An Alternative to the Fighting Frame in News Reporting

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Abstract: Journalists rely on conflict as a conventional method of framing news reporting. Faced with the pressure of deadlines and time and space constraints, as well as strained resources, and their perception that media consumers prefer this reportorial style, journalists resort to conflict-based reporting. The approach positions one side against another, excluding the likely possibility that there are several sides in any given dispute, simplifying the complexities of the issue, and often exacerbating the conflict by the very nature of the reportage. The general public repeatedly expresses dissatisfaction with current media practices. Journalists themselves are increasingly calling for an alternative approach. Using a dispute between a monastery and a forestry company as a case study, this paper will analyze media coverage, comment on key players’ observations, and offer an alternative approach for consideration.

Introduction
The craft of journalism is grounded in certain conventions by which reporters define the storytelling exercise. They are expected to seek a balanced and fair
description of the event (Mencher, 1999; Robinson, 1998; Stephens, 1993; Stone, 1992). They are expected to accurately cover stories that are of importance and that are timely (Stevenson, 1995). They also aspire to tell their stories with a degree of objectivity (Friedman, 1998; Schlesinger, 1978; Tuchman, 1972). The media consider conflict one determinant of news (Berner, 1992; Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991; Stephens, 1993). American journalist James Fallows (1996) even suggests “no conflict, no news” (p. 163).

The traditional method of conflictual news coverage is to seek a reflection of disagreement, usually between two parties. This satisfies a perceived need for an element of drama or “flamboyance” (Gitlin, 1995, p. 93). Berkowitz & Beach (1993) also suggest that when an issue is controversial, journalists are especially aware of the need for objectivity, so they “try to provide information from each side of an issue” (p. 6). Telling two sides, however, dismisses the possibility, and often the reality, that there are many sides, or, as Ericson, Baranek, & Chan (1991) point out, that “truth is held to reside somewhere in between” (p. 39). Furthermore, the conventional approach often precludes an acknowledgment that an element of consensus may exist.

Folger, Poole, & Stutman (1999) suggest that “communication problems are sometimes the cause of conflicts” (p. 435). It is possible that the journalistic exercise of telling the story may in fact exacerbate the conflict (Baumann & Siebert, 1993).

The approach may also affect media consumers’ impressions of the conflict by virtue of the way the story is told (Rubenstein, Botes, Dukes, & Stephens, 1994). For example, journalists often begin with the perspective of one participant in a dispute, Person A, and then proceed to acknowledge the perspective of the “other” participant, Person B. Often by choosing who is in the A category, that is, the subject of the story, and who is in the B category, the object, journalists inadvertently give one participant an advantage.

Furthermore, the very presence of the media may affect the dimensions and even the outcome of the conflict (Rubenstein, Botes, Dukes, & Stephens, 1994). That presence may change participants’ behaviour. Media attention on a wide scale may cause participation in the story to spread. The coverage may itself cause participants to hold their positions more firmly, to be less willing to compromise.

Journalists have acknowledged the need to re-examine their reliance on this news gathering convention. Media critic Jonathan Alter has said that “hyper-adversarialism . . . is now really corroding journalism” (quoted in Fallows, 1996, p. 163). And Walter Isaacson, managing editor of Time magazine, has encouraged the media to consider other approaches:

We have to look at how you find the common ground in America, the common facts that people can use in arguments. But also, instead of presenting everything as dissent, we have to occasionally try to do something like promote understanding and even promote a consensus that may be emerging. (quoted in Konner, 1996, p. 4)
This paper examines the degree to which journalists relied on a conflict model as they covered a particular dispute involving a forestry company and a monastery in Atlantic Canada. With references to relevant literature drawn from the areas of journalism and conflict resolution, the paper then proposes an alternative approach that might enable the media to cover conflict in a way that does not compromise the substance of the dispute.

The dispute between the Nova Nada monks and J. D. Irving, Ltd.
A group of Carmelite monks moved to southwest Nova Scotia in 1972, purchased an old hunting lodge, and converted it into a hermitage with only sporadic access to electricity and running water. The monks belonged to the Spiritual Life Institute, which has two other monasteries, one in Ireland and the other in Colorado. They led a contemplative life in which long periods of silence and solitude were fundamental. The Nova Nada Monastery also offered a wilderness retreat for those wishing to escape the noise of urban society for a period of quiet reflection.

In 1994, J. D. Irving, Ltd. bought the land surrounding the monastery—more than 180,000 acres—from another forestry company, Bowater Mersey. Irving's harvesting operations began in earnest in 1996, and the silence so important to the monks' existence was disturbed by the felling of trees and the construction of roads.

The monks asked Irving to agree to establish a two-mile buffer zone around the monastery, where there would be no harvesting, so that they could return to the silence so important to their way of life. Irving responded first with an offer of a one-mile buffer zone, and restricted logging with quieter equipment at times of Nova Nada's choosing in the second mile. The monks of Nova Nada rejected that offer. Irving countered with an agreement to a two-mile buffer zone for five years, provided they could aggressively harvest in the second mile for an eight-week period in the sixth year. The monks also rejected that offer. Their view was that the two-mile buffer zone was in itself a compromise; it was the least they could live with.

The dispute stalled when neither the monks nor Irving would alter their positions. The monks left Nova Nada in the fall of 1998, and the monastery is essentially closed, although the monks say they may return at some future date to reassess the situation.

Journalists from far and wide were attracted to this story. It was a David versus Goliath tale, a conflict between innocence and greed, a conflict between the spiritual and the material, a conflict between silence and noise, rural and urban. In stories about conflict that generate media interest, from war to protests to shootings, from the political arena to labour and management, the media's role is central to our understanding. They provide us with the information that helps us know what is truly happening. To that extent, the media, too, are participants in the conflict.

As Rubenstein, Botes, Dukes, & Stephens (1994) point out, “journalists have the ability to clarify issues and create understanding between various kinds of disputants” (p. 121). This paper proposes to illustrate how journalists' reliance on
conflict to tell the story of this dispute inadequately acknowledged its complexities, disadvantaged participants, and may well have contributed to the final impasse.

Methodology
For the purposes of this research project, the researchers examined the news stories which appeared over a period of one year, during which five discrete but related news events received significant media attention:

- August 1997: the Nova Nada monks circulate a petition to gather support;
- November 1997: Irving offers a compromise to settle the dispute;
- April 1998: the Nova Nada monks hold a news conference in Halifax to say they will leave Nova Nada if a settlement cannot be reached;
- July 1998: the Nova Nada monks hold a rally in Halifax;
- September 1998: the Nova Nada monks hold a news conference at their monastery to say they are leaving Nova Nada.

Two Halifax-based daily newspapers, The Daily News and The Chronicle-Herald, were examined, as well as local television news coverage on CBC and ATV, the CTV affiliate based in Halifax; the Canadian Press newswire service; and The Globe and Mail. Feature stories were not included here because the intent was to explore alternatives to the conventions of conflict coverage in news reporting.

The researchers then conducted qualitative interviews with four journalists who covered the story: Kevin Cox, Atlantic correspondent for The Globe and Mail; Lisa Taylor, a former news reporter for CBC Television’s First Edition; Brian Medel, Yarmouth bureau chief for The Chronicle-Herald (Halifax); and Michael Tutton, a former Halifax-based staff reporter for the Irving-owned New Brunswick Telegraph-Journal. We also spoke to two key official sources: Mother Tessa Bielecki of the Nova Nada Monastery and Mary Keith, Director of Communications for J. D. Irving, Ltd. Interview questions were adapted from the Bloomfield model (1995) (see Appendix A).

The findings of the news coverage and participants’ observations were then revisited within the context of conflict resolution theory and practice.

Analysis of media coverage
The production of news influences the storytelling process to a significant degree. The pressure of deadlines, time and space restraints, and strained resources affect how and which stories are told (Schlesinger, 1978), as does journalists’ perception that they are providing what media watchers want (Altheide, 1976).

The narrative form is a standard approach to storytelling. And journalists adhere to the principle that objectivity and balance are goals worth striving for. There are conventions that define how journalists gather information and tell their news stories, and some of them warrant examination in the context of conflict coverage. Journalists believe, for example, that balanced and fair coverage is a basic
tenet of their work (McKercher & Cumming, 1998; Mencher, 1999; Stephens, 1993; Stone, 1992). They acknowledge that human interest enlivens a story (Mencher, 1999). They concede that official sources determine the content of a significant proportion of the day’s news (McKercher & Cumming, 1998). The researchers examined each of these conventions as they applied to the case study.

**Using the conflict frame within the conventional narrative form for journalistic storytelling**

Employing the narrative form is an attractive way of processing information. Storytelling’s universal appeal derives from a psychological impulse to narrate, and our desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure that exists only in imagination (White, 1987). The narrative approach helps make sense of the world by organizing experiences and lending a sense of order to events (Braid, 1998; Chaney, 1977). Narrative becomes “a potent medium for communicating experiences, ideas, values, and beliefs to others” (Braid, 1998, p. 330).

Understandably, then, reporters rely on the narrative form to assemble a story. As Robinson (1998) points out, “journalists do not invent; rather they appropriate pre-existing narrative styles” (p. 8).

There are different frames within which journalists apply the storytelling approach (Manoff & Schudson, 1986). The conflict frame is an example: “a readily available device with which facts [can] be easily arranged into a narrative” (Manoff & Schudson, 1986, p. 208). Bal (1985) suggests that either confrontation, change, or a choice of possibilities are often characteristics of a narrative text, be it a newspaper article or a novel or a poem, a notion with which van Dijk (1988) and Wolfsfeld (1997) concur. Wolfsfeld (1997) suggests “the news media constructs frames for conflicts by attempting to fit the information they are receiving into a package that is professional, useful and culturally familiar” (p. 33).

Robinson’s (1998) analysis of news coverage of the 1980 Quebec referendum demonstrates how using the conflict frame within a narrative influences the storytelling process. She observes that journalists applied “a pre-existing style of sports narration based on adversarialism,” which “legitimated confrontation in order to simplify the narrative and thus make it more exciting” (p. 88). Indeed, as The Globe and Mail reporter Kevin Cox points out, reporters are disinclined to tone down the drama: “It’s like a boxing referee. You don’t want to break up the slugfest. It’s going well. The fans love it” (personal communication, June 23, 1998). Framing a story as conflict, with two clearly polarized parties, brings an element of drama to the story because of the “gravity of the opposition of the two outcomes” (Manoff & Schudson, 1986, p. 99). Even complex stories are simplistically reduced to a script of “binary opposition” (Manoff & Schudson, 1986, p. 99).

Such was the case with the media coverage of the Nova Nada and J. D. Irving dispute. Reporters used the conflict frame to assemble the narrative, in which the monks, regularly cast in the A role, or subject of the story, were “pitted against” the Irving company, who played the B role, or object. Reporters played “the cre-
ative role of the narrator,” as Braid (1998) suggests, in selecting, interpreting, organizing, and presenting the events (p. 330). The story was one of “David vs. Goliath” (Mercer, 1997, p. A4; CTV National News, September 14, 1997), in which the monks were “fighting for their survival” (Medel, 1997a, p. A1). This approach appeared in the first phase, even though both the monks and the Irving company still seemed committed to finding an agreement, reflecting Manoff & Schudson’s observation (1986) that “news tends to emphasize conflict, dissension and battle; out of a journalistic convention that there are two sides to every story, news heightens the appearance of conflict even in instances of relative consensus” (p. 9).

Mother Tessa Bielecki, who was the chief spokesperson for the Nova Nada monks, says media coverage initially reflected a simple narrative about how the lifestyle of quiet monks was threatened by a forestry giant, but that ongoing media coverage changed the players’ approaches. Media attention alerted the Sierra Club, for example, such that members of the environmental group volunteered their services as advisers to the monks, and widened the monks’ perspective of the issue as the dispute evolved. First preoccupied with saving Nova Nada, the monks “suddenly realized, well, wait a minute, there’s a lot going on here,” (Mother Tessa Bielecki, personal communication, June 24, 1998), and so the dispute deepened from being about noise to being about forestry practices.

Mary Keith, Director of Communications for J. D. Irving, Ltd., is critical of the media for oversimplifying the coverage, and for never definitively addressing the noise issue in a systematic way. She views the escalation of the conflict into debate over forestry practices as “unfortunate,” and believes the media must share responsibility for that evolution because their coverage “led to feelings of misunderstanding.” It was her decision to purchase advertising space in newspapers to explain Irving’s position because she believed reporters were not inclined to do so (personal communication, July 22, 1998). CBC Television reporter Lisa Taylor agrees that the media escalated the level of disagreement, and suggests the monks actually exploited the media’s appetite for “a battle of good and evil, the battle of a quiet, peace-loving communal organization versus big business; white hats and black hats” (personal communication, October 1, 1998). And Brian Medel of The Chronicle-Herald wonders whether the volume of coverage was itself counter-productive, since many media consumers got “sick and tired of the whole affair” (personal communication, October 6, 1998).

Both organizational spokespeople fault the coverage for its simplistic approach. Mother Tessa says reporters “got swept up in the story about this pain . . . and they ignored the issues. They have been superficial” (personal communication, June 24, 1998). Mary Keith was frustrated with the media’s tendency to project a one-dimensional, “cutting wood and counting cash” image of Irving’s employees. “We’re passionate about the work we do in the woods,” she says (personal communication, July 22, 1998).

Reporters employed what Manoff & Schudson (1986) describe as “ironic juxtapositions” (p. 226) as they wove information into a narrative form, which the
following lead exemplifies: “It takes a lot to tick off Roman Catholic monks, especially ones who have taken vows of silence. But forestry giant J. D. Irving Ltd. seems to have managed” (Thorne, 1997a, n.p.).


The conclusion of the ATV story from the April 4, 1998 news conference incorporates irony with the symbolic treatment of people “garbed in the clothing appropriate to their occupation” as Tuchman (1978, p. 122) observes. Over a visual of monks praying, the reporter says, “and just in case, they’ve been adding prayers of conversion for J. D. Irving to their regular services” (ATV News, April 4, 1998).

In television in particular, the use of symbols provides drama and human meaning for viewers (Tuchman, 1978): “People as symbols tell of the impact of news events upon their lives. . . . And the use of symbols strengthens the distinction between legitimate newsmakers and ‘just plain folks’” (p. 123). The monks of Nova Nada as presented were symbolic of simplicity, purity, and innocence although, as will be demonstrated in following sections, their words did not complement their visual presence, and the absence of a balancing symbolic representation of the “other” compromised the reporters’ pursuit of objectivity.

**The role of objectivity and balance in a conflict-driven story**

Journalists adhere to the doctrine of objectivity, in which they attempt to separate facts from values—“value-free facticity” as Durham (1998) describes it (p. 119; see also Friedman, 1998; Janowitz, 1975). They recognize, however, that objectivity is difficult to achieve (Blankenburg & Walden, 1977; Durham, 1998; Janowitz, 1975; Schlesinger, 1978; Schudson, 1995; Tuchman, 1972).

They are encouraged to prepare their stories with reasonable attention to fairness and balance (Mencher, 1999; Robinson, 1998; Stephens, 1993; Stone, 1992). As Robinson (1998) suggests, the media “provide the basic information on daily events that is beyond most citizens’ personal experience” (p. 4).

Reporters who covered the dispute between the monks of Nova Nada and J. D. Irving, Ltd. were challenged to educate as well as to inform. Citizens knew little, if anything, of the monks’ existence. Nonetheless, because the media relied so heavily on sources, coverage reflected facts as provided by official sources rather than acquired from investigative methods. Furthermore, because the media were emotionally attracted to the monks (“what they’ve really done is tugged us in an area we don’t really like to go,” according to Kevin Cox [personal communication, June 23, 1998]), coverage also suggests journalists sympathized with the monks’ values, as our analysis shows.

In fact, Cox acknowledges that media coverage was “enormously sympathetic towards the people of Nova Nada” (personal communication, June 23, 1998). Lisa Taylor says the media “became players, and they were played.” She
cites a Halifax-based media rally which the monks organized in August, 1998. The media widely covered the event even though it was a demonstration in support of Nova Nada’s already widely reported position (personal communication, October 1, 1998). Michael Tutton does not go quite so far, although he agrees “there’s always a tendency to give the Irvings a bit of a kick . . . they are the Goliath versus the David” (personal communication, October, 30, 1998). It is clear that label in itself challenges the notion of detachment (Robinson, 1998).

News reporters strive for balance by ensuring they provide at least two points of view (Durham, 1998; Robinson, 1998), even though inclusion of two perspectives does not itself assure balanced coverage. Manoff & Schudson (1986) suggest “every element of the news story — who, what, when, where, why and how — is an effort at explanation. . . . Readers want not just to know but to understand” (p. 105). Reporters expect that if balance is not achieved within a single story, it is as coverage evolves. That did not happen in this case. Figure 1 shows a comparative word count of information reflecting the perspectives of the two main participants in this dispute. It suggests reporters consistently tipped the balance, in story after story, such that a reader would have difficulty truly understanding the dimensions of the dispute and “what is publicly important to them” (Manoff & Schudson, 1986, p. 105).

Furthermore, the effort reporters expended to acquire the perspective of the monks was not applied to the Irving company. The media travelled to southwest Nova Scotia to collect information from the monastery. It was not until the last phase of the dispute, in September of 1998, that they extended the same journalistic courtesy to the Irving company. In fact, the first time a television newscast included an Irving spokesperson at all occurred following the Nova Nada rally on July 31, 1998. Mary Keith travelled to Halifax from corporate headquarters in Saint John, New Brunswick, to make herself available. Only ATV News contacted her and included visuals and a voice clip of her in their coverage. Keith called the other reporters, who used her information (personal communication, July 22, 1998). Although Durham (1998) and Janowitz (1975) believe there is a role for advocacy journalism, particularly when it advances the cause of “those most disenfranchised” (Durham, 1998, p. 133), reporters interviewed for this study did not suggest that was their intent.

The role of human interest in stories about conflict

Human interest is considered a desirable component of a news story. It is believed that people relate to stories about other people, that the participation of individuals in any news story makes it more relevant (Mencher, 1999). Furthermore, interview sources enable the journalist to distance herself from the story: “Quotations of other people’s opinions are presented to create a web of mutually self-validating facts” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 95).

The result is that journalists rely to a considerable degree on the human interest dimension. Much of their newsgathering time is spent searching for the right person, the best quote, the most lively reaction. Much of the story itself is taken up with quotations and paraphrased quotations.
Richards & King / An Alternative to the Fighting Frame in News Reporting

News stories are also “heavily people-centred” because of the journalistic premise that consumers can only understand abstract content by personalizing it (Chandler, 2000): “Simple images are made to stand for complex issues” (p. 9). According to Altheide (1976), increased economic pressure on news programs has contributed to the tendency “to stress the human interest dimensions of news stories” (p. 6). With a “stone-faced” approach, devoid of emotion, readers would not be interested in a story (Kevin Cox, personal communication, June 23, 1998).

Mother Tessa Bielecki remained the protagonist throughout the story. Media consumers got to know her as the key spokesperson for the monks, for much of the year. To a lesser degree, they also heard from Sister Sharon Doyle and Father William McNamara. Each news story examined, during each of the five phases, included at least two and often three or more quotations from a Nova Nada player.

Mary Keith was the designated spokesperson for J. D. Irving, Ltd., although she was consistently relegated to a less significant role than her counterpart from Nova Nada, and frequently paraphrased rather than quoted directly.

It is arguably true that the role of a monk in this context is more compelling than an organizational mouthpiece. There were other perspectives, however, that might have satisfied the need for human interest. Indeed, coverage of the last phase frequently included a quotation from a sawmill operator who had a long association with Irving in Nova Scotia. Reporters fixed, single-mindedly, on the monks’ distress as projected through Mother Tessa’s anguish. No such empathy...
was accorded to J. D. Irving, Ltd.’s employees, their job concerns, or their contributions to the community.

The language of the two official sources significantly coloured the way reporters told their stories. Throughout the dispute, the Nova Nada monks used the language of war. They said the noise was like “being tortured” (Cox, 1997b, p. A2). Father McNamara drew parallels between the Irving company and “hordes of barbarians” (Medel, 1997a, p. A1). The monks said the logging operations were “a threat to our very existence” (Medel, 1997a, p. A2). In April, Mother Tessa said, “It is like being in a war zone. You have a sense that the enemy is out there, but you never know when something will happen” (Cox, 1998a, p. A4). If the situation persisted, she said, it would mean “the death of all that Nova Nada stands for” (Brighton, 1998, p. 5; Clifford, 1998, p. A1).

At the July rally, Mother Tessa said “our whole way of life is being destroyed” (Cox, 1998b, p. A4; Mellor, 1998, p. A5). Father McNamara called it “an atrocity” (Cox, 1998b, p. A4).

Finally, in September, the monks announced their decision to leave Nova Nada. Mother Tessa said, “[t]he very struggle to save Nova Nada from extinction has become destructive to our way of life” (MacDonald, 1998, p. 4). Father McNamara said he had to remove the monks from this “battlefield” (Gorham, 1998, p. A5). “Their wounds are almost unbearable,” he said (Cox, 1998c, p. A4). In the end, the monks overplayed the “almost Messianical” tone (Michael Tutton, personal communication, October 30, 1998).

The evocative language was in stark contrast to the words of Mary Keith of J. D. Irving, Ltd. She spoke of “working with the community” (Cox, 1997b, p. A2) and of how the Irving company “is vowing to make some major concessions to accommodate the monastery” (Cox, 1997a, p. A4). She said J. D. Irving, Ltd. wanted to be “a good neighbour” (Thorne, 1997b, p. 4), and noted how “there’s a very human story in terms of the people who work in the woods” (ATV News, July 31, 1998). The words “fair and reasonable” became synonymous with J. D. Irving, Ltd.’s position, in both spoken words and in paid print ads.

The role of official sources in conflict

It has been documented in many studies (Sigal, 1973; Smith, 1992; Soloski, 1989) that journalists rely on official sources for most of their news. In his seminal study of the news, Herbert Gans (1979) likens the relationship to a dance: “Sources seek access to journalists, and journalists seek access to sources. Although it takes two sides to tango, either sources or journalists can lead, but more often than not, sources do the leading” (p. 116).

The assignment editor has “holes to fill” in each newscast and scheduled events allow him or her to organize the news efficiently (Altheide, 1976). Sources provide a level of authority to the news. And, “for journalists, quoting practices become the framing devices which determine what is relevant to the reconstruction of news events” (Robinson, 1998, p. 123). The extension of this relationship is that journalists find themselves responding to organizational initiatives and seeking a response from another official source to that initiative, often one which
disagrees. It is a reactive process, as Schlesinger (1978) points out, which leaves little room or time for a perspective drawn from personal observation or a neutral source, let alone from a third or even fourth point of view.

It also leaves little room or time for context. Our analysis of media coverage suggests an exploration of the root causes and wider dimensions of this dispute did not occur, as is often the case (van Dijk, 1988). In none of the news stories surveyed did journalists address issues such as the relationship between the Nova Nada monks and the previous owners of the forested land, the degree to which the Irving company’s offers of compromise might be somewhat affected by concerns over precedent, the relative values of the trees in the disputed territory, growing concern over the pace of clearcutting in Nova Scotia forests, or the lifestyle of forest workers who depend on Irving for their livelihood.

The Nova Nada/J. D. Irving, Ltd. story presented a challenge for reporters. It was a Nova Scotia story. The monastery was located deep in the woods, in a remote part of the province, and access even by telephone was limited. The sawmill where the trees are processed is located about 60 kilometres from the monastery. The foresters are scattered throughout the area. And Irving’s head office is in Saint John, New Brunswick.

In spite of logistical difficulties, the monks made themselves accessible to reporters, who were attracted to their novel perspective (Kevin Cox, personal communication, June 23, 1998; Michael Tutton, personal communication, October 30, 1998). As Mother Tessa Bielecki points out, “we intended to use the media because we knew that if we didn’t, we weren’t going to get [the Irvings’] attention, and we weren’t going to get the kind of hearing we needed” (personal communication, June 24, 1998). The Irving company, on the other hand, tended to represent the more predictable source, with which both the media and their consumers were quite familiar. Furthermore, as described above, the monks used evocative language which was irresistible, particularly when placed beside, or against, the more neutral language of the Irving company.

And so journalists remained in Nova Scotia to tell this story, relying on the refreshing perspective of the monks, at the expense of a more predictable organizational position located in another province. Lisa Taylor of CBC Television suggests the media’s softness toward the monks reflects the sentiment that Irving is a corporation, “nameless, faceless and consumed with accumulating revenue.” With Mother Tessa, “the barriers were down. It became a very warm, fuzzy relationship” (personal communication, October 1, 1998).

And while the monks employed a “war of words that was really striking,” the Irving company’s message was comparatively understated. Taylor says the company tried to take the higher moral ground, concentrating on what it had offered instead of criticizing the monks for not being willing to compromise. “The company didn’t choose to do battle directly,” she says (personal communication, October 1, 1998).

In hindsight, Kevin Cox of The Globe and Mail refutes Nova Nada’s implication that Irving is almost an “evil empire.” He considers Irving a highly competi-
tive business enterprise and “not bad stewards of the land” (personal communication, June 23, 1998). That organizational image was not the impression the media conveyed in the news coverage surveyed. Instead, the choices of wording magnified the conflict, reinforcing Irving’s commercial clout while highlighting the monks’ misfortune as bullied victim. For example, a print article described the “plight of some Roman Catholic monks who are at odds with forestry giant J. D. Irving Ltd.” (Medel, 1997b, p. A7). A CBC television news item polarized the dispute between monks who “can’t get simple peace and quiet . . . [from] the giant logging company” (CBC’s First Edition, November 7, 1997). Similarly, ATV News emphasized the discord between the monastery’s atmosphere—“simple, wilderness, serenity and solitude”—and the “noise of clear cutting” (ATV News, April 4, 1998). It is not that these characterizations are necessarily inaccurate. It is that the repetition of those contrasting images ignores another equally accurate perspective.

Recommendations
The media applied the fighting frame to the dispute between the Nova Nada Monastery and J. D. Irving, Ltd. By their own admission, the coverage escalated the dispute. The monastery is now closed and the monks have taken up residence in one of their other two monasteries, in Ireland and in Colorado. To apply conflict resolution specialist Susan Heitler’s (1990) frame to news gathering, the “process” of reporting on the “content” of conflict can and does directly affect the outcome.

As Baumann & Siebert (1993) describe it,

The media mediates [sic] conflict, whether it [sic] intends to or not. Its [sic] representatives define, shape, and often exacerbate conflict by the stories they choose to cover, by those they omit, by the sources they use, by the “facts” they include, by the way they use language, by their own biases, or “news frames.” Journalists are dangerous mediators, dangerous because they usually do not recognize, or do not accept responsibility for, this power that they wield. (p. 28)

In When Talk Works: Profiles of Mediators (1994), Deborah Kolb and Associates suggests there are mediators whose aim is to “have the parties come away from mediation with a different, better understanding of the problem, if not with a definite settlement”; they see themselves as “vehicle[s] of communication,” who specialize in “summarizing the parties’ positions” (pp. 474-475). This so-called communication frame reflects, at least to some degree, the journalist’s role.

We invite the media to consider another conflict reporting model that reflects the intent of the journalistic exercise. Consider the understanding frame. Rather than using a conflict-based narrative approach that polarizes positions, seeks disagreement, over-simplifies the dispute, and drives parties further apart, consider an approach which clarifies perspectives, and tells a story about how and why two participants are in conflict.

The mediator (also described as an impartial third party) engaged in conflict resolution searches for shared understanding of issues, interests, options, and
solutions. The media would do well to consider the commonalities: a story about conflict, using this model, might focus on not only the parties’ position, but on why they take that position; not only on what should have been done, but on what might be done in the future to resolve the problem; not only on a relationship gone sour, but on how to restore and even build a better relationship in the future.

We offer a model that is grounded in neutral, information-seeking questions, and that probes to unravel the layers of a conflict, as follows:

1. The issues. The journalist inquires about the background of the dispute, by asking questions such as:
   - What do you want to resolve?
   - How does this dispute make you feel?
   - Are there other people who have a stake in this dispute?

2. The interests. The journalist proceeds to ask about the current status of the dispute:
   - What’s important to you, and why?
   - What will you gain if you get what you want?
   - What will you lose if you don’t get what you want?
   - What would you like your relationship with X to be?
   - What do you think is important to X?

3. The options. In this phase, the journalist might encourage participants to ponder the future:
   - What would resolve this conflict for you?
   - What would resolve it for you, that would be acceptable to X?
   - What can you do to improve this relationship?
   - What can X do to improve this relationship?

4. The solutions. Finally, the journalist would conclude with questions about the actual resolution:
   - How will it be carried out?
   - Who will do what?
   - When?
   - What happens if _____ does not happen?

Journalists will recognize similarities between this proposed model and current practice. The neutral questions as framed, though, will provide answers different both in tone and content than the oft-used “Whose fault is it?” and “What do you say to _____?” and “What do you think your chances are?”

Furthermore, the questions offer an opportunity to develop a storytelling approach within the understanding frame, rather than the fighting frame. The issue, rather than the person, becomes the focus of the story. While it is true that people relate to stories about people (Mencher, 1999), stories that are defined by what people say leave little room for context. In conflict, people are tempted to personalize the dispute, and to lay blame. The monks of Nova Nada spoke “from the heart” (Mother Tessa Bielecki, personal communication, June 24, 1998) and
in the process of expressing their pain used inflammatory language which did little to enlighten. Conflict resolution specialists Fisher & Ury (1991), on the other hand, “separate the people from the problem” (p. 10). The content elicited from these questions might liberate the reporter from the temptation to use inflammatory language in the story assembly process.

Reporters interviewed steadfastly upheld their function as neutral observer. So would a mediator. And yet, the reporters resisted any suggestion that they consider the common dimensions of the two roles: “I know I’m not a mediator,” says Brian Medel. “I’m supposedly an unbiased reporter of fact and . . . I have no motive other than doing the aspect of my job which is to report the truth” (personal communication, October 6, 1998).

Asking questions is fundamental to a journalist’s work, but the question of what it would take for conflicting sides to reach a settlement is seldom asked. “We very rarely ask, ‘Is there any compromise position here that you might be contemplating?’ because you don’t really want to go there. Because it’s going to mess things up. And besides,” he adds, “quite honestly, often it’s so much fun being in the middle of it” (Kevin Cox, personal communication, June 23, 1998).

News coverage of conflict is most often an ongoing process, in which no single story can reasonably be expected to be definitive. We recommend journalists stand back from their predictable and steadfast reliance on human interest as provided by official sources, given that it leaves so little room for context, that it relegates authority over content to parties with vested interests, and that it polarizes positions. Rather than spending time seeking the most colourful quotation as a standard template, reporters might better, at least on occasion, probe for information that would deepen understanding, seeking the light rather than the heat.

**Conclusions**

The argument for considering an alternative approach to the fighting frame in news reporting is driven by two factors. The journalism profession aspires to truthful and responsible storytelling, and is committed to accurately and fairly describing events. And yet, according to a Pew Research Center survey of journalists (1999), “roughly one-in-three members of the national and local media now say that a decline in public trust, confidence and credibility is the most important problem facing journalism; 17% said this in 1989” (n.p.). The survey also suggests that more than two in three reporters agree that they “pay too little attention to complex issues.” A narrow majority even agreed that news organizations often drive controversies rather than simply report the news (see Section III of the study).

Furthermore, media consumers have expressed their dissatisfaction with current news reporting practices. In the spring of 1993, the *Los Angeles Times* conducted a poll which indicated the public considers reporters to be “insensitive elitists out of touch with the common people” (Edge, 1993, p. C2). According to the poll, only 17% of those surveyed agreed the media were doing “a very good job.” Linguist Deborah Tannen (1998) refers to the low esteem in which the public holds the media: “When polls ask people why they dislike the media, results
always show the negativity of the press at the top of the list” (p. 53). Former journalist and journalism professor John Miller (1998) suggests journalism has essentially lost its way, and that although part of the explanation is “institutional,” having to do with budget cuts and limited resources, part of it, too, he argues, has to do with journalists whose laudable skepticism has “drift[ed] into cynicism” (p. 49). Tannen (1998) describes a newscast as “a shower of scenes of conflict”: “When such seeds are sown nightly, the bitter harvest is an overwhelming mood of hopelessness and a conviction that nothing constructive can ever be accomplished” (p. 34).

In light of acknowledged concerns about current practice, we urge reporters to consider this alternative.

References


Appendix A

Basic Questions for Key Players, According to the Complementarity Model Recommended by David Bloomfield (1995)

For Mother Tessa Bielecki of the Nova Nada Monastery, and Mary Keith of J. D. Irving, Ltd.

I. About the dispute:

1. Who is speaking for your organization in this dispute?
   - From whom do you receive advice—content/approach?
   - How are the communications in this dispute taking place? face-to-face [where], via the media?
   - What are the key elements of this dispute?

2. What are the key elements of this dispute, from your perspective?
   - How do you perceive your organization?
   - What are your perceptions of the “other”?
   - How do you think the “other” perceives this dispute?

3. What do you think ought to happen to resolve this dispute?
   - What do you think the “other” believes ought to happen to resolve this dispute?
   - Do you believe your recommendations are reasonable? Why?
   - Do you believe the “other’s” recommendations are reasonable? Why or why not?
   - Do you believe the “other” believes your recommendations are reasonable? Why or why not?
   - Has your organization encountered any similar situation in the past?

4. What has been your approach to try to resolve this dispute?
   - How would you describe your strategy in this dispute?

5. If resolution of this dispute is your goal, what can you do now (how might you change your position) to achieve that goal?

II. About media coverage:

1. What are your impressions of the media coverage, in general and in particular?
2. How does it compare with other coverage of issues involving your organization?
3. What has been the role of the media in this dispute?
4. Do you think the media tried to understand your position?
5. Has the media’s role contributed to the way the dispute has unfolded?
6. Has location/accessibility affected media coverage at all?

For journalists:

1. What do you think the dispute between Nova Nada and J. D. Irving is about?
2. How would you describe Nova Nada’s position? (Media strategy; bargaining position; spokesperson’s role.)
3. How would you describe J. D. Irving’s position? (Media strategy; bargaining position; spokesperson’s role.)
4. How do you think the media have treated this story?
5. Do you think both points of view have been adequately/fairly addressed?
6. Do you think the media in any way became players in this dispute, to the extent that they might have been used as instruments to advance the debate?