The Role of the Media in Educational Conflicts

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The Problem

The Bureau of Municipal Research in THE NEWS MEDIA AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT expresses, better than most, the assumed relationship between the media and various social institutions and processes found in most media research.2

In spite of extensive social science research in the area of mass communication, public opinion and policy-making...the fact remains we really don't know precisely how much impact the media do have on any given decision...We do "know and can safely assume that the press both helps to formulate and reflect public opinion.3 (original emphasis)

To illustrate the role of the media, the B.M.R. reports on its extensive study of the Metropolitan Toronto teachers' strike of 1975. The B.M.R. came to the conclusion that in this educational conflict:

The press did more than just embody or mirror public sentiment. It helped to transform vague inarticulate notions about the teachers into hardened stereotypes...the press contributed positively to the anti-teacher climate of opinion.4

Starting with this same assumption that the media formulates public opinion, we began in 1976 a comparative analysis of newspapers in three towns with teachers' strikes and three towns without strikes. Our purpose was to provide data about community attitudes. When combined with a colleague's survey data on the teachers we hoped to distinguish factors in the 'quality of the working lives' of teachers which lead to conflict.5

However, in our analysis we found a pattern which did not lend itself to this assumption. Our data which covered news articles for the entire 1975-76 academic year, indicated a temporal pattern of 'media events' which are better explained by the model of 'news as purposive behaviour' presented by Molotch and Lester.6

We shall begin our paper discussing our original model, research
and results. We shall then examine these results using the Molotch and Lester model to explain our results. We shall also discuss the implications of our findings for the role of the media.

The Original Research

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MEDIA, COMMUNITY ATTITUDES AND TEACHERS' MORALE

Researchers such as Kohn have demonstrated that some of the most important elements in working lives are found in the social interactions that take place outside of the work-place. We are interested in the non-work relationships, interactions, of individuals that shape their perceptions of their work and work role (appropriate work behaviours and attitudes). In simpler words, we wish to look at the experiences outside of work that affect morale. Morale is a persons' feelings about themselves, their work, and their work activities.

When we examine the experiences, interactions, or relationships of a worker outside of work, we are in fact analyzing the community in which the worker lives. The best method for a community analysis is the classic anthropological ethnography. However, there would be insurmountable problems in using this method for this study. Therefore, we turned to an analysis of each community's newspapers as the best alternative method.

We assumed that by analyzing newspapers it would be methodically possible for us to collect identical information in an identical manner from all six communities. This would permit comparison of the six communities and analysis for specific similarities and differences.

Furthermore, it has been our experience that teachers have an extremely limited amount of physical interaction with their communities. Part of the ideology of being a teacher is that one must treat all students in an identical manner, and this can only be done if one has no personal ties with the students. Many teachers deliberately choose to live in communities outside of those in which they teach. If they do live in the communities in which they teach, they try to teach in a different neighbourhood. This avoidance is facilitated by the size, complexity and mobility of North American society. Therefore, we assumed that teachers would not have significant personal interactions within the community. Instead, they would interact indirectly through some secondary sources. The local newspaper becomes the teacher's primary interaction, through which they learn of the activities of various important members of the community and community attitudes toward them and their work.

Finally we assumed that the newspapers will present a relatively
accurate index of local behaviours and attitudes. It is currently accepted by those persons doing research on the media that local newspapers filter the material reported. This filtering is the result of decisions about what is newsworthy, therefore, what events will be 'covered' and reported. However, this bias is not negative. What happens is that the editor makes the selections in such a manner that the community's attitudes and behaviour are accurately reflected. Local media are both 'opinion-makers' and reflections of the local situation.

The import of the media lies in their production of ideas, stereotypes, and myths that are concerned and shared by the citizenry... The media do not operate in a vacuum. Newspapers, radio and television, especially when subject to the discipline of the market place, must reflect moods and attitudes evident in the country... Over time, the media do not exercise a definite power upon the ways, the rituals, the assumptions, the concerns of the public, which together with much else constitute the social reality. Does this fact make the media a flawed mirror of life? Perhaps so. Better yet, the media are a filter through which certain images of life are purified and enhanced. Media influence, then, is determined by the very ideological and institutional environment the media informs. (emphasis added) )P. Rutherford. The Making of the Canadian Media).

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**Diagram #1**

**Community Attitudes, Media, and Teachers' Morale**

*(simplified model)*

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3.
Based upon these assumptions the analysis of newspapers in each of the communities would be an ideal research method for developing data on the community activities that would affect teachers' morale thus their working lives.

MEASURING COMMUNITY ATTITUDES

Given our model of teachers' working lives and general methodological strategy we have chosen, the specific means of collecting data are relatively simple. We are interested in the topics discussed in newspaper articles about education, the individuals singled out as authors or 'sources of news', and the topics discussed by these 'significant' individuals in each of our six communities. These data can be collected by reading newspapers and making note of all the education articles.

We obtained all available copies (either original or microfilm) of the newspapers in six communities; St. Catharine's Standard, Welland Tribune, and Niagara Falls Review (All non-striking communities) and Sault Ste. Marie Star, Windsor Star and Kirkland Lake Northern Daily News (all striking communities), for the period from September 1975 through June 1976. We recorded every article concerned with elementary or secondary education, with the exception of school sports. After initial analysis the original one hundred and fourteen topics and thirty-three speakers were collapsed into the following five types of topics and six types of speakers:

**TOPICS:**

**General Education.** The majority of articles, all of which had the same common element—school social functions (plays, concerts, PTA, or school gossip columns written by a student).

**Educational Themes.** The largest collapse in terms of the number of classes grouped together. All concerned the function and operation of schools; the purpose (intellectual, occupational, social) or quality, resources (buildings, equipment), or the cost of education.

**Teachers.** The number, cost (salaries), quality (dedication, professionalism) and working conditions (hours, extra-curricular activities) of teachers.

**Settlements and Strike Comments.** Reports of contract settlements or commentary about the right of teachers to strike.

**Strike Activities.** Discussions of events leading to a strike (the negotiations and positions), the strike itself (pickets, lock-outs), or various outside actions (ERC investigations, legislation).
SPEAKERS:

Reporters. Any passage attributed to a named reporter or columnist, wire service, or not directly attributed to some other persons were assumed to be the products of 'reporters'.

Public. Members of the community (students, parents, letters to the editor, individuals from the community when identified). As the purpose of editorials is to influence public opinion, editorials were included.

Outsiders. All involved non-community members. (ERC, AIB, Professors, Judges, Provincial and Federal Ministers and Legislators).

Trustees. The chairman of the board, trustees, and persons directly employed by trustees, (lawyers and negotiators).

Administrators. The director of education, all board administration personnel (superintendents, consultants, principals).

Teachers. All local teachers including their representatives (local and provincial OSSTF officials and lawyers).

Within one article it was possible for more than one person to be quoted and for more than one topic to be discussed. Each time a topic or person changed a new record was made. The result was 8,499 different records noting topic, speaker, total inches of type, locale, pictures, page, date and paper, and a short summary.

The analysis of the data was relatively simple. We wished to generate comparative profiles of the topics and speakers in the communities. As our data included all articles and speakers, differences were real, not estimates, and inferential statistics were not needed. We constructed a series of tables comparing the topic, person and person/topic profiles (numbers and percentages) for each community. We also compared, both within and between communities, profiles for each month of the school year and for story locale (local, non-local).

A large number of tables were generated and examined. Only summary tables are presented. However, all patterns reported were found in the profiles of individual communities as well as in local and non-local articles before they were accepted and reported.

Further, there is no reason to believe that there is any significant bias caused by an uneven distribution of articles. Only 4870 of our 8499 articles (57.3%) were from newspapers in the three communities with strikes. Also, the distribution (percentage) of articles from each community's newspaper closely resembled the distribution of the population in the six communities.
EDUCATION AS PORTRAYED BY THE MEDIA

The results of our systematic examination indicates that there are two pictures of education presented in the media.

In communities with strikes, the media present an image of an educational system fraught with strife, a 'high profile', 'touchy' concern over which there is continual disagreement. Articles frequently concern educational themes, (money, quality) or strike activities (negotiations, plans, etc.). Furthermore the news sources are frequently board members or teachers, and the material cited is often in conflict, the teachers saying one thing and the board another.

In communities without strikes the media present an image of a bland educational system, with little discussion of substantive issues and no disagreements. Schools are presented as happy, quiet, places, and there appears to be either little community concern or complete acceptance of the educational system. Articles most frequently concern the social aspect of education, a school play or social activities, the PTA, or a quick review of a school board meeting. The articles are written by reporters or use the public as sources (e.g. the president of the PTA). Board members and teachers are infrequently cited and always in agreement on issues. When there is an article discussing a significant educational issue (e.g. the budget) the material is presented as information, not as a disagreement.

NEWSPAPER TOPICS

The first result of our examination is shown in Table 1; the local news topics covered in strike, and non-strike newspapers, broken down by annual total and month-by-month.

The totals are the first indication that there is, indeed, a difference in the media's presentation of education in a strike and non-strike communities. Newspapers in non-strike communities devote three times more coverage to general education articles than strike newspapers. The strike newspapers make up by presenting two and a half times as many articles on negotiation and strike activities.

On the surface this difference may seem foolish. It could be expected that newspapers in communities where there is a strike would devote space to the strike. Using the month-by-month breakdown section of this table, which is based on only those articles from the local area, we can examine these differences more closely.

The first thing that will be noticed is that the pattern found in the overall percentages is generally repeated month-by-month. This is interesting as the strike and major negotiation activities took place in the late Fall and Winter not in the early Fall or late Spring.

Further testing, not reported here, indicated that the pattern held in month-by-month examinations of individual papers as well as
examinations of patterns in non-local news. This pattern appears to be both strong, pervasive and independent of the mere occurrence time of a strike. There is more to the pattern than simply reporting local occurrences.

Of further interest is the pattern that appears in 'educational themes'. In the strike communities articles about these themes appear in the Fall and Spring. In the non-strike communities these appear in the Winter and Spring, during the period when annual school budgets, enrollments, and personnel changes are made public.

Examination of the article summaries indicated that the articles

**Table #1**

**TOPICS COVERED IN NEWSPAPER ARTICLES**

(Local news only; Total and Month-by-month)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. GENERAL EDUCATION</th>
<th>II. EDUCATIONAL THEMES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
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<th>III. TEACHERS</th>
<th>IV. SETTLEMENTS</th>
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<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
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<th>V. STRIKE ACTIVITIES</th>
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*percentage - percentage of all mentions that year/month.
from strike communities were primarily attacking or defending education. In the non-strike communities the articles were more likely to be discussions and explanations. Coincidental to this is a slight rise in articles defending and criticising teachers in the Fall and Spring in the strike communities. As indicated earlier this pattern held up when the topics were examined town by town, and articles from non-local sources were examined.

The general conclusion drawn from an examination of these month-by-month breakdowns is that education is 'high profile' in the strike communities. Year-round, strike communities appear to be interested in educational themes, negotiations and strikes, or teachers; topics that generate controversy and concern. Articles on education in non-strike communities tend to 'play down' the potential for criticism. An excellent example is found in two 1979 articles reporting the settlement of the Peel teachers strike. A Toronto (strike) paper stresses the conflict in a front page article filled with quotes from negotiators. The St. Catherines (non-strike) paper briefly describes the particulars of the settlement in a short side bar next to a supermarket ad.

SIGNIFICANT COMMUNITY PERSONS

Aside from an image, the media also indicate the 'significant' persons in education by citing certain individuals more frequently than others. These significant individuals add an important dimension to the portrayal of local education by indicating the individuals who are 'responsible' for education and 'qualified' to speak about education. Significant persons are portrayed as having some control over the situation, people who 'matter'.

A quick glance at table 2 will indicate that the 'significant' persons in education differ in strike and non-strike communities. It is readily apparent from the table that in non-strike communities two-thirds of the individuals responsible for (the source of) 'news' about education are either individual newspaper reporters or the local public, people not directly connected with schools.

The significant persons in strike communities are clearly the school board and teachers. When combined with the members of the administration these 'education' officials account for over one-third of all the news (source) an amount almost equal to the newspaper's reporters and three times more than the individual members of the community.

As was the case with media topics, in the month-by-month analysis only, local articles were used as it is more likely that the matter taken from a news-wire (non-local story) would be written by unspecified reporters, whereas, local stories are more likely to feature named individuals from the community.
Given the month-by-month pattern it is difficult not to conclude that in non-strike communities education is a community matter, while in strike communities education has become a matter for the professionals (teachers) and those with specific legal responsibilities (the board).

Throughout the year it will be noted that in non-strike communities there is a larger amount of material from the public (category two) while category one (reporters) is almost identical to strike communities. The pattern for strike communities shows a

<table>
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<th>TABLE #2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PERSONS CITED IN NEWSPAPER ARTICLES</td>
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<td>(Local news only, Total and Month-by-month)</td>
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</tbody>
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1. REPORTERS

2. PUBLIC

3. OUTSIDERS

4. TRUSTEES

5. ADMINISTRATORS

6. TEACHERS

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**non-striking**

**striking**
significantly higher incidence of educators providing the news in every month of the school year. This increase in the presence of the public in non-strike situations and the maintenance of the dominance of 'educators' in strike communities heightens the distinctions between the apparent 'significant' persons and the locus of responsibility in the two types of communities. The stability of the pattern throughout the year is clear evidence that these data are not being biased by the presence of a strike during the Winter. Looking at the two articles on the Peel settlement noted above illustrates this difference. The strike Toronto paper quotes a teacher spokesman and two teacher negotiators. The non-strike St. Catherines paper quotes a parent and talks about parent feelings.

COMBINED PATTERN

There are, at this point two very interesting patterns existing in these data; strike communities stress topics that are more controversial and the significant news sources are members of the educational institutions, not the community. In examining the situation we found in table 2, an interesting shift is found in conflict community speakers. In the Fall and Spring there is a large percentage of material attributed to board members and administrators. The increase of teacher material in the Winter seemed to us to imply that the teachers respond to this 'news' from the members of the board and administration'. When combined with the topic pattern we felt that his could be interpreted as the occurrence of an ongoing dispute over education taking place in the media with striking boards and administrations discussing educational themes (the quality, expense or purpose of education) and teachers (salaries, working conditions) in the Fall and Spring and teachers responding to these 'attacks', prior to and after strike situations.

To test the presence of this pattern we began to develop a rather involved form of graphic cluster analysis similar to a scattergram (usually a two-dimensional graph showing a linear pattern or relationship between two variables). We took each newspaper, month-by-month, and computed the percentage of the articles in each topic attributed to each class of speaker. This resulted in a complex four dimensional graph; six topics and five groups resulted in thirty categories for six papers over ten months. We found that one of the following five distinct clusters of topics and speakers appeared each month in each paper:

(1) Reporters discussing general education topics.
(2) Reporters discussing educational themes combined with the public and outsiders discussing general education and educational themes.
(3) Board members, administrators and teachers discussing general
educational topics and education themes.

(4) Reporters, the public, and outsiders discussing teachers, settlements, and strikes.

(5) Board members, administration and teachers discussing teachers, settlements, and strikes.

We assigned a numeric code to each of these clusters and asked the computer to assign a one whenever a reporter discussed general education; a two if a reporter discussed educational themes or a member of the public discussed a general or theme topic, and so on. This reduced the thirty categories to five. By combining the communities into strike and non-strike table 3 was computed.

**TABLE 3**
PERSONS CITED BY TOPIC IN NEWSPAPER ARTICLES
(local news only; Total and Month-by-month)

1. REPORTERS/TOPIC #1

2. REPORTERS/TOPIC #2
PUBLIC/TOPICS #1,2

3. TRUSTEES, ADMINISTRATORS & TEACHERS/TOPICS #1,2

4. REPORTERS, PUBLIC/TOPICS #3,4,5

5. TRUSTEES, ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS/TOPICS #3,4,5
The pattern found in this table supports our initial interpretation. It will be noted immediately that non-strike communities dominate categories one and two, the low-level topic/person combinations. Strike communities dominate those categories where the board, administration and teachers make statements about educational and strike topics. The academic year begins with media statements about educational themes as well as strike and negotiation topics by the board and teachers (categories three and five). Notice the public and reporters lag behind the board and teachers in discussing strike and negotiation topics (category four). It should also be noted that in June the situation appears to be beginning again. The board and teachers are still making statements regarding settlements and strikes and negotiations in the media.

Conclusion

THREE MEDIA MODELS

Two models have dominated media research since the 1950's. The first is the "hypodermic needle" model. In this model the media are seen as "directly inject(ing) the public with attitudes which subsequently affect their behaviour". This is the model noted in the introduction as guiding the researchers of the Bureau of Municipal Research.15

The second model grew out of the attempt by researchers to validate the hypodermic needle model. This proved to be impossible and researchers concluded that what minimal effects the media have are determined by social conditions. This led to the "agenda setting" model, which holds that media create an awareness of issues in the public which permeate the issue to later become a significant factor in the public's attitudes if conditions permit.16

Recently a third model was proposed by Molotch and Lester. In their model, Molotch and Lester portray the media "as reflecting not a world out there, but the practices of those having the power to determine the experiences of others". News is an intentionally promoted happening and the best "approach to mass media is to look not for reality, but for purposes which underlie the strategies of creating one reality instead of another". News is seen as the product of individuals who "produce" (provide information) "assemble" (write and print) and "consume" (read) which can be understood only if all of these factors and their interactions are examined. Molotch and Lester establish a paradigm for classifying events based upon whether or not the event was intentional or accidental or promoted by the effector or the informer (media). The result is four types of events; "routine", "serendipity", "scandal", and "accidental".19
EXPLAINING OUR RESULTS

From a cursory examination of the results of Table 1, "Topics", it would appear that the media were presenting specific information about schools and that the nature of the information differed in communities with strikes. These data are consistent with either the hypodermic needle or agenda setting models.

However, the data in tables 2 and 3 indicate that there is a distinct pattern of 'producers' associated with news topics and times of the year. This is particularly clear in table 3 where the domination of categories one and two by the non-strike media and categories four and five by the strike media is very apparent.

These data do not lend themselves to an interpretation of the media as either attempting to manipulate public opinion or creating an awareness. What is strongly implied by this pattern is that the media are part of a complex social process related to the interaction between teachers and trustees.

It would appear as if the media in strike communities are reflecting the situation found in the educational system. The temporal data indicates that first members of the board of trustees and the administration begin to make statements about educational issues. Teachers then respond. It is only after there have been several months of statements, when open conflict develops, that the public begins to make statements or show signs of concern about the issues raised by the boards and teachers. Furthermore this polarization between the board and the teachers, as reflected in the media, continues year-round and appears to indicate the presence of a long-term hostile atmosphere in education occasionally building up to a strike.

This pattern can not be explained by either the hypodermic needle or agenda models. Both models are based upon the assumption that the media are directing messages to the public. Our data indicate that neither the public nor the media personnel, reporters, are significant in these patterns. Furthermore, the temporal lag between the board and teachers implies a response by teachers not an attempt by the media to influence community attitudes or levels of consciousness. Finally, the difference in the topics reported by educational and non-educational sources would argue against any assumption that the media are attempting to influence attitudes and/or consciousness.

This pattern in strike communities is supported by the opposite in non-strike communities. Where there is no polarization between the boards and teachers, there appears to be no real 'news', only the presentation of various 'social notes'. During the period of budget discussion, there is an increase in statements by the board, administration and teachers. But, as we noted, this is almost always explanatory in nature. Rarely in non-strike communities are there any controversial statements as exemplified by the Peel settlement arti-
The absence of issues or discussion precludes any explanatory model that seeks to imply that the media are influencing attitudes either directly or through raising levels of consciousness.

We can only conclude from these data that the educational news found in the media is ‘produced’. In the strike communities the board members and teachers provide material in the form of statements with heavy issue content. In non-strike communities, with no ‘sources’ in the board, administration and teachers, the media must fall back on what is ‘given’; material about social events or ‘interesting’ material from the wire services. Our data is explainable only if the media are seen as printing material that has been ‘produced’ for them, tools being used by members of the educational system.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA

The influence of the media, according to the Molotch and Lester model is determined by the consumers. We can assume three sets of consumers for the media’s coverage of education; teachers, the administration and trustees, and the public. As our study was concerned with the quality of teacher’s working lives we shall concern ourselves only with the influence of the media on teachers.

Our study made a basic assumption about teachers as consumers of media; due to limited interaction with the community teachers would use the media as a means of vicarious interaction through which to learn of the community’s attitudes toward education and teachers. Nothing in our data would indicate that this assumption is incorrect.

Given this we would have to infer that the primary influence of the media upon teachers in a strike situation is to create a feedback loop. The media are, according to our data, reflecting a polarization within the education system. If this image is subsequently used by the teachers, mistakenly interpreted as media or public attitudes, the net effect should be to intensify the perception of a negative situation and lessen teacher’s self concept and morale.

As shown in Diagram two, “The Media and the Teachers’ Working Lives”, the media become a channel for reflecting teachers, administrator and trustee’s behaviours, already perceived through interaction, thus doubling the negative input.

The situation would not materially differ for teachers in a non-strike situation where again the media would reflect the behaviours of teachers, administrators and trustees as given to the media. The overall impact however would be to double calming inputs, intensify the feeling that nothing bad was happening and everyone was happy.

The influence of the media on teachers inferred from our work is that of a mirror reflecting the situation within the institution, a feedback, intensifying to perception of the situation, regardless of whether the situation is hostile or not.
The most damaging critique of this inference would be that the teachers ignored or were unaware of the material presented in the media. A second damaging critique would be that although aware of the material in the media the teachers were not concerned. Every major study of teachers and the media as well as the actions of teacher's
organizations refutes these two potential critiques. The Ontario Federation of Teachers reports consistently in its journal, UPDATE, of their efforts to counteract negative media portrayals and to increase the amount of 'teacher' news in the media. The Bureau of Municipal Research corroborates this awareness and concern.

If the long-term consequences of the strike are as negative as predicted and if teacher discontent and alienation has been caused in large part by perceived public and media hostility, then we suggest that the role played by the local media in the event is of more than academic interest.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

A number of researchers studying the role of media in various situations have questioned the validity and reliability of the media's coverage of events. Many blame the media, others such as Hull in his study of the media's relationship with regional government for the Archer Commission, go one step further finding that the institutions share the blame and should develop more effective methods of communicating with the media.

The media do definitely fulfill the gatekeeper role and in so doing provide a filter to the news concerning the governance of the Region. Certainly not all the news available gets through the gates.

But, first and foremost, it (Regional Government) should make a concerted effort to improve its public relations efforts the appointment of a Communications Coordinator would seem to be in order.

Hull further states that in his opinion this would affect the Regional Government as well as the public thus acknowledging that the media are involved in a complex process of production and consumption.

Our study adds empirical data to such conclusions and strengthens the implication that the media must be examined not as an institution which has the responsibility for creating the news but as a part of a complicated process which involves those whom the news is about and those reading the news. Furthermore the impact of the media must be examined from the point of view of the consumers of which the 'general public' represents only one set. A far more significant impact of the media may be on the institution which is the subject of the news.

It appears that at least in the case of education that the institution itself is responsible for the media coverage, and the most significant impact is on the members of the institution, intensifying the existing situation. In this one situation, at least, we may be falsely accusing the
media of creating an image when they are merely printing what they are told, and the impact on the public may not be as significant as the impact on other consumers. More research into the reporting of local political news and 'controversial' subjects and institutions is needed. However, our results imply strongly that current popular perceptions of the media as producers of news whose impact is on the public are incorrect. The media as is with case with all social institutions are part of the complex network of interrelationships and news must be studied as a process in both its creation and consumption.

Footnotes

1. The research was supported through a Brock University Dean's Research Grant. We are grateful for assistance of the late M.I. Berkowitz, N. Yarmoschuk, W.H.N. Hull, and W.A. Matheson.


3. Ibid. p. 45.

4. Ibid. p. 48.

5. N. Yarmoshuck, Brock University School of Administrative Studies. A volume Waging Peace, uniting the two projects is currently in progress.


8. For more detailed discussion of the use of content analysis in Sociology, the reader is directed toward: Holsti, Ole R., Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities; Addison-Wesley, Reading, Mass., 1969.


11. (see text page 5).


13. Ibid.

18. Ibid., p. 111
19. Ibid., p. 111
23. Op. Cit., p. 31
25. Ibid., p. 54

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