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# Lights, Camera, Conflict: Newspaper Framing of the 2008 Screen Actors Guild Negotiations

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## Abstract

This study examines coverage of the 2008-2009 negotiations between the Screen Actors Guild and the Alliance for Motion Picture and Television Producers, through 148 articles published in the *Hollywood Reporter*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *New York Times*. News coverage tended to focus on actions, strategies, and procedures; unions' actions against management, rather than management's actions against unions; intra- and inter-union conflict rather than conflict within management; and economic consequences only in a broad sense.

## Keywords

framing, communication theory, print media, content analysis, newspaper, news and reporting

This study examines newspaper coverage of a labor-management negotiation to extend prior research on news framing of labor unions. Drawing on content analysis, this article identifies frames present in coverage of the negotiations between the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) in 2008-2009. Content analyses of media framing are common in communication research, though Matthes<sup>1</sup> critiques several weaknesses. As with other content-analytic studies, a guiding assumption is that through coverage and framing, news

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organizations shape social reality, or meanings of particular events,<sup>2</sup> and thus influence the public agenda.<sup>3</sup>

As some scholars have lamented, the proliferation of framing literature has led to a growth in the number of frames identified.<sup>4</sup> While scholars have argued that there are more news frames than are currently recognized in the literature, adding more frames does not by itself unify the literature. Thus, one of the aims of this study is to build on a base of frames in the literature, including substantive/procedural,<sup>5</sup> conflict, and economic consequences.<sup>6</sup>

Framing studies of labor have examined blue-collar professions and workers, including autoworkers and transit workers.<sup>7</sup> Despite a decline in union membership nationwide,<sup>8</sup> the entertainment industry remains heavily unionized. While entertainment industry disputes garner substantial media attention, very few studies offer insight into how these disputes are characterized in the news.<sup>9</sup> Thus, one goal of this study is to provide a better understanding of news characterizations of entertainment unions in the context of one extended negotiation. A second goal is to contribute to news framing research by testing predictions and asking questions to support or qualify past claims.

## Literature Review

There is considerable scholarly research on news framing and news frames.<sup>10</sup> A news frame is defined as “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving connection among them. The frame suggests what the issue is about, the essence of the issue.”<sup>11</sup> Scholars have classified news frames in a number of ways, but the focus of this review is on substantive/procedural, conflict, and economic consequences frames.<sup>12</sup> These common frames are likely to be important for understanding the unfolding series of events occurring in a negotiation between a union and a multiemployer bargaining agent.

However, we do not know how much news coverage of the 2008 Screen Actors Guild negotiations addressed these issues. Thus, to begin, we ask the following research question:

**RQ1:** To what extent do news publications cover any of the issues related to the SAG-AMPTP negotiations?

### *Substantive versus Procedural Frames*

News stories are frequently cast in terms of substantive or procedural/process content.<sup>13</sup> *Substantive* is used in this study for frames that others have called “issue” or “thematic,” and *procedural* (or *process*) for frames that others have labeled as “horserace,” “game,” “strategy,” and “episodic.” This choice of terminology is motivated by Druckman’s analysis of negotiation processes.<sup>14</sup> In Druckman’s definition, substantive refers to ideas or concepts introduced or exchanged by interactants. Thus, a *substantive* news frame emphasizes issue distinctions and positions of parties. In line

with Iyengar's conceptualization of thematic frames,<sup>15</sup> substantive frames link news coverage to the larger issues occurring in the negotiation.

In contrast, *procedural* news frames refer to matters concerning the structure or format of interactions between sides. A procedural news frame emphasizes processes, including actions, strategies, and tactics of parties involved,<sup>16</sup> and it is conceptually similar to episodic or event-oriented news framing.<sup>17</sup>

In news coverage of particular conflicts, researchers have found a greater focus on procedural rather than substantive content.<sup>18</sup> For example, strategy coverage has been the predominant form of U.S. political campaign news.<sup>19</sup> In news coverage of social protests, journalists have employed a "protest paradigm," marginalizing issues and instead focusing on the actions and appearance of protestors.<sup>20</sup> Studies of labor-management disputes have reported a tendency for news coverage to focus on actions (or procedure) rather than the substantive issues in media coverage of unions.<sup>21</sup> News coverage of protest groups also focuses on appearance and actions rather than on issues and social criticism.<sup>22</sup> This review leads to the following hypothesis:

**H1:** The predominant focus of articles will be more on a procedural frame (actions, strategies, and procedures) than a substantive frame (the issues being negotiated).

### Conflict Frame

Conflict and economic impacts frames capture media attention.<sup>23</sup> The conflict news frame represents competition or disagreement among parties involved in news stories. Scholars have conceptualized conflict in news stories through the presence of one or more parties reproaching another and language to indicate warring or battling.<sup>24</sup> Conflict frames were the most frequent in Matthes'<sup>25</sup> and Neuman, Just, and Criglet's analyses.<sup>26</sup>

Studies of a particular dispute, such as labor-management negotiations, operate within a general conflict frame. However, a more focused approach examines which parties disagree and which initiate actions against other parties. Harmon and Lee<sup>27</sup> contextualized press coverage of strikes through a political economy of communication framework. This approach highlights the normative assumptions about acceptable political and cultural beliefs and behaviors, and the effects of concentrated ownership, on press coverage, especially as the press is a business that creates and distributes media products, and is supported by advertisers. Certain kinds of framing are very functional for powerful groups, including industry and government, facilitating lower objectivity and higher self-censorship by the press. Thus, the press is likely to reinforce the dominant commercial agenda, one of consumption and profit. Sinclair<sup>28</sup> criticized this press bias toward capital over labor. According to Martin, this manifests through five main frames of labor coverage: (1) The consumer is king, (2) the process of production is none of the public's business, (3) the economy is driven by great business leaders and entrepreneurs, (4) the workplace is a meritocracy, and (5) collective work economic action is bad.<sup>29</sup> For similar reasons, strikes are more newsworthy than layoffs,<sup>30</sup> and reporting in general frames strikes and unions negatively, relative to

management, the public, and authorities.<sup>31</sup> Thus, media coverage has tended to focus on labor as the aggressing party, highlighting actions taken by labor unions over those taken by management.<sup>32</sup>

McLeod and Detenber<sup>33</sup> provided a more general perspective, arguing that emphasizing the “status quo” in news coverage affects the audience’s frames (making some topics or interpretations more salient), in particular decreasing support for protestors and newsworthiness of that coverage, while increasing support for police. Here, the status quo refers to the interests of the existing economic and political structure, embedded in and reflected through news practices and journalistic norms, organizational pressures, and ideologies. The media are more “guard dogs” (protectors of the system with occasional attacks on individuals) than “watchdogs” (objective investigators).<sup>34</sup> Thus, we hypothesize the following:

**H2:** News publications will focus more frequently on actions taken by the union against management than on actions taken by management against the union.

Media scholars argue that news organizations often emphasize problems of social movements (including labor organizations) and de-emphasize problems with management organizations.<sup>35</sup> Coverage of strikes in general leads to negative public opinion of unions,<sup>36</sup> often detrimental to labor organizations and other collectives. First, the appearance of conflict between or within groups with similar interests suggests disorganization,<sup>37</sup> which may impact public support for one side over another. Second, this framing takes attention away from other issues. For example, Martin and Oshagan<sup>38</sup> found evidence of media focusing on competition between two unions facing the possibility of a plant closure and concluded that focusing on conflict between unions pushed important issues, such as economic damages to workers and the communities in which they reside, and the role of management in creating rivalries between unions, to the background. Although prior research has focused on rivalries between unions, no study has examined the extent to which news media focus on conflict between media industry unions or on the internal conflicts of unions. Thus, to some extent, prior theorizing about conflict framing in general and union news framing in particular assumes a unified stance within each actor. Two related guiding research questions are:

**RQ2a:** To what extent does news coverage focus on disagreement between unions?

**RQ2b:** To what extent does news coverage focus on disagreement within a union?

### *Economic Consequences Frame*

This news frame highlights the economic impacts of a particular issue or story topic. This frame emphasizes terms that indicate financial losses for an individual, group, institution, region, or country.<sup>39</sup> Economic consequences frames were the third most frequent in the Matthes<sup>40</sup> and the Neuman, Just, and Criglet<sup>41</sup> studies.

Labor-management negotiations are economic exchanges and thus provide opportunities to explore how news publications focus on financial consequences arising from the bargaining process. Further, the literature has noted that commercial, mainstream media focus on the negative economic consequences of unions' actions,<sup>42</sup> including inconveniences caused to consumers or broader economic consequences, while ignoring the effect of management's actions against unions (e.g., take backs or rollbacks, reduced jobs, etc.). U.S. network TV newscasts covering strikes have typically emphasized impacts on consumers and disproportionately so on effects on higher-class consumers.<sup>43</sup> As noted earlier, news organizations' economic dependence on advertising dollars may also foster a managerial bias in news coverage. Hence, we ask the following research question:

**RQ3:** To what extent is an economic consequences frame included in news media coverage of labor-management negotiations?

Of course, coverage frames may vary across time, due to actual events and progression in the negotiations and/or shifts in framing choices; thus, we ask the following:

**RQ4:** To what extent does the emphasis on different frames change over time?

## **Method**

### *Case Description*

This case examines the main frames used by three publications about the negotiations between SAG and AMPTP, the film and television studios' bargaining representative.

SAG was a labor union representing more than 110,000 film and television actors. SAG had in the past negotiated its TV/theatrical contracts alongside its sister union, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA). AFTRA represented more than seventy thousand performers, journalists, and other artists. About forty-four thousand actors held cards in both SAG and AFTRA. During the 2008 round of negotiations, AFTRA and SAG suspended their twenty-seven-year-long joint bargaining agreement over a disagreement between the two unions.<sup>44</sup>

Negotiations began on April 15, 2008, leaving a little more than two months before the guild's TV/theatrical contract expired, raising the possibility of a SAG strike. The SAG-AMPTP contract talks were preceded by a fourteen-week-long strike by the Writers Guild of America and occurred in the context of a severe global economic downturn. The writers' strike cost the industry an estimated \$2.5 billion,<sup>45</sup> and with 110,000 actors out on strike (compared with thirteen thousand members of the writers' union), there were fears that a SAG strike would be far more severe. Although a SAG strike did not occur, the negotiation process faced multiple challenges, including difficulties between SAG and AMPTP, division within SAG, and disagreements between SAG and AFTRA.<sup>46</sup>

A little over a year after negotiations began, SAG and AMPTP reached an agreement. SAG ratified a two-year contract on June 9, 2009, which included wage and pension increases, and gains related to digital and online media similar to those achieved by other industry unions (jurisdiction for original online content, compensation for ad-supported streaming of film and television programs online, compensation for derivative new media programs), and, indeed, similar to those SAG rejected months earlier.<sup>47</sup> Table 1 provides a timeline of key events in the case.

### Sample

Using the ProQuest and LexisNexis electronic databases, all news articles including the phrase “Screen Actors Guild” were sought from the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *Hollywood Reporter* between March 1, 2008, and June 15, 2009. March 1, 2008, predates the start of SAG-AMPTP negotiations between the actors and the industry’s bargaining organization, and June 15, 2009, follows the SAG members’ contract ratification vote.

All three publications are in regions that are economically dependent upon the motion picture and television industries, yet each varies in terms of its reach and its audience. The *Hollywood Reporter* is one of the film and television entertainment industry’s trade magazines. Scholars have included trade publications in content analyses because of their influence in both reporting and shaping industry-related policy processes.<sup>48</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* is a large, regional newspaper. Researchers have included the *Los Angeles Times* in content-analytic studies because of its influence in the western United States;<sup>49</sup> it is also included here because of its significant role in the Los Angeles-area media industry. The *New York Times* is an elite national newspaper. Scholars have included the *New York Times* in content-analytic studies of labor-management disputes because of its national influence, its role as a “paper of record,” and its ability to shape the agendas of other newspapers.<sup>50</sup>

The first author downloaded the news articles and selected those that were about TV/theatrical contract negotiations (looking specifically for keywords such as negotiations, bargaining, contract, deal, in the headlines and lede paragraphs), and removed any content labeled explicitly as opinion/editorial content (e.g., editorials, opinion columns, and letters to the editor). Although other framing studies have included opinion/editorial content along with news content, op-ed articles perform a function different from that of news content,<sup>51</sup> which is guided by standards of objectivity. Of the resulting 148 articles, 28 were from the *Hollywood Reporter*, 71 from the *Los Angeles Times*, and 49 from the *New York Times*.

### Coding

Two research assistants were recruited as coders. They received an overview of the project and training in using the codebook and recording their observations, using example articles from similar publications. The assistants coded independently from one another and without consulting the researchers. The first author met with them

**Table 1.** Dates and Key Events in the Conflict.

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**2008**

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March 29-30: AFTRA votes to suspend joint bargaining agreement with SAG  
 April 15: SAG-AMPTP negotiations begin  
 May 5: SAG-AMPTP talks collapse  
 May 7: AFTRA begins talks with AMPTP  
 May 27: AFTRA reaches deal with AMPTP  
 May 28: SAG-AMPTP negotiations resume  
 June 6: SAG board votes to launch campaign to oppose AFTRA deal, targeting joint members of SAG and AFTRA  
 June 30: SAG contract expires  
 July 8: AFTRA members ratify contract  
 July 10: SAG rejects AMPTP's final offer  
 September 18: SAG membership elects more moderate slate of directors  
 October 1: SAG negotiating committee recommends strike authorization vote  
 October 23: SAG, AMPTP agree to bring in federal mediator  
 November 22: Mediation efforts fail; SAG announces it will begin strike referendum campaign  
 December 16: News of internal opposition to strike vote  
 December 22: SAG delays strike authorization vote

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**2009**

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January 12-13: Moderate faction of SAG board introduces resolution to fire union executive director, but fails to do so  
 January 14: Doug Allen announces he will no longer seek strike authorization vote  
 January 19: Moderate faction of SAG steps up efforts to fire Allen  
 January 27: SAG board fires Allen, replaces negotiating committee  
 February 2: SAG president files lawsuit to reinstate ousted executive director, claiming board violated procedures, and block further talks between SAG and AMPTP  
 February 5: Judge refuses to request to block SAG-AMPTP talks  
 February 8: SAG again votes to fire Allen, in attempt to halt lawsuit by SAG president Alan Rosenberg  
 February 17: SAG-AMPTP talks resume  
 February 19: SAG-AMPTP talks fall apart over contract duration  
 April 17-19: SAG-AMPTP reach tentative agreement; board approves contract  
 June 9: SAG members ratify contract, with 78% supporting

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*Note.* Compiled from the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Hollywood Reporter*, and the *New York Times* stories, and press releases by the Screen Actors Guild and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers.

weekly and discussed issues with coding, providing coders with feedback on their performance, based on evaluating the cross-coder confusion matrix and the intercoder reliability measures up to that point. Overall, coders jointly coded seventy articles from similar publications. Once the diagnostic reliability was adequate (80% agreement or higher) for each variable, coders moved on to production coding of the 148 articles. Based on coder training, the confusion matrix, and intercoder reliabilities, the

codebook was updated ten times to reflect clearer operational definitions to ensure mutually exclusive categories. One category (in the economic consequences frame; see below) was added based upon these discussions. Training and production coding occurred over twenty weeks.

The research assistants independently coded the 148 articles on twelve variables in four categories, and obtained reliabilities ranging from .73 to .99 using the  $I_R$  reliability index (the most appropriate reliability measure for 0/1 coding, as traditional approaches do not take into consideration two 0s as agreement<sup>52</sup>). For the 240 (13.5%) out of the total 1,776 decisions with initial disagreements, the first author was the tie-breaking judge. These reconciled decisions were then discussed with the research assistants and included in the final set of codes. For the one variable with a reliability below .70 (Substantive/Procedural Frame, at .64), we clarified the operationalization and the two authors recoded the articles, resulting in an  $I_R$  of .97.

## Measures

Applying the detailed operationalizations for the twelve variables,<sup>53</sup> coders marked no (0) or yes (1) to the following questions about each of the articles.

*Any presence of substantive (negotiation) issues.* Does the news article address any substantive issues in the conflict (e.g., contract provisions, such as compensation, benefits, length of contract, or definition of the problem or issue)?

*Relative substantive or procedural frame.* Overall, the story emphasizes actions, strategies, or procedures (e.g., meetings, rallies, pickets, voting on contracts, and legal challenges) more frequently than substantive issues.

*Conflict frame.* Coders assessed the following five items within the subcategories of source of the action, and source of the conflict, frames modified from Semetko and Valkenburg's work.<sup>54</sup> Does the story emphasize the following:

### Action source

1. actions/possible actions taken by SAG/its members against AMPTP/its member companies (e.g., campaigning against a contract, rejecting offers/contracts, releasing reports, rallies/pickets, legal challenges, regulatory actions, asking for mediator)?
2. actions/possible actions taken by the AMPTP/its members against SAG/its members (e.g., rejecting offers, legal challenges, regulatory actions, offering contracts to other unions, asking for a mediator)?

### Conflict source

3. internal division within SAG (e.g., references to rival factions, infighting, internal rivalry, dissidents, internal strife)?

4. internal division within the AMPTP (e.g., references to rival factions, infighting, internal rivalry, dissidents, internal strife)?
5. disagreement between the SAG and another union (e.g., jurisdiction issues/turf wars, ending joint bargaining agreement, campaign to defeat contract, verbal sparring)?

*Economic consequences frame.* Coders assessed five items about types of economic consequences. Questions 1 through 3 are adaptations from Semetko and Valkenburg,<sup>55</sup> question 4 is derived from Martin's<sup>56</sup> assertion that news articles address readers foremost as consumers, and question 5 was added during coder training when it became apparent some articles focused on self-inflicted economic harm. Is there any explicit mention of real or possible:

1. financial losses to AMPTP companies due to SAG's actions (e.g., from SAG's proposals in the negotiation, public relations, pickets, boycotts, threat of a strike)?
2. financial losses to SAG due to AMPTP companies' actions (e.g., from AMPTP's proposals or public relations)?
3. broader economic impacts attributed to the dispute (e.g., local businesses, film and television industry as a whole, some link to the state of the economy that suggests a strike will worsen economic situation)?
4. references to any possible or definite inconveniences or disruptions caused to consumers (e.g., delay in releases of film or television products, price increases)?
5. mention of real or possible financial losses to SAG due to SAG's actions (e.g., from SAG's refusal to accept a contract)?

## Results

Table 2 provides the percentages of content by mention and frame, by publication, and overall, along with intercoder reliabilities. As the data are the population of the stories about the SAG negotiations during the relevant period of time from the three publications, they do not require inferential statistics for comparing means or percentages.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, inferential statistics were used only to assess differences across time.

### **RQ1: Substantive Negotiation Issues Mentioned**

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of articles for all three news publications mentioned at least one of the issues involved in the conflict between SAG and AMPTP.

### **H1: Substantive Frame versus Procedural Frame**

Even in the context of frequent inclusion of negotiation issues, the frame of articles was predominately procedural (85.1%) rather than the substantive frame, supporting **H1**.

**Table 2.** Percentages of Content by Mention, Frame and Publication, and Coding Reliabilities.

Topic	Publication			Reliabilities		
	HR (n = 28)	LAT (n = 71)	NYT (n = 49)	Total (n = 148)	% agreement	<i>I<sub>R</sub></i> reliability
Issue mentioned	57%	72%	57%	64%	76%	73%
Frame: procedural (vs. substantive)	92.9	83.1	83.7/ 2.0 <sup>a</sup>	85.1 <sup>a</sup>	97	97
Frame: Conflict Actions Taken by Union or Actions Taken by Management						
SAG actions against AMPTP	39	30	24	30	87	86
AMPTP actions against SAG	7	18	18	16	77	74
Internal and external conflicts						
SAG internal division	54	52	47	51	83	81
AMPTP internal division	0	0	0	0	99	99
SAG-other division	32	54	22	39	77	74
Frame: Economic consequences						
AMPTP losses by SAG	4	0	0	1	96	96
SAG losses by AMPTP	0	1	0	1	99	99
Broader impact	25	28	12	22	78	75
Consumer impact	0	1	0	1	97	97
SAG loss by SAG	4	3	6	4	97	97

Note. Cell values under *Publication* are percent yes. Reliabilities: Computing *I<sub>R</sub>* (Perreault and Leigh, 1989):  $I_R = \{[(F_o/N) - (1/k)][k/(k - 1)]\}^{1/2}$  for  $F_o/N > 1/k$ , where  $F_o$  is the observed frequency,  $N$  is the total number of observations,  $k$  is the number of coding categories. HR = *Hollywood Reporter*; LAT = *Los Angeles Times*; NYT = *New York Times*.  
<sup>a</sup>One case was unrelated to Unions, representing 0.7%.

**H2: Conflict Frame—Union Actions versus Management Actions**

A minority of articles in all three news publications discussed actions/possible actions taken either by SAG against AMPTP or vice versa, but they were nearly twice as likely to cover union as management actions (30% vs. 16%), supporting **H2**.

**RQ2a and RQ2b: Conflict Frame—Other Union and Internal Disagreement**

More than a third (39%) of articles focused on disagreement between SAG and other unions (in particular, AFTRA), while half (51%) of all articles in the three publications focused on internal disagreement in SAG. There was no coverage of any internal disagreement within AMPTP (which exists for the sole purpose of bargaining with the unions).

**RQ3: Economic Consequences**

If the articles attended to any economic consequences at all, they emphasized the broader impacts arising from the dispute (22% overall). A few articles mentioned

SAG's self-inflicted economic consequences (4%). One article each mentioned economic harm to one side due to another's actions for either SAG or AMPTP, and one article focused on the effects of the dispute on consumer inconvenience.

#### RQ4: Frame Emphases over Time

To address possible temporal changes in framing, we split news coverage into three periods delimited by two significant events likely to alter the course of the bargaining process.<sup>58</sup> Period 1 covered the start of negotiations to the culmination of a deal between AMPTP and AFTRA ( $n = 53$ ). Period 2 included news stories up to when SAG dropped its strike authorization vote ( $n = 46$ ). Period 3 covered from then through the end of SAG-AMPTP negotiations ( $n = 49$ ).

The percentage of articles including any *mention of the negotiation issues* did not significantly vary across the three time periods (69.8%, 67.4%, 55.1%;  $\chi^2 = 2.69$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Articles during period 1 focused proportionally more on *substantive issues*, whereas period 2 had proportionally *more procedural framing* (76.9%, 95.7%, 85.7%;  $\chi^2 = 6.99$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Percentage coverage of *unions' actions against management* was consistently greater than of *management's actions against unions*, across the three time periods (20.8% vs. 13.2%, 56.5% vs. 26.1%, 14.3% vs. 10.2%). The jump in coverage during period 2 was significant for unions' actions ( $\chi^2 = 23.44$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not for management's actions ( $\chi^2 = 4.96$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p > .05$ ). *Conflict within SAG* was present in about half (50.7%) of all articles, but significantly and substantially increased across all time periods (20.8%, 58.7%, 75.0%;  $\chi^2 = 32.26$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Each period of news coverage included *conflict with other unions* (e.g., SAG-AFTRA), but this significantly declined after period 1 (66.0%, 28.3%, 20.4%;  $\chi^2 = 25.59$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The only *economic consequences frame* showing significant differences across the time periods was the broad impacts of a possible strike, with a peak in period 2 (17.0%, 39.1%, 12.2%;  $\chi^2 = 11.25$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .005$ ), likely because an actual potential for a SAG strike existed only during period 2.

## Discussion

The majority of articles at least mentioned substantive issues related to the dispute between AMPTP and SAG, a finding consistent across time periods. However, the overall focus of articles was on actions, procedures, and strategy, rather than on substantive issues. This builds on prior research in politics and social protest<sup>59</sup> that revealed a greater focus on procedural than substantive issues. As other scholars have suggested, a predominant focus on actions (a procedural frame) may obscure the issues (a substantive frame) underlying the conflict.<sup>60</sup>

Many articles focused on division within SAG and on disagreement with its sister union, AFTRA. While the turbulent politics within SAG and difficult relations between SAG and AFTRA may have reflected social reality,<sup>61</sup> newspaper coverage of internal division or disagreement among unions could be argued as framing a tacit support of management's interests: casting SAG in a negative light, damaging potential public

support for the union, and pushing the union to accept management's deal. This is in line with Gitlin's<sup>62</sup> research that media characterizations of protest organizations focus on their disorder. Consistent with Martin and Oshagan,<sup>63</sup> the procedural focus on conflict between unions may distract from the substantive issues at the center of the dispute and areas of joint concern for unions, such as the difficulty middle-class actors have in making a living. Further, the considerable coverage of internal conflict sources within SAG and between SAG and AFTRA suggests that future analyses should not assume unified union stances, but assess the role of such internal strife in overall negotiations and in media coverage. Moreover, the complete absence of coverage of disagreement on management's side is interesting because the six studios that comprise the multiemployer bargaining agent are fiercely competitive with each other outside of collective bargaining.<sup>64</sup>

The prediction of greater focus on actions taken by labor unions over actions taken by management was also supported and stable across time. The three news publications did not completely ignore the actions taken by management against the labor union, but SAG was presented as the aggressor 1.83 times more. This provides support for claims that labor unions are represented in the media as the aggressing party.<sup>65</sup>

Very few articles considered the economic consequences of the contract negotiations, though those that did attended to the broader effects arising from the dispute. These broad economic consequences occurred most frequently in period 2, during which time SAG was weighing a strike authorization vote, which would have economic consequences on union members, as well as the media industry. Very few articles focused on the impacts to consumers, such as delays in movie releases or increases in prices of media products. The difference between this case and Martin's<sup>66</sup> findings can perhaps be explained by the fact that SAG did not call a strike, and consumers actually experienced few disruptions to their media diet. Four articles focused on self-inflicted economic consequences arising from SAG's failure to accept an offer given earlier by management. While this type of economic consequence was seldom raised, it supports Parenti's<sup>67</sup> assertion that media characterize union members' actions as "irrational and greedy, self-indulgent to the point of self-destruction."

Adding a temporal element illustrated important differences in frames and framing of news coverage of the SAG-AMPTP negotiations. In particular, period 1 demonstrated a greater focus than other periods on issues central to the negotiation, while period 2 illustrated greater struggles with management, with other unions, and within SAG. Although period 3 witnessed a resolution to the conflict, it was marked with an exceptionally high level of references to internal division within SAG.

## Conclusion

### *Implications*

The contributions of this study to news framing theory are threefold. First, for media and conflict researchers, this study situated research on media depictions of labor in

the larger body of news framing literature with the general news frames of conflict and economic consequences. This allowed us to bring together a body of literature to test predictions of news framing research and develop the framing construct where past research provides no predictions. Second, this study introduced *substantive* and *procedural* frames from the negotiation literature to characterize the overall focus of news coverage. Third, this study qualified some claims about *economic consequences* frames. In particular, this case restricts claims that media coverage necessarily focuses on negative economic impacts arising from labor unions' actions, in particular, impacts to consumers.

For labor unions, this case emphasizes the consequences of infighting and disagreements with fellow unions, and especially living out the conflict through news publications. SAG, for example, perhaps prolonged the resolution of its conflict with its extremely public commitment to defeating its sister union's contract, and then began losing television contracts to that union. In addition, the leadership's inability to reach a deal amounted to real economic losses for its members, which studios estimated to be around \$65 million.<sup>68</sup> For SAG, these two issues provided discussion points for management to use in painting SAG's leadership as out of touch with the industry. Interestingly, though, this incident served as a lesson for both unions. Both unions reinstated their joint bargaining agreement,<sup>69</sup> and membership of the two unions voted to merge them in March 2012.<sup>70</sup>

For this case, journalists came to frame negotiations primarily in terms of procedural rather than substantive terms. These procedural aspects can so preoccupy actors that they become substantive issues themselves to the involved parties, but, conceptually, they are *not* substantive to the formal negotiation issues. This shift may reduce audience understanding about what is central to the negotiation and may substitute conflict interactions for thoughtful presentation of substantive issues.

Finally, the method of content analysis provided a means by which to systematically examine coverage of negotiations between a management organization and a labor union. As a by-product, this study provides future researchers a set of reliable operational definitions for coding central frames in management-union coverage.

### Limitations

The coding was based on characterizations of each whole article. As some scholars have pointed out,<sup>71</sup> whole-story characterizations can be problematic and miss nuances that smaller units of analysis capture. However, many of these trade articles were quite short (several paragraphs), so this approach was appropriate. Second, this study focuses on one case (here, the SAG-AMPTP negotiations), rather than multiple examples of negotiations (such as other unions in the industry or a more inclusive sample of unions across multiple industries), and thus the results are not generalizable. However, the results do provide justification for use of these more detailed frames in this and related contexts. Finally, four variables had somewhat low  $I_R$  reliabilities—around .75.

## Future Research

This study provides some avenues for future research. Because of the central role of the procedural and substantive frames in this case study, it would be useful to have more detailed sub-measures, as with the multiple items for the conflict and the economic consequences frames. As this study revealed, some framing patterns were stable across time, but not others. In news framing of negotiations, politics, and social protests, what media, actor, and issue factors trigger a shift in emphasis from substantive to procedural?

Another possibility for further research lies in coverage across multiple negotiations over time between the same union-management pair. This approach would allow researchers to make more general claims about the nature of conflict, economic consequences, and substantive/procedural frames, as well as assess the influence of prior coverage patterns. This particular case features some elements of historical and protracted conflict,<sup>72</sup> including issues labeled as nonnegotiable and references to increases in the costs parties were willing to bear. Thus, this case could contribute to research on conflict framing by identifying how parties' prior and current public statements contribute to escalation or de-escalation of the conflict through emphasizing certain features of the conflict, including prior, as well as current issues, identity, and process.<sup>73</sup>

Following Iyengar,<sup>74</sup> McLeod and Detenber,<sup>75</sup> and others, it would be useful to test if greater prevalence of these kinds of frames affects the salience of the emphasized topics to the news readers, affecting subsequent attitudes, support, legitimacy, and policies relating to labor unions and management. In essence, the ways these negotiations are framed in the news can have important implications for how the public, the relevant media industry, management and labor, and even journalists understand, evaluate, and take action on issues and actors involved.

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