike “dragged on” for months after that, there would be “huge ramifications,” especially since the networks might lose their audiences.

“This Writers Strike Feels like a Rerun From 1988” also victimized the networks; it compared the strike to the 1988 writers strike and found that though the issues were “pretty much the same,” the entertainment industry was now “much more susceptible to drastic changes in viewing habits and programming styles.” There was currently “enormous danger” for the networks in the absence of their most popular shows.

“NBC to Use Cable, International Shows” framed NBC as a victim taking measures to defend itself. The article reported that with the strike “cutting off the traditional supply lines for new scripted television shows,” the network was planning to use reruns from their sister cable network, USA, and shows produced outside the country, to fill out their schedule. This strategy, coupled with the return of Jay Leno and Conan O’Brien, would “help insulate” the “profit-starved” network from the strike, and provide “an extra layer of protection.”
From its headline alone a reader might assume that “Cracks in Producers’ United Front” would emphasize conflict between members of the AMPTP, similar to how other Journal articles discussed conflicts within the guild about tactics. However, rather than a serious conflict about how to proceed in negotiations, “Cracks” was more of an evaluation of the strength of individual companies in the AMPTP; it devoted several paragraphs to mapping out which companies were better poised, because of their holdings, to ride out the strike.

The awards season was portrayed as a prominent victim of the strike. The cancellation of the Golden Globes ceremony was portrayed as a major blow to the entertainment industry in “And the Loser Is….Fashion – Strike Rolls Up Red Carpet At Awards Show, Dashing Designers’ Hopes for Hype.” Fashion designers missed out on a major free advertising opportunity, as well as companies who wanted to advertise during the ceremony. According to one executive at Michael Kors, Inc. (a fashion company) the strike was “no longer just a writers’ strike” but an “entertainment-industry issue.” Next, in “Oscar Nods Offer Little Boon to Distributers” the Journal reported that thanks to the strike, the films in contention for the top prizes would have to “work harder” to get the box-office boost that usually comes with a nomination. Because the strike had cancelled the Golden Globes, the kickoff to the Oscar season, there were less opportunities to showcase and advertise the films competing for the prize.

In “Late Night Talk Shows Set to Go Scriptless” the Journal discussed the return of late night television before the strike’s end. The article seemed to be told from the view of the producers or hosts of these shows, because it focused on the difficulties they experienced in trying to get these shows back without the writers; the focus was on the
challenges they faced and how they attempted to meet them. The biggest problem seemed to be the guild’s strike rules, mentioned four times as a source of headaches for the problems. These rules were described as ambiguous, gray, unclear and “extremely broad and vague,” forbidding hosts from doing anything that constituted “writing services.” So the producers, in turn, struggled to fill their shows with acceptable content. They also had trouble finding guests who would cross the picket lines, with one producer saying she had been on the phone for the past six weeks trying to secure guests for “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.” The deal between David Letterman’s production company Worldwide Pants and the guild is described as an “advantage” for him in the ratings; the Times and the Post characterized the deal the same way. Noticeably absent from this article was a word from the writers of these shows and what they thought of their employers going back on the air without them. Instead, the article was told solely from the point of view of the producers or the networks.

“Studios Set Stage for TV’s Return” was written from the same point of view – it described the difficulties networks faced in restarting production on television programs towards the end of the strike, and attempted to estimate how long it would take before things were back to normal. The networks faced “tough decisions” like whether to race a series back on the air with as many new episodes as possible, extend them into the summer, delay them until fall or cancel them altogether. They also faced a “truncated development cycle for next season’s new shows that could turn into a mad dash to lock down stars and shoot even a handful of pilots” while completing existing series. Further proof of this article being written from the network perspective was its focus on who would benefit from the end of the strike – in this case, the smaller cable networks, which
would “dodge” the negative effects of the strike, and Disney’s ABC network, which could now air the Academy Awards without the “threat” of picketing writers disrupting the broadcast as they did the Golden Globes.

**Strike as Business Opportunity**

Some articles framed the strike as a positive opportunity for entertainment companies. This “strike as business opportunity” frame surfaced in “Cracks in Producers’ United Fronts.” Peter Chernin, head of News Corporation, said that the strike could be a “positive for the company” because its Fox network relied less on scripted programs than its rivals, and had the successful “American Idol,” which didn’t rely on unionized writers. This article also marked the first time that the *Journal* acknowledged its relationship with New Corporation by stating “News Corp has agreed to buy Dow Jones & Co., publisher of The *Wall Street Journal*.” Finally, perhaps the most important characterization of the networks – as well as the guild – in his article comes from the first two paragraphs. The first lines described the scene on a recent picket line – “a giant inflatable pig smoking a fat cigar bobbed above a crowd of chanting screenwriters.” The article labels this image as “classic Hollywood, portraying the producers as a united force of greed.” In reality, the article continued, the producers were “anything but united in their needs and ambitions.” These lines criticize the guild’s depiction as simplistic and theatric, not accurate; it also suggests the companies in the AMPTP aren’t greedy, but simply have “needs and ambitions.”

In “TV Networks Consider Using Strike to Cancel Costly Production Deals,” the *Journal* reported that studios were planning to take “advantage” of the “force majeure”
clause in many production deals, which enables the studio to cancel a deal during an extended “labor action” such as a strike. This chance to “wipe out deals that weren’t yielding hit shows was thought to be one appealing aspect” of a long strike.

The Guild is More to Blame Than Producers

The Journal more often framed conflicts and negotiation problems during the strike as the fault of the guild, not the producers. The paper either emphasized a lack of agreement between both sides, or blamed the guild for failing to agree to proposals from the studios. It never blamed the studios for failing to agree to any plans the writers put forward – indeed, it never covered any proposals the guild (may have) put forward.

“Writers Talks Needs Hollywood Ending” took the first approach. The article emphasized both the guild and the AMPTP’s role in reaching an agreement. It claimed that “both sides are motivated to make a deal,” and quoted a former executive of Warner Bros. saying that both sides needed to “check their egos at the door and stay there until they make a deal.” And instead of attributing the blame to one party, the article said that “the two sides couldn’t agree on how the writers would receive residual payment.”

However, in “For Studios, Weeks of Cushion,” the Journal described the strike as the result of the guild’s “failing” to agree to a new contract with film and television producers, and not a matter of mutual disagreement. The next article, “Writers Guild Denounces New Offer From Studios,” took a similar tack – it focused on the writers’ rejection of an AMPTP proposal. The article referred to this plan as an “offer” three times, and said that the writers “quickly assailed” it and “attacked” its particulars. The use of the word “offer” is significant because it implies that the studios were making
concessions or being conciliatory. The article quoted an email from the guild’s presidents that said the guild would not back down, but did not include any explanation of why the guild rejected the offer; it merely focused on the fact that it rejected it. Meanwhile, the article devoted a paragraph that detailed the particulars of the studio’s offer, saying that it would provide $130 million in new compensation to the writers. The overall impression of the guild from this was that they were being resistant and belligerent, while the studios were making multi-million dollar concessions and trying to reach an agreement.

One week later, “After Talks Fail, Writers Strike Could Drag On,” again blamed the guild for the breakdown in talks. It claimed that “last week’s talks…bogged down over side issues that included the union’s attempts to organize reality TV and animation writers and its effort to remove a clause from its current contract preventing it from joining strikes by other Hollywood unions.” By designating these issues as “side issues” without any explanation, the article suggested that the guild was not adhering to the most important matters at hand, or being nitpicky and difficult.

**Radical, Belligerent Guild**

Besides being more likely to blame the guild than the studios for conflicts during the strike, the *Journal* also framed the guild as radical, and emphasized conflict as well as secrecy within its ranks.

“The Blog is Hollywood’s Must-See – Screenwriters Check In as the Plot Thickens in Talks for Contract” describes a blog written by guild member Craig Mazin and watched by both the guild and the production companies as an important gauge of the public opinion. The article makes a distinction between the public aspect of this blog and the
“secrecy” of the “union negotiations.” Perhaps this refers to the negotiations between the production companies and the guild but the phrase “secrecy of union negotiations” associates secrecy and privacy with the guild – it could have read “contract negotiations” or “talks between the guild and AMPTP.” The article reinforces this association by noting that the guild has a blog – but it is password protected, not public, and for members only. Significantly, the article said that Mazin ideologically occupied a position “between hardcore union activists and the companies they work for” and portrays him as a bit of rebel. He “does little to endear himself to the Guild’s membership” – rather, he criticizes both sides as he sees fit. A quote from a production company spokesman claims he “brings sanity” to the process; no quotes from the guild are employed. The article represents a subtle characterization and is perhaps insignificant on its own, but ultimately the picture the reader gets is of a secretive or inwardly-focused union composed of “hardcore” activists.

A profile of the Patric Verrone, head of the west coast branch of the guild, contains a more outright association of the guild with radicalism. The article described him as someone who had “agitated for change” within the guild in the past and wrote that “studio officials and moderates within the guild” think that he and other guild leaders had been “spoiling” for a strike as a way for the union to flex its muscle. The article countered this by saying that a (unnamed) WGA spokesman has long maintained that the writers want to reach an agreement, not strike. However, what is significant here is the phrase “studio officials and moderates within the guild;” it radicalizes Verrone and rhetorically places him in opposition to moderates, which is in turn linked with the studios. The phrase also lends legitimacy to the idea that he had been “spoiling” for a
strike. The article furthermore identified Verrone as part of a “dissident” group within the
guild, which, during a 2005 dispute with leadership, said in an email they were “ignored
in favor of a strategy of patience and discipline.” The article allowed Verrone a chance to
speak, quoting him saying “This industry is thriving. They need us and we want to share
in it.” Overall, however, the article seems to put Verrone in opposition to moderation.

“In Hollywood, a Tale of Two Union Leaderships” compared the negotiating
tactics of the guild with the Directors Guild of America (DGA), which was also seeking a
deal with the AMPTP. The article characterized the guild leaders as bold, brash outsiders
willing to “upend the clubby atmosphere of show business,” as they “attacked corporate
chiefs, “criticized” entertainers like Jay Leno and were on the brink of “upsetting one of
Hollywood’s most sacred cows” – the awards season. In contrast, the DGA, “lead by
veteran Hollywood hands” were said to be taking a less confrontational tactic – they had
been holding discussions with the AMPTP prior to formal negotiation systems, in order
to “set the table for a quick agreement” once the formal talks began. The DGA was
reportedly considering a temporary agreement on compensation for work distributed over
the Internet – one of the big sticking points in the guild’s negotiations with the AMPTP.
The writers, however, had “resisted” any similar temporary agreement on digital
residuals. The article also provided a previously published quote from the DGA’s
negotiator that criticized the guild’s methods: “There’s a school of thought that believes
the only way to get the best deal is to negotiate right up to the last minute. We don’t agree
with this approach.” There was no response from the guild. Ultimately, the article seemed
to label the guild methods as confrontational and brash, and promoted the DGA’s tactics
as a possibly more reasonable and successful alternative.
The DGA’s eventual deal with the AMPTP reappeared in “Directors, Studios Reach a Deal.” The article claimed their deal added pressure to the guild to accept a similar deal and end the strike; it described the situation as a “critical moment” that would test the cohesion and solidarity of the guild. Some WGA members were growing “antsy” and pushing the leadership to accept the deal. The idea of conflict within the guild also showed up in “Splits Emerge Among Key Backs of Striking Writers.” This article focused on “showrunners” – writers who also work as producers for a television program, and have final creative control over it. The article described the showrunners as an important group who had largely backed the strike, but emphasized that many were in an awkward position because they had to balance “fealty to their cause” with other “priorities.” They were concerned for the nonwriting staff who were in danger of being laid off. Many had received letters from the studios pressuring them to return to work. The article presented the case of Carlton Cuse, showrunner for “Lost.” Cuse had decided to return to producing work, even as he was on strike, because he felt he owed it to the fans and did not want to hurt “the franchise.” He identified himself as in the “moderate camp” because he thought that each showrunner should make up his own mind about whether or not to return to producing work – which the guild had advised against. Overall the article seemed to suggest that those showrunners who weren’t completely on strike were reasonable. And the association of “moderation” with activities the guild had discouraged is a subtle but still important textual message about the guild, as well as its tactics and advice. Indirectly, this radicalizes it.
Questioning the Strike

The *Journal* used a critical frame when discussing the reasons behind the strike, as well as its outcomes. In the “questioning the strike” frame, the *Journal* implied that strike wasn’t as successful and may have been not worth the “suffering” the writers endured. It also implied that the guild’s central position which lead them to strike was misguided and incorrect.

“In Hollywood, a Tale of Two Union Leaderships,” discussed in the previous section, radicalized the guild and unfavorably compared the guild’s more “brash” tactics with those of the DGA, which was also trying to reach a contract with the AMPTP. It provided a quote from a negotiator with the DGA that criticized the guild’s tactics:

“There’s a school of thought that believes the only way to get the best deal is to negotiate right up to the last minute. We don’t agree with this approach.”

“Scenes from Next Week…?” cast doubt on the guild’s reasons for striking. The article argued that the most contentious point in the AMPTP-WGA negotiations was how much writers should be paid when their work is digitally distributed via the Internet, cell phones and iPods. The writers believed they got a “bum deal” in the 1980s when they made an agreement covering residual payments for their work distributed on videocassette and DVD, before these mediums took off. The article claimed that with the advent of the Internet, the writers were witnessing “Hollywood charging hard at another new medium” and implied that they were eager to secure a sizable piece of a perceived multibillion dollar market. However, the article cast doubt on the guild’s position that the Internet was poised to become a highly lucrative market like DVDs. It noted that while networks were sinking millions into building up Web distribution channels, the revenue
from these projects was small. It reported that executives said revenue from television shows on iTunes was also small, and referred to “industry observers” who thought it was “faulty logic” to assume that the Internet sales would explode the way DVD sales did. Three times the article emphasized that “no one knows” or that it was “far from certain” how lucrative or successful these digital markets would become. Overall the article implied that the Guild’s position on the strike’s central issue was misguided. It also was based on a central assumption: that the market for a product should determine the compensation for those that produce it. Other negative characterizations of the guild also showed up – for example, the article said that the writers had “insisted” on revisiting the DVD residual issue. It quoted the president of the AMPTP saying this was “a complete roadblock to any further progress” and did not provide a quote from WGA explaining why it thought the issue was important enough to revisit. These few lines gave the impression that the Guild was stubborn.

In “Writers Return, but Web Question Lingers,” the Journal assessed the final agreement between the guild and AMPTP which ended the strike in mid February. The guild received 2% of whatever fee a producer is paid to allow a TV show to be streamed on the Web; it characterized this as a “modest advance” and “a psychological and perhaps strategic win.” This lukewarm assessment of the guild’s achievements was supported by two quotes from guild officials who characterized the deal as “not all we’d hoped for and not all we deserve” and more “about the principle” of getting a percentage and not a flat rate. Elsewhere, however, the article was more critical of the gains the guild had won. A quote from Patric Verrone, the guild’s West Coast president, labeled the strike “the most successful strike in American labor in the past decade.” The next paragraph, however,
noted that because the guild’s contract mirrored a deal between the AMPTP and the DGA, which did not strike, the writers possibly hadn’t gained as much as they’d hoped by “suffering” through the strike. Earlier the article mentioned that the writers had lost $270 million in wages by going on strike, plus millions more lost in producing fees by those showrunners who supported the strike. Later, the article reported that the guild had said the strike had had a serious, unexpected impact on the production companies; the next paragraph reported that the major media companies had claimed little financial fallout from the strike – a statement that seems to contradict the lead, which referred to the strike as “crippling.” Finally, the article implied that two prominent media executives were responsible for ending the strike. They “played a key role in breaking the deadlock between the writers and the studios” – they settled the deal with the DGA, “a key turning point in pressuring the writers to make a deal.” One of these executives was News Corporation executive Peter Chernin; the article did not mention that News Corporation was the parent company of the Journal.

Entertainment Industry as Machine

In several articles, various machine metaphors were used to describe the entertainment industry. “Writers’ Talks Need Hollywood Ending” reported that “many in the industry” thought that an upcoming negotiation session presented the best opportunity to resolve the strike and “prevent the total collapse of Hollywood’s entertainment machine.” The machine metaphor was used again in “Studios Set Stage for TV’s Return.” The lead of that article read “The prospect of a settlement in the three-month strike by film and television writers is setting off a scramble to restart Hollywood’s
stalled production engine and get key TV series back on the air quickly.” And in “NBC to Use Cable, International Shows,” the writers’ strike was “cutting off the traditional supply lines for new scripted television shows.” This does not refer to a machine, but it mechanizes the process of production.

Two other articles compared Hollywood to a machine and at the same time alluded to labor history with the use of the phrase “throw a wrench into the machine.” “Fade to Bleak” reported that the strike had made it more difficult for films nominated for an Oscar to generate publicity: “Although the Writers Guild of America strike ended last week, the three-month work stoppage threw a wrench into the typically well-oiled Oscar buzz-making machinery.” The metaphor was also used in “Scenes from Next Week…?” which reported that “A walkout would also throw a wrench into some expensive, long-planned movie productions.” This is an allusion to the industrial sabotage committed by workers who would literally throw a wrench into the machinery at factories they were striking.

Comparing the entertainment industry to a machine is a significant metaphor because it dehumanizes and mechanizes the work people in the entertainment industries perform. If something runs like a machine, it runs smoothly, automatically and continuously – the strike constitutes a disruption to the nature of the machine in this comparison.
Summary of Frames

The primary research question that guided this study was: What frames were present in newspaper coverage of the 2007-2008 Writers Guild of America strike? In total, 80 articles from the New York Times, the New York Post and the Wall Street Journal were analyzed. The following chart summarizes the most prominent frames used by the three papers. The first and last frames listed in each column are the most and least prominent, respectively; those listed in between are listed roughly in order of prominence. The following sections will describe in detail the textual elements that make up each frame.

Table 1. Summary of Frames

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<td>inexplicable, unsolvable strike</td>
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<td>radical, belligerent guild</td>
<td>consumers’ needs matter the most</td>
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<td>entertainment industry as machine</td>
<td>innocent bystanders</td>
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It should be noted here that because the Post’s victims fell quite neatly and consistently into three groups – viewers, networks and shows, and “bystanders” outside the guild and producer camps – these three separate frames have been identified. The Times and the Journal victimized networks and shows in a few articles, but the victimization of these entities did not appear as often or as consistently as it did in the Post. Thus, in these papers, one frame, labeled simply “victimization” describes the coverage.

It is clear that the victimization frame was the most prominent across all three papers; it was used in more articles than any other frame. The Post relied the most heavily on it, as the three aforementioned shades of the victimization frame were detected. Next, the “strike as business opportunity” and “radical, belligerent guild” frames were the second most common frames; both were seen in the Times and the Journal, but not Post. The “show must go on” frame was also found in two of the three papers: the Times and the Post.

Each paper employed frames that were uniquely theirs – the Times alone relied on the “conflict and crisis with the guild” frame, while the Journal used the “guild is more to blame than producers,” “questioning the strike,” and “entertainment industry as machine.” The frames most unique to the Post were the “consumers needs matter most” and the “inexplicable, unsolvable strike” frames.

**Victimization**

The central organizing theme of this frame was that the strike had victimized or at least negatively affected some other entity in some way. Victims of the strike included
television networks, shows, the Oscars, the fashion and book publishing industries and other entertainment industry workers like actors. Words like “vulnerable,” “downward spiral,” “susceptible,” “brought down,” “in danger,” “wiped out,” “hurt,” “damage,” and “strikebound” created the sense of victimization. Other articles portrayed networks taking steps to protect themselves from the strike, and television shows facing “tough decisions” about how to operate in reduced circumstances (i.e., without writers). Where this frame was used to discuss networks, it de-emphasized the networks’ role in bringing about the strike, instead portraying them as on the receiving end of the guild’s actions. In the Post, the victimization frame appeared so frequently that three sub-frames were identified: disappointed, victimized viewers; networks and shows in peril; and innocent bystanders.

**Disappointed, Victimized Viewers**

This frame emphasized that the strike had hurt television viewers. The central organizing theme of this frame was that the strike had halted production on a television show, leaving its fans hanging and/or stuck with repeats, which were portrayed as distasteful. In simplest terms, the central conflict within this frame might be stated as “strike versus viewers,” since the interests of the viewers were at odds with the strike. Articles using this frame often focused on fans of specific television shows as the main character of concern. This frequent use of “fans” over “viewers” is rhetorically significant, since the word “fan” implies someone who is more devoted to a show – and who would have more to lose in that show’s absence – than a more casual “viewer.”
Networks and Shows in Peril

Within this frame, television networks and shows were the main character of concern. Their victimization by the strike was accentuated through adjectives and verbs describing the strike and its effects on them. Words like “threat,” “looms,” and “fear” created the sense that the strike was something frightening or ominous. The verbs used to describe the effects of the strike on networks and shows – such as “halt,” “inflict damage,” “force,” “claim a casualty” “unravel,” “disrupt” and “hit” – emphasized their victimization, some of them drawing from battle imagery. “Victims” was also used outright to describe television shows. As the frame victimized the networks, it de-emphasized or sidelined any role the networks, as producers, had to play in bringing about the strike or in ending it.

Innocent Bystanders

In the Post’s third victimization sub-frame, people outside the guild and the producer/network camp were the main characters, and they were hurt by the strike. The central organizing theme of this frame might be “bad things are happening to others due to the strike” – they were getting laid off; they were vilified by the guild for going back to work; they were going out of business. Words and phrases like “caught in the middle” “casualty” and “collateral damage” were used to describe these outsiders; these words contributed to the sense that they were victimized.
Strike as Business Opportunity

The central organizing theme or idea of this frame was that the strike was an opportunity for businesses to innovate by cutting expensive business practices. Television networks were the main character; the frame operates from their perspective – the potential benefits the frame emphasizes are for the companies, not for individual workers. This frame relied heavily on company CEOs for quotes. Within this frame, the cost to networks of some of their current practices was emphasized– like the “costly” expense of putting together presentations for potential ad-buying clients, or the “bloated” cost of the current practice of developing pilot series all at once, every fall. The words “advantage,” “opportunity,” and “benefit” were used to describe the changes that networks could make.

The Show Must Go On

Within this frame, television programs were the main character. The central organizing theme or idea behind the frame is that television shows should not be interrupted, and if they had been stopped, they should resume. This frame was commonly used to discuss the return of late-night television shows before the strike’s end, and the end of the strike itself. These events were treated positively; significantly, in many articles, the end of the strike was not so much the resolution of a labor dispute, but television’s return to normalcy. As main characters, the late-night shows were often anthropomorphized – they had “felt stress” in scheduling guests during the strike; they got “their” writers back. Hosts of late-night television shows also figured prominently as characters in articles employing this frame. Their ability to put together a funny show –
or draw high ratings – without their writers was celebrated. This frame de-emphasized the work of writers and others who created the shows; these individuals were seldom allowed to speak via direct or indirect quotations.

**Radical, Belligerent Guild**

The central organizing idea behind this frame was that the guild, led by radical Hollywood outsiders, was using aggressive, militant tactics. Words like “demands” and “insistence” were used to refer to the guild’s proposals and offers to the studios; these contributed to the sense that the guild was aggressively seeking something they were not entitled to. Words like “radical,” “hardball,” “hardcore,” and “militant” were furthermore used to describe the guild and its tactics, particularly its picketing the Golden Globes and “The Tonight Show.” Verb phrases like “angrily attacked,” “bitterly complained,” and “upend” also characterized the guild’s actions as fractious or belligerent. Other articles rhetorically opposed the guild leadership to “moderates” within its membership who favored less confrontational tactics. In sum, these rhetorical choices radicalized the guild, and in doing so, critiqued and marginalized its actions. Articles that used this frame de-emphasized television networks and studios; even though the strike was at times compared to a fight or struggle, the networks and studios actions were seen responding to the guild’s aggressive tactics.

**The Consumers’ Needs Matter Most**

The central organizing theme or idea of this frame is that television consumer displeasure is newsworthy in and of itself. Articles that used this frame emphasized
consumer displeasure caused by production stoppage and resulting reruns. In these articles there was no further discussion beyond the fact that viewers were displeased; the reasoning or chain of causality stops at viewer displeasure, because viewer displeasure is news in and of itself. This frame is tied to the “disappointed, victimized viewers” frame in several articles; the viewers are victims because they, as consumers, don’t have any new product (television shows) to consume. “The consumers’ needs matter most” frame differs from the “disappointed, victimized viewers” frame, however, because the ‘victimized viewers’ frame emphasized that the strike had victimized viewers; in “the consumers’ needs matter the most” frame, both the strike and networks (through bad programming design) cause viewer displeasure. The central conflict of this frame might be summarized as “viewers versus anything that causes reruns.”

**Questioning the Strike**

The central organizing theme of this frame was that the strike was based on incorrect assumptions by the guild and wasn’t an effective way to resolve a labor dispute. Whereas the “radical, belligerent guild” frame portrayed the guild as aggressive and militant, this frame portrayed the guild as misguided – misguided in its estimation that the Internet market would become as lucrative as the DVD market, and misguidedly waging a strike that the writers to suffer without reaping substantial gains for them. Emphasis was placed on the lost wages and other costs the writers suffered by going on strike. The economic future of scripted, television-like content on the Internet – one of the main issues behind the strike – was portrayed as uncertain. This assumption rested on another, more fundamental assumption derived from market economics – that the market
for a product should determine the compensation for those that produce it. Because, as one article put it, “no one knows” if the Internet will be a lucrative distribution channel for television networks, they should not have to pay the writers more for work distributed on it.

**The Guild is More to Blame Than Producers**

This frame was often used to discuss conflicts between the guild and producers. The central theme of this frame was that the guild was stubborn or not willing to compromise. In this frame the guild was often faulted for failing to agree to studio “offers.” The use of “offers” to refer to producers’ proposals is significant here, similar to the use of “demands” to refer to the guild’s proposal, seen in other frames. “Offer” implies that the producers were being conciliatory or attempting to compromise. Other words like “attacked” and “assailed”

**Conflict and Crisis Within the Guild**

The central organizing theme or idea behind this frame was that the guild leadership was facing an internal conflict due to the use of its “radical” tactics. Two main characters were featured in this frame – the guild’s leaders – Patric Verrone, head of the WGA West and David Young, the strike coordinator – and its members. This frame rhetorically opposed the guild leaders from its members, putting them at opposing ends of a disagreement about tactics. Words and phrases like “fissures,” “pressure building” “growing unease,” “growing contingent,” “critical moment,” “severe test” and “fraying solidarity” contributed to the sense of an impending internal crisis within the guild.
“Resistance” and “dissent” were used to highlight the position of those guild members who did not agree with guild leader’s tactics. This frame highlighted conflict and de-emphasized those guild members who approved of the strike tactics. These members were not given the chance to speak.

**Entertainment Industry as Machine**

This frame can be identified through the use of certain “machine” metaphors used to stand in for the entertainment industry or different industries related to it (like the entertainment publicity industry). Phrases like “Hollywood’s entertainment machine,” “Hollywood’s stalled production engine,” “supply lines for scripted television shows” mechanized television and film production and de-emphasized and de-valued human labor. Furthermore, the metaphor “throw a wrench into the machine” used a bit of labor history – striking workers’ literally throwing a wrench into management property – to compare Hollywood to a machine and suggest that the writers were sabotaging an otherwise steady, smooth process than ran like clockwork.

**Inexplicable, Unsolvable Strike**

This frame was defined by what was absent from several of the Post’s articles – namely, background information about the strike’s causes. Articles that used this frame focused on the (often negative) effects of the strike, without giving information about how it had started or the principle issues behind it. Without this information, the strike was reduced to its effects. And because several articles did not even refer to the Writers
Guild of America or even “writers,” the strike was simply “the strike” – a dehumanized, background condition that affected other entities.

**Framing Trends**

The most basic observation about the frames used to cover the strike is that the guild and the strike were both framed negatively. The frames used by the *Times* and the *Journal* that were explicitly critical of the guild and the strike (“belligerent, radical guild,” “conflict and crisis within the guild,” “questioning the strike” and “guild is more to blame than producers”) contributed to this, as well as the overall reliance on the victimization frame.

Because of this, it can be said that the strike was framed more from a management rather than a labor perspective. Although there were examples of articles that emphasized the strike’s damage to workers in other industries (seen most prominently in the *Post’s* “innocent bystander” frame) the victims emphasized the most often were networks and studios (management), viewers (consumers) and individual television programs (products). Labor was never depicted as a victim of unfair wages, or management policies. The strike as business opportunity did not victimize the management but it was certainly a frame that operated from a management perspective. The gains from the strike were for the companies, who would benefit from the opportunity to cut costs.

The fact that management was often victimized and labor never was is significant. Effectively this removes blame for the strike from management; any role they may have had in bringing about the strike is obscured. Related to this, there was a significant “hole” in the papers’ discussion – a lack of information about writers’ salaries as
compared to company profits or executive salaries. This would appear to be a relevant issue in the ongoing story of a strike held largely over the issue of compensation. Writers’ salaries were never explicitly mentioned in dollar amounts. One *Times* article noted that the average pay in “TV broadcasting” was $2,450 a week in 2006, but it was not clear what occupations fell under this category. Also in the *Times*, “Strike Opens New Window on Hollywood” mentioned that most writers were paid far less than “high profile” writers like Larry David (the creator of “Seinfeld”) and referred to the writers as a middle and upper-middle class group. The final paragraphs of the *Post* article “ Quitcoms Hit TV” gave writers a chance to explain the reasons they were on strike. It also mentioned, in quotes, the disparity between writers’ income and network/studio profits. This kind of basic economic information was largely absent across all articles from the *Post*, the *Times* and *Journal*. It provided a quote from a writer described as “a Writers Guild member who writes for film and makes between $75,000 and $100,000 a year.” The writer compared his salary to other entertainment industry workers: “While actors are making millions of dollars for reciting lines, writers are on the bottom of the totem pole,” he said. The article also introduced another TV writer who said that if he made more money than an average teacher, it was a good year. “We work hard to create content that the studios make millions off of. We just want our pennies,” he said. These lines represented the only reference to writers’ salaries in specific figures and in relation to other entertainment industry workers and to studio profits.

A final framing trend was the tendency to remove human activity from work. This was seen in the “show must go on” frame, the “entertainment industry as machine” and also the “inexplicable, unsolvable strike” frame. The “show must go on” frame implied
that the final, visible product (the television show) was more important or of more concern than how it was created, and the people involved in its creation. The “entertainment industry as machine” frame automatized the process of television and film production. Finally, the “inexplicably, unsolvable strike” removed human action from the strike.

Ownership

This study attempted to answer the research question, “Did newspapers whose owners had a financial stake in the strike frame it differently from those who didn’t?” The Post and the Journal are owned by News Corporation, which owns several television networks and film production studios, and was one of the companies represented by the AMPTP. It had a clear stake in the outcome of the strike. The Times, meanwhile, is independently owned by the New York Times Company and had no stake in the outcome of the strike.

It should be first noted that the topic of ownership itself rarely surfaced in the coverage offered by the Post and Journal, whose owner had a stake in the strike. In the Post, the paper’s ownership and financial stake in the strike was rarely disclosed. In a December article the Journal first mentioned that News Corporation had agreed to buy its publisher; in one later article it mentioned that News Corporation owned the Journal. The Journal mentioned twice that the company’s executive Peter Chernin had played a significant role in getting the writers to agree to a deal, by initiating informal talks with the Directors Guild of America, a move that the Journal said ultimately pressured the writers to make an agreement. Another time it mentioned that Chernin thought that the
strike would benefit News Corporation’s Fox network, since it didn’t rely so heavily on scripted comedies and dramas with unionized workers, while its competition did. Neither the Post nor the Times mentioned Chernin as a key player who moved forward a deal with the writers. They did not mention the Fox network as a potential beneficiary of the strike, either.

Of course, the mention of parent company ownership in a newspaper is not in itself an indication of whether framing of the strike differed along lines of ownership. In general, there were no major differences in framing in terms of ownership. All three papers relied heavily on the victimization frame; perhaps more telling, even the other, different frames used by each paper were similar because most framed the strike and the guild negatively. There were a few more nuanced differences, however. Beyond the victimization frame, the Journal and the Times shared two additional frames (“strike as business opportunity” and “radical, belligerent guild”) and the Post and the Times shared one (“the show must go on.”) The Journal and the Post shared no additional frames. If the victimization frame is kept constant, it can be concluded the Journal and the Times’ coverage had more in common with each other than either of them did with the Post – in spite of the Post and the Journal’s mutual owner. At the same time, it should be remembered that the coverage of the strike across all three papers was mostly negative, no matter the specific frame used. In other words, the tone – negative versus positive towards the guild and strike – did not vary by ownership. At the same time, on a more nuanced level, the “sibling” Post and Journal’s coverage were the most different in their use of specific frames.
The relationship between the *Wall Street Journal*’s ownership and its content merits more scrutiny. The *Journal* is owned by Dow Jones, and during the fall of 2007 Dow Jones was sold to News Corporation. The deal was finalized on December 13, 2007, although it was initially reported in early August that News Corporation had secured the deal to take over the company. Because of this time frame, this study treated the *Journal* as a subsidiary of News Corporation for the entire strike. The literature on ownership would suggest that the finalization of the deal and transfer of Dow Jones to News Corporation on December 13 would be reflected with a change of coverage. However, there were no differences in framing before and after December 13. No frame was used more or less before or after this date, though the content of the articles was different. For example, “Writers Near Return, but Web Question Lingers” published February 11, used the “questioning the strike” frame. It questioned the effectiveness of the strike since the writers had to “suffer” through it and the resulting contract didn’t differ much from what Directors Guild of America, which did not strike, received. “Scenes from Next Week….? Value of Content Distributed Via Net, Phone Is Big Issue As Writers’ Strike,” published November 1, used the same “questioning the strike” frame, this time questioning the guild’s belief that the Internet would be as lucrative a market as DVDs.

Bagdikian (1997) argues that the concentration of ownership within the media industry results in news skewed in favor of the owner’s corporate interests. Gilens and Hertzman (2000) study of coverage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act showed that media outlets promoted their owners’ specific corporate interests, i.e. covered the act favorably where the owner stood to gain from it. The results from this study of the writers strike showed that the coverage of the strike in the *Post* and the *Journal* was indeed
skewed in favor of its parent company through both paper’s negative framing of the guild and the strike. The *Times*, however, also framed the strike negatively even though it outwardly did not have any stake in the strike – its parent company did not own any production studios or television networks, and it was not involved in the strike at all. Overall, there was little difference in framing along the lines of ownership despite the different interests the papers’ parent companies had. The lack of any change in the *Journal*’s coverage, despite its change in ownership, also seems to be at odds with the literature on ownership. At first glance this is perhaps confusing. However, critical theorists like Bagdikian (1997) might argue that while the *Times* had no specific stake in the strike, it still had an interest in protecting the assumptions that underlie its financial structure. Its status as a (partially) commercially owned company committed to profit might result in it being critical of organized labor and supportive of management – which it most certainly was. Meanwhile, the literature on ownership does not indicate whether papers owned by the same company would be more likely to frame the strike using the same specific frames. While all three papers used negative frames, the *Post* and the *Journal*’s coverage of the strike differed more than the *Post* and the *Times*, or the *Journal* and the *Times*, despite the *Post* and *Journal*’s mutual owner. Some insights into this apparent anomaly will be addressed in the following section.

The *Post*: Typical Tabloid Coverage

The third research question this study addressed was “Did tabloid newspapers frame the strike differently than serious newspapers?” In this study the *Post* was considered a tabloid, while the *Journal* and the *Times* were considered “serious” papers.
Based on the results, it can be concluded that the Post covered the strike in a manner the literature suggested a tabloid would, and the Journal and the Times covered it mostly as expected of a serious paper.

According to researchers such as Sparks and Tulloch (2000); Connell (1998); and Eide (1998), the tabloid is characterized by sensationalism. The Post’s coverage was indeed more sensational than either the Times’s or the Journal’s, as seen in headlines such as: “‘Desperate’ Fans Won’t Get Answers Soon;” “Down in Flames: Fans Fume over ‘Heroes’ ‘Deaths’;” “Red Carpet Alert: Strike Endangers Oscars;” and “Red Alert! Writers Strike Translates into Dreary, Dead Carpet at Critics’ Choice Awards.” Other headlines like “Payroll Company is Casualty of Writers Strike” and “Industry Quaking on Warner Layoff Plans,” while perhaps not as outwardly bombastic, were nevertheless inaccurate overstatements, based on the facts the article provided. Also according to Sparks and Tulloch (2000), Connell (1998) and Eide (1998) tabloids emphasize entertainment news over political and economic news. From this description one might expect the Post to eschew discussions of the economic issues behind the strike, although the fact that strike was entertainment news might make it more likely to receive coverage. However, no Post articles provided a discussion of the issues behind the strike. A few articles alluded to the strike’s causes, often with one sentence or phrase that mentioned the issue of writers’ compensation for digital media. Overall the Post’s articles showed a persistent lack of information about the causes of the strike. This resulted in a frame that viewed the strike as inexplicable condition that affected other entities, not as result of human action. This frame may have been aided by the fact that the Post’s articles were relatively brief. Articles over 500 words were rare; the average Post article about the
strike was 390 words, while the *Times* and the *Journal* articles averaged 926 and 985 words, respectively.

The *Post’s* lack of background information about the strike should not be interpreted to mean that the *Post* framed the strike more negatively than the more “serious” papers. It cannot be said that the *Times* or the *Journal* framed the strike or the guild more positively than the *Post*. For one, all three papers lacked information comparing compensation and salaries for the writers, as mentioned in the previous section. More importantly, in all three papers the victimization frame was most prominent. Furthermore, the *Times* and the *Journal* both relied on the “radical, belligerent guild” frame in several articles; this frame wasn’t seen in the *Post’s* coverage.

Connell (1998) argues that tabloids are defined by their ideational and linguistic populism, and the *Post* certainly did cover the strike from a populist angle. Its coverage focused much more heavily on the television audience, seen especially in its “victimized viewers” frame, and its “the consumers’ needs matters most” frame. Viewers and fans, meanwhile, did not receive as much attention in the *Times* and the *Journal*; they were mentioned far less. The *Post* was also much more likely to focus articles on a single television show, as in “‘Desperate’ Fans Won’t Get Answers Soon,” “Strike Takes Out ‘Lost’” and others. The *Times* and the *Journal* included some articles that focused on the strike’s effects on one show – examples include the *Times* “‘SNL’ Is Ready to Make UP for Lost Time” and the *Journal*’s “Hot Topic: Striking Out: Are the Oscars Next?.” The *Post* had more articles devoted to one show, however.

If serious papers focus more on economic issues and “structural changes in the world” than tabloids, then the *Times* and the *Journal* did conform to this definition
through their more marked reliance on the “strike as business opportunity” frame. The *Times* did rely on the “show must go on” frame, which emphasizes the most visible aspects of a product (in this case, the television show) while backgrounding and de-emphasizing its process of production (writers and others’ work.) Overall, however, if we take the three defining characteristics of the tabloid – sensationalism; de-emphasis on economic and political news; and ideational and linguistic population – the *Post* performed as expected of a tabloid, and the *Journal* and the *Times* performed as expected of serious papers, with some exceptions on the part of the *Times*. The *Times* and the *Journal*’s coverage was more similar than the *Times* and the *Post*, or the *Post* and the *Journal*, which follows what the literature on tabloid and serious papers would suggest. Given this, and the previous section’s finding that there were no major differences in coverage along the lines of ownership, it can be said that there were more differences in coverage along the lines of tabloid status, than along the lines of ownership.
CHAPTER NINE  
Conclusion

Coverage of the writers strike in the *Times*, the *Journal* and the *Post* shows that 1) the writers strike was framed negatively; 2) the *Post* performed as expected of a tabloid and the serious papers performed as expected of serious papers; and 3) no major differences in framing along the lines of ownership were detected, since the framing of the strike and the guild was generally negative in tone. The two “serious” papers covered the strike using more of the same frames than the two papers who had a mutual owner, suggesting that tabloid status seems to matter more than ownership in terms of frame-use. The *Times*, whose parent company did not have a stake in the strike, framed it very similarly to the *Journal*, whose parent company did have a stake in it. The literature on framing theory, media coverage of strikes and organized labor, and critical theory provide insights into why this was so.

**Framing Theory**

This study relied mostly on Entman’s (1989) definition of framing. According to him, framing is “selecting some aspect of perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation.” This study finds no fault with Entman’s definition. This study also pulled from other literature on framing to identify specific textual elements that create a frame. Overall this method (displayed in the protocol in Appendix A) was a successful way to guide frame analysis – with one
possible caveat. The protocol, as developed, promoted the idea of one frame for one article shown through the article’s theme, structure, rhetorical choices and excluded elements. In reality, however, almost every article promoted multiple frames, and the protocol made it more difficult to see these “secondary” or minor frames. An example of this is the “entertainment industry as machine” frame, used by the *Journal*. This frame was visible only through the sporadic use of machine metaphors, such as “throw a wrench into the machine.” It did not technically show up as the theme of an article, or the structure of an article. The idea of the entertainment industry as machine, however, is certainly a frame because it promotes a particular interpretation of the industry and implies a treatment recommendation for the strike. It cuts out people from the process of production. The protocol as written still enabled the researcher to identify this frame, however, when comparing the results from the “rhetorical choices” section of all the completed protocols.

One element of the frame that was not included in the protocol, which might be added to the “structure” section, is the delegitimizing use of quotation marks. Gitlin (1980) remarked on the use of quotations to call doubt on the veracity of statements by the SDS. Similar delegitimizing quotation marks were used in one *Wall Street Journal* article to refer to a critical statement from the guild about the “multinational corporations” they were striking. The use of quotation marks here was interesting here because their use implied that the companies involved in the strike weren’t really multinational corporations, when they clearly were. This was a subtle criticism of the guild. Though this wasn’t a common device used in the articles in this sample, it should be added to the protocol.
The Strike and Labor Literature

Given the literature on media coverage of organized labor, the frames used by all three papers were not unexpected. All of the previous research described a tendency to frame coverage of strikes from a pro-management and anti-labor perspective, and also from a consumer-oriented perspective. Martin (2004), Brennan (2005) and Tracy (2004) all noted that the coverage of strikes tends to be focused on negative impacts to the consumer, which was clearly a major trend in the framing of this strike. The “strike as business opportunity” frame found in the Journal and the Times was somewhat unexpected, since it described potential benefits from the strike for companies. However, this frame still operates from a management perspective, since the strike was thought to be an opportunity because it presented the chance for companies to slash costs and get rid of production deals that weren’t making them money.

Martin (2004) wrote that the media often use consumer-oriented framing to write about labor. His study of what he called the five largest labor stories of the 1990s yielded five specific frames: the consumer is king; the process of production is none of the public’s business; the economy is driven by great business leaders and entrepreneurs; the workplace is a meritocracy; and collective economic action is bad. In its coverage of the writers strike, it can be said that all three papers used consumer-oriented framing, with the Post adhering to this frame the most often. Furthermore, the Times and the Post’s “the show must go on” frame is a variant of the “process of production is none of the public’s business” frame. The “show must go on” frame emphasized that the most important thing in the story of the strike was for television shows to get back on the air.
This consumer-oriented framing may appear as a “democratic” way to frame labor disputes, since such an event might seem like it only affects the workers involved in it; when crafting reports, journalists often attempt to make news “relatable” to the public at large to draw in readers. Framing the public as consumers accomplishes this in one sense, but at the expense of a potentially more “relatable” and inclusive frame – the public as fellow workers. Work is, after all, an almost universal experience, and yet for most people, their work is not their own. Someone else owns it, controls it and tells them how it should be done. Consumer-oriented framing of the public in labor disputes ultimately maintains the legitimacy of this inequitable system. In contrast, conceiving of the public as fellow workers and labor disputes as a human rights issue would provide a meaningful challenge to this. If the purpose of journalism is to lead towards an enlightened citizenry and materially improve public life – ideas which are at least given lip-service popularly – then consumer-oriented framing is a poor way to do it. Of course, the issue becomes whether this kind of framing is even possible given the overwhelmingly corporate ownership of the media; critical theorists would argue that it isn’t possible, because such framing would constitute an unacceptable ideological challenge to the logic of capitalism. This will be addressed in the subsequent section on critical theory.

Gitlin (1980) identified four framing devices in his study of media coverage of the Students for Democratic Society – trivialization, polarization, emphasis on internal dissent and marginalization. Different shades of a few of these framing devices were found in the coverage of the strike by the Post, Journal and Times. Polarization and trivialization, however, didn’t figure very prominently as framing devices. For example,
within Gitlin’s study, polarization of the SDS was achieved by focusing on counter-protests, and by placing far-right groups such as neo-Nazis as equivalents from the other end of the political spectrum. If radicalizing an entity also marginalizes it, then the Times and the Journal marginalized the guild through descriptions of its leadership and tactics as “hardball,” “hard-bitten,” “militant” and “radical.” The Times and the Journal also emphasized internal dissent within the guild in some articles. At various times the papers reported that the guild was at a crossroads, its leaders facing a critical point that would test their power. Furthermore, the “hardball tactics” championed by the guild leadership were said to have provoked argument from within its ranks, with a group of writers forming a “network of dissent.” Dissent within the producers’ camp was addressed just once, compared to the four articles in the Times and the Journal that focused specifically on “critical moments” and fissures in the guild’s perceived solidarity. “Cracks in Producers’ United Front,” from the Journal, reported that the major entertainment companies represented by the AMPTP had different individual interests in the strike. However, the article said they would pull together quickly if need be, and while some stood to lose more, none welcomed the work stoppage.

White Collar Versus Blue Collar Strikes

The vast majority of the literature on media coverage of organized labor has dealt with coverage of strikes by “blue collar” workers performing manual labor. The Writers Guild of America, however, constitutes a group of decidedly “white collar” creative professionals, and so the results of this study provide much-needed insights into the framing of these types of workers.
Martin (2004) provided one of the only studies of media framing of a strike by “white collar” workers in his examination of the 1994-1995 Major League Baseball (MLB) strike. He found that this strike was framed in such a way that obscured the business and economic aspects of baseball; baseball was a game, not a business, according to these reports. The strike was also framed from the perspective of disappointed fans, who were angry at greedy celebrity-athletes.

There are some similarities between the coverage of the baseball strike and the writers strike. The closest comparison can be found in the Post’s “disappointed, victimized viewers” frame, in which viewers upset at the interruption to their shows were the main character. The coverage of the writers strike is also similar to the coverage of the MLB strike in that the three papers displayed a tendency to focus on the final product (the television show) over its process of production. Just as the MLB strike was seen as an inconvenient and pointless interruption to a game meant for fans, the writers strike was portrayed several times as an interruption of fan’s television shows. The similarity of these frames is furthermore significant if we consider that both strikes involved disruptions to the flow of entertainment. This suggests values mass entertainment and views disruptions to it indignantly. This framing is in essence an outgrowth of the consumer-oriented framing discussed in the previous section.

Coverage of the baseball strike also implied that the athletes were mostly greedy millionaires who didn’t need or deserve any more money. As noted in the previous chapter, the writers’ salaries and economic class were seldom mentioned; the writers and the guild were never characterized outright as greedy in any quotes or in the text of the articles. In several articles the strike was criticized – for example, it was characterized as
“melodrama” in one article from the *Post*, and was said in the *Journal* to be based on misguided ideas about the future of the entertainment business. The *Times* and the *Journal* often framed the guild as belligerent – for example, the word “demand,” used to describe the guild’s proposals, was part of this characterization. The use of this word may imply greediness. On the whole, however, greed didn’t occur as a salient concept in the framing of the strike. Indeed, discussions about what constituted fair wages and what producers and writers each deserved was noticeably absent from the coverage. As mentioned in the previous chapter, one *Post* article – “Quitcoms Hit TV” – included quotes from writers which spoke to the disparity between writers’ salaries and studio profits. A *Times* article, “Strike Opens New Window on Hollywood” reported that the writers were a middle and upper-middle class group who on average made far less than high-profile celebrity writers. There was a certain tinge of negativity about the writers’ class, however. One quote from a professor at UCLA read, “It’s hard to get people to come up for the middle and upper middle class,” referring to the level of support for the strike in the Los Angeles area. This is not a harsh statement, and it cannot be interpreted to mean that the writers were greedy and did not deserve more. It is one of the few instances of a negative statement about the writers’ class or how much money they made.

In the *Journal* article “The Picket Line is the Place to Meet a Writer in L.A.,” fans who went out to the picket lines to support the writers of their favorite T.V. shows were buying snacks for “writers who have a lot more money than they do.” This implies that the writers are financially secure, which ultimately criticizes the guild’s strike goals (i.e., increasing writers compensation) and suggests that the writers do not need any more money. Coupled with Martin’s study of the MLB strike, these statements sprinkled
throughout the sample may suggest the presence of an interesting discourse about white-collar labor and strikes, specifically the public perception of the relative “deservedness” of white-collar workers trying to better their working conditions. Research that compares media coverage of strikes by blue-collar and white-collar workers is needed.

**Critical Theory**

The critical theory perspective would suggest that in covering the strike, the media would accept the frames advanced by the powerful or those with the economic and cultural capital to promote them. Therefore, one would expect to see frames that supported the interests of the powerful media conglomerates represented by the AMPTP. The framing of the strike in the three papers largely supports the critical theory perspective, because the frames were often pro-management, or anti-labor, because they emphasized the damage done by the strike (“victimization”), evoked sympathy for network products (“the show must go on”) and criticized and marginalized the guild and its tactics (“radical, belligerent guild” and “questioning the strike”). If, as Entman (1993) suggests, frames “bear the imprint of power because they register the identity of actor interests that competed to dominate the text,” then the frames show the imprint of these companies. Furthermore, Ryan (1991) emphasizes that social movements can succeed in promoting their frames to the media. It would appear here that, with its overall focus on victimization over other aspects of the strike, the frames that may have been promoted by the guild did not “win” the framing contest with the producers. The victimization frame, even when it did not victimize the networks and studios, promotes their interest because it emphasizes damage and negative consequences of the strike.
This study found that there were no major differences in framing along the lines of ownership; this does contradict some literature on ownership because the *Times* framed the strike negatively. The literature on ownership would indicate that it would not have a reason to, since its owner was not involved in the strike and ownership influences content. However, critical theory can still account for this finding, because it argues that a commercially-owned media outlet like the *New York Times* – by nature of being part of a capitalist enterprise intended to make profit – would tend to rationalize inequitable distributions of power and frame disruptions to the status quo negatively. The economic structure of a media outlet also functions as a limiting factor on the range of acceptable frames for issues that present challenges to its fundamental logic. For example, Gitlin (1980) writes that “the fact that networks are capitalist corporations…does not automatically decree the *precise* frame of a report on socialism, but it does preclude continuing, emphatic reports that would embrace socialism as the most reasonable framework for the solution of social problems.” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 10). In other words, while a specific frame may be beyond the influence of economic structure, there are boundaries and lines which cannot be crossed when it comes to topics like organized labor. This accounts for the negative coverage of the strike across the board, despite owner interest, and also the different frames that the *Post* and the *Journal* used, though they are owned by the same corporation. Though all the major frames identified in this study differed, all were negative; there was clearly a line which could only rarely be crossed. The critical theory perspective can also account for significant absence of any comparison between the writers’ salaries and the companies’ profits, which was missing in all three papers’ coverage, even though the strike was fundamentally about
compensation. The inclusion of this information would have constituted a journalistic attempt to verify the guild’s arguments (i.e., we deserve more, given producers profit), but also a more fundamental questioning of the logic of capitalism and distribution of wages. The critical theorist would argue that as a profit-seeking company the Times as well as the Post and the Journal still had an interest in protecting the ideas that underlie its financial structure and criticizing those that might challenge it – like labor unionism, which represents a fundamental alternative. In this case, the fact that all three newspapers are part of capitalist corporations – no matter their owner – can account for the overall negative coverage of the strike. Because this study did not look at coverage from newspapers with different economic structures and organizations, this study does not itself support this idea – but again, the literature on critical theory suggests it as a possible explanation for why the strike was framed the way it was.

Limitations

In its analysis of frames in coverage of the writers strike, this study purposely ignores both the process of framing (how frames got into the text) and the effects of these frames on the audience. This study cannot answer these questions. The study also does not attempt to compare news texts about the writers strike with the “reality” of the strike as might be obtained via interviews with human sources who participated in the strike. In using qualitative analysis the study is also limited by the somewhat subjective nature of the methodology. Furthermore, the goal of qualitative research is not to produce knowledge that is “generalizable” across a population; this study is not able to say how newspapers, in general, covered the strike. The results are specific to the sample studied.
Another limit to this study is the fact that the *Wall Street Journal*’s ownership changed during the course of the strike. The sale of Dow Jones, publisher of the *Journal*, to News Corporation was finalized December 13, about a month into the strike. This study treated the *Journal* as if it had been under News Corp’s wing the whole time because negotiations for its sale had been under way for months.

**Further Research**

Using textual analysis, this study identified specific frames in the coverage of the writers strike to examine the relationship between ownership and framing, and tabloid identity and framing. It has shed light on the significant frames used by three major newspapers that covered the strike, but further analysis of media coverage of the strike is needed. The possibilities are many.

A quantitative study of the coverage of the writers strike would complement this study because it could test to see if the frames identified here can be seen across a larger sample. Other qualitative methods might also be used to further examine coverage of the strike. One might use interviews with guild members, leaders, producers, and negotiators to compare the coverage of the strike with the experiences of the people who lived it. This would allow researchers to learn if those who were involved in it thought they were framed accurately. Such interviews would also allow researchers to learn how strike participants framed their actions when interacting with journalists, and if they thought the messages and frames they communicated were accepted. Researchers might also conduct interviews with the journalists who reported on the strike, to learn more about patterns of sourcing, newsworthiness criteria and what frames they used to think about and
understand the strike. Interviews with the journalists who reported on the strike would also be a good opportunity to address the question of ownership. Bagdikian (1997) reported that many editors and journalists felt that the financial interests of their company owners at times translated into pressure to uphold these interests in their articles. Researchers might learn if journalists who covered the strike at the Post or the Journal felt this pressure. Moreover, it would be interesting to discover how they interpreted the fact that their parent company, News Corporation, had a stake in the strike, and how important it was for them to disclose this in their articles. The Post, for example, seldom mentioned its owner and its stake in the strike; the Journal mentioned its owner a few times. As media conglomeration intensifies, and more and more news outlets are consolidated into larger companies, this may be a particularly relevant issue.

Another possible way to examine the strike would be via blogs. Both the Times and the Journal wrote an article about a blog covering the strike – Nikki Finke’s “Deadline Hollywood Daily” blog, and a blog by writer Craig Mazin. The Times and the Journal drew a distinction between these blogs and “traditional media.” Finke’s blog was reported to be “pro-writer;” it would be interesting to conduct a textual analysis to see what specific frames she used to cover the strike and negotiations process, and to compare these frames with those used by the “traditional” media. Considering that these blogs are not corporate-owned, comparing their coverage to the traditional media would be another way to investigate the relationship between ownership and content.

Finally, while this study did not find any major differences along the lines of ownership, critical theory suggests that the economic structure of a news organization may be more significant influence on coverage than the specific interests of an individual
owner. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to study coverage of this strike in media outlets with different types of economic structures. The aforementioned independent blogs are one possibility; other targets might include a non-profit-funded media organization; a publicly-traded corporate chain paper and a non-chain paper privately held by one individual or family.

**Final Remarks**

This study is worthwhile because the body of literature and in-depth studies of media coverage of strikes and organized labor is quite small, and studies of strikes within the entertainment industry are particularly lacking. This study represents a contribution, an attempt to fill in this “hole.” The study is furthermore important because it addresses a reality within the journalism industry. As more media outlets are bought and consolidated by conglomerates with holdings in other industries, ownership and its relationship with media coverage will continue to be an issue that affects the practicing journalist.

To summarize, this study found that, in line with the literature on media coverage of strikes and organized labor, the New York Times, the New York Post and the Wall Street Journal used mostly negative and pro-management frames to report on the strike. Most prominent of these frames was the victimization frame, which was present in all three papers. Contrary to some of the literature describing the relationship between ownership and content, there were no major differences in framing, despite the papers’ different owners, who had different stakes in the strike. Finally, although coverage of the strike was negative across the board, the Post and the Journal’s coverage, despite their mutual owner, differed the most in terms of specific frames. This suggests that tabloid
identity may have mattered more than ownership when it came to framing the writers strike.
APPENDIX A:
Protocol to Guide Analysis of Frames

1. Basic (Atheide, 1996)
   a. Date
   b. Page
   c. Headline
   d. Lede
   e. Length of article in number of words.

2. Theme
   a. What is the central organizing theme or idea? (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987)
      i. What is the central conflict? (Hertog & McLeod, 2001)
      ii. How is causality addressed? (Entman, 1993)
      iii. What solutions are recommended, if any? (Entman, 1993)
   b. What master narratives and myths are alluded to or invoked? (Hertog & McLeod, 2001)
   c. Who are the central actors in the story? (Hertog & McLeod, 2001)

3. Structure
   a. How does the headline structure the text? (Pan & Kosicki, 1993)
   b. How do the headline and lede work together? (Pan & Kosicki, 1993)
   c. What background information is provided? (Pan & Kosicki, 1993)
   d. Who is allowed to speak directly via quotations? (Tuchman, 1972)
   e. Where are quotations placed? (Tuchman, 1972)

4. Rhetorical/stylistic Choices
   a. Where and how is passive voice used? (van Dijk, 1991)
   b. What metaphors, catchphrases, and exemplars are used to describe events? (Gamson & Lasch, 1983)
   c. What details are included that might be irrelevant? (van Dijk, 1991)
   d. What words or terms are repeated? (Ghanem, 1996)

5. Alternatives
   a. What does this article not mention? What is left out? (Hertog & McLeod, 2001)
APPENDIX B:
Articles Analyzed


References


