

PRIA Virtual Research Symposium 2021

Submission Title: Communication inequality in the news marketplace of ideas

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For social, political and industrial groups, the news media represents a marketplace of ideas where competing perspectives battle for attention and legitimisation. In this marketplace, public relations scholars and practitioners assume superior communication skills and strategies positively influence the way journalists represent competing arguments in news reports.

Although much of this research is interested in how communicators frame information to influence their representation in news media and to compete against alternative perspectives, less is known about how *equally* journalists represent different ideas; in other words, how equitably this marketplace of ideas is facilitated to deliver balanced representation of conflict.

Using quantitative and qualitative content analysis of spokesperson communication and news media framing of industrial disputes, this paper presents a case study which argues that groups with more structural power – in this case employers – have an advantage in media framing ahead of groups with less power – unions and workers.

The primary case study is the 2016 case of the Victorian Country Fire Authority dispute between salaried firefighters represented by the Victorian United Firefighters Union, in conflict with CFA management.

Analysis of 189 cases of public communication by these stakeholders and their political allies, including speeches, media releases, social media posts and parliamentary debates, revealed the competing industrial narratives. These narratives were then compared to the narratives used by journalists in 309 news reports about the dispute from newspapers, online news, radio and television.

Analysis of the results of this content analysis informs understanding of the limits of strategic communication to influence news frames, depending on which position a communicator represents. This research demonstrates how the frames used by strategic communicators in an industrial dispute can either be amplified or blocked by journalists, depending on how well communicators frame their arguments to fit within dominant frames used by journalists to interpret social, political or industrial conflict.

Additionally, this paper describes how when frames do not fit the dominant interpretation – or are blocked entirely – the communicators with less power resorted to defensive counter-framing to contradict the employer's accusations of their illegitimacy. In this research, these communicators were the union and worker spokespersons and their allies in the Labor Party. These findings can be applied to any group who challenges power, whether that be workers in conflict with employers, social movements advocating for progressive change, environmental groups campaigning for environmental policies, or women fighting for gender equity. The counter-framing strategy was found to further weakened the strength of the frame used by union and workers, undermining their efforts to justify their collective activities during industrial conflict.

This analysis contributes to greater understanding of the strategic communication battle between groups with different power, and the strategies used to strengthen the voice of groups who struggle to have their arguments legitimised to mass audiences through news representation. In particular, competition for news media attention and legitimisation is found to occur on an uneven playing field

because groups with power are empowered by news framing, where those who challenge power are further weakened, making it more difficult to have their voices heard.

Keywords: Strategic framing, communication competition, counter-framing, news media