



MEDIA & COMMUNICATION STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

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No conflict, no coverage: Media misses repeal of nuclear energy moratorium

Keith Joseph Zukas^{1*}

Abstract: Conflict is a core news value taught in journalism courses across the world because it allows disparate viewpoints and stakeholders to make claims about societal issues in the public sphere. But what happens to societal vetting of an issue like nuclear energy if there is no news coverage of opposition? This article investigates such a case study in the 2016 repeal of a nuclear power plant ban for the state of Wisconsin in the United States. Interviews with political and nuclear industry public relations reveal a concerted effort to frame the lifting of the moratorium as progress for the state's future. Journalists explain they believed it was a non-issue and only reported the passage of the bill as a political process. A content analysis of newspaper articles shows that indeed strategic communicators monopolized the sources and framing of the stories supporting Shoemaker and Reese's theory of power influences on journalists.

Subjects: Environmental Policy; Environmental Politics; Mass Communication; Political Communication; Environmental Communication; Media Management; Newswriting and Reporting; Journalism; Newspapers

Keywords: framing; gatekeeping; indexing; news; conflict; nuclear energy; environmental communication; strategic communication; political communication

1. Introduction

The most common types of stories reported in contemporary news media are about event-based and conflict-oriented issues. This type of reporting is also the most commonly scrutinized for

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The research agenda of Dr Keith Zukas has developed a unique area of study combining both journalism and strategic communication theory in the analysis of framing devices used to communicate about energy and environmental issues through the news industry. This research compares energy issues in strategic communications with informative news stories. It investigates how agendas are formed in different mediums and how energy issues are framed due to strategic influences and journalistic choices in the construction of stories. There are several avenues for future research in related journalism theories, and in the subject of energy and the environment. The current project exemplifies the important role of the news industry in vetting societal issues such as energy and the environment in the public sphere.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Conflict is a core news component of journalism known across the world because it allows disparate viewpoints and stakeholders to make claims about societal issues in the public sphere. But what happens to societal vetting of an issue like nuclear energy if there is no news coverage of opposition?

This article investigates such a case study in the 2016 repeal of a nuclear power plant ban for the state of Wisconsin in the United States. Interviews with political and nuclear industry public relations reveal a concerted effort to frame the lifting of the moratorium as progress for the state's future. Journalists explain they believed it was a non-issue and only reported the passage of the bill as a political process. A content analysis of newspaper articles shows that indeed strategic communicators monopolized the sources and framing of the stories supporting the theory of power influences on journalists.

simplistic, stenographic coverage (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Event-based coverage is typically monopolized by the actor creating the event, especially if there is no prominent opposition responding in real time. Otherwise the story may be presented in a conflict frame, but those are also criticized for presenting merely two-sided coverage in a staged winner-takes-all battle for dramatic effect (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

Despite their shortcomings, these two story types do provide audiences with a structure for understanding the most basic and integral information about a societal issue. They embody the news industry values of timeliness and relevance. A conflict frame represents democracy as the most basic unit for comparison in the marketplace of ideas. Furthermore, these simple frames can be especially useful tools for making complex science issues such as nuclear energy salient for mass audiences. The choice of a journalist to write a story using a conflict frame could open up a floodgate of perspectives on an issue to audiences.

This case study examines the sociological role of the journalist as a gatekeeper and a framer of information in newspaper coverage of the repeal of a ban on new nuclear power plant construction in the state of Wisconsin in the United States. In particular, strategic communications from stakeholders are analyzed to explain effects on journalistic choices in newspaper article construction, which reveal that Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) theory of influence over the press continues today into the twenty-first Century.

1.1. The changing professional roles of journalists

The citizen-focused watchdog role of the press is an integral part of news organizations like the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism, but today in-depth stories require vast resources and are out of reach for many publications (A. Hall, personal communication, November 20, 2011). If news media aren't actively seeking out stories, they are often missed.

"We really don't reach out to the media or ask for an interview unless its mutually beneficial for us," said Rob Kovak, Policy Advisor for Wisconsin Senator Frank Lasee (R). "We'll send out a generic press release when something passes a committee."

More than a watchdog for truth, ethical issues of the press have become more predominant in affecting news coverage such as journalistic integrity through objectivity and credibility. The emphasis on these ethics directly affect journalists' choices in source selection for news stories. For journalists, citing sources who hold official titles or degrees lends credibility to a news story and solidifies the journalist as a responsible disseminator of information to the public (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). Attributing information to these sources also maintains the journalists' objective view when composing a story because they take on a larger role of messenger rather than producer.

"Our utilities reporter Judy Newman and state government reporter Matthew Defour picked up on the efforts pushing the bill through the legislature," said *Wisconsin State Journal* City Editor Phil Brinkman. "Our leg reporters were aware of the bill to repeal the nuclear moratorium too, but it just didn't seem like an active issue."

This routine professional decision-making process of obtaining information from those with official titles or expert knowledge has been termed "indexing" by communication scholars, such as in Bennett (1990) seminal article *Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States*. Bennett describes in his analysis that news is indexed according to the information provided by government officials, which limits the scope and details of the news story.

It is unclear exactly why traditional media have tendencies to index sources and follow political news cycles—whether due to a political information monopoly, an organizational relationship between the press and government, or professional routines of seeking representatives of the people

(Bennett, 1990). According to Altschull (1995), mass media are agents of the politically and economically powerful and media content always reflects the interests of those who control and finance the press. Ownership is considered the primary means through which the ruling class exerts control over media institutions (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

As an institution, the press plays an important role in the political and economic well-being of communities and society. Under certain circumstances there is pressure from those in power to cover issues from favorable perspectives (Altschull, 1995). Journalists, however, are also responsible for citing government and industry due to their established routines of seeking out newsmakers.

1.1.1. Organizational factors

How news organizations adapted to the twenty-first Century is key to understanding its trajectory. Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2009) emphasize that journalism is caught in a “tension between tradition and change” (p. 564). News organizations did not openly adopt the internet, but rather colonized it as a reaction to fears of competitors. This preserved their own territory in a time of diminishing returns on print news readership (Cohen, 2002).

Content coverage in journalism is thus divided between these two extremes of traditional and online journalism (Benson, 2004). Online news organizations have more competition from various types of providers in the information business and struggle for the latest updates to collect page views and advertisement click-throughs (Picone, 2007). This has increased market pressures on news organizations, highlighting the struggle to reconcile commercial profit interests with quality news production goals (Hamilton, 2003).

The change from gatekeeper to gatewatcher is a quintessential example of how professional norms are affected by digital media: “the inroads it [the internet] has made into newsrooms and the desktops of journalists working for all media types in terms of computer-assisted reporting (CAR); and how it has created its own professional type of news work called online journalism (Deuze, 2003).”

Online news production makes an already labor intensive product even harder for journalists. The pressure of a 24 h online news cycle with multimedia components has intensified the need for journalistic scrutiny in news organizations (Shirky, 2008). While strategic communicators barrage editors and reporters with information, it becomes too easy for strategic content to pass by gatekeepers and find audiences under the guise of informative communication.

For nuclear energy, crisis communication to mitigate negative reactions to the meltdowns and explosions in Fukushima, Japan were likely perceived by journalists and audiences alike as informative rather than strategic communication.

We did a lot of crisis communication after the Fukushima, Japan accident. We could provide technical expertise to the media to help people understand how this particular type of reactor works and provide insight into what systems were compromised. Even as the event was unfolding we were on the phone 20 hours out of 24 each day for a week. People were so concerned, wanting information about what was happening, how bad it was, would it reach the US. Saying that we should shut down all plants now. It was very emotional. It was crisis communication- definitely. We were just trying to provide what information we had. (Prema Chandrathil, public affairs officer for the Wisconsin region of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, personal communication, March, 14, 2017)

1.1.2. Source credibility

Source credibility is an increasingly important issue in today’s cluttered media environment. Studies show that Americans continually report lower levels of trust and perceived credibility in journalists on national surveys (Pew Research Center, 2004a). Additionally, various cues can contribute to credibility assessments without rational consideration. For example, the use of an official title for a

source can increase the perception of experience or trustworthiness. This means that not only the sources themselves, but also the additional stylistic choices made by journalists contribute to the perception of credibility.

“We were following the issue through the legislature and the *State Journal*,” said *La Crosse Tribune* Local News Editor Marc Wehrs (personal communication, April, 15, 2017). “We’ve done a good deal of reporting on the decommissioning of the Dairyland nuclear facility down in Genoa, but have not had a specific staffer on the legislative process dealing with the moratorium, though the topic has come up plenty often on the opinion page.”

For media professionals, this shows potential for shared credibility between sources, journalists and news organizations (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003).

1.2. Issue framing

Conflict frames can be widely employed for societal issues and are listed among Semetko and Valkenburg’s (2000) five generic frames of conflict, human interest, morality, responsibility, and economic consequences. A conflict frame is concerned with the winning or losing on an issue, which is typically employed by a journalist to gain audience interest. This frame emphasizes the disagreement and problem between two parties, whether they be individuals, groups or institutions (Hertog & McLeod, 2008). Research has shown that discussions over issues between political elites “often reduce complex substantive political debate to overly simplistic conflict” (Patterson, 2000).

Generic frames can also be tailored to a specific issue, and can be found in political news often for the strategic purpose of presenting an issue in a certain way to be received by an audience. One example found in Gamson and Modigliani (1989) study of media coverage of nuclear power is the progress frame, which posits the potential economic and technological achievements through advanced nuclear energy operations.

Thus, a conflict frame can be employed in a political setting of Democrats versus Republicans or tailored to other societal issues such as the nuclear energy industry versus environmental advocacy organizations.

1.3. Wisconsin Act 344

Major issues develop clear proponents and opponents over time such as in the case of nuclear energy. Due to past meltdowns at Chernobyl, Three Mile Island, and Fukushima, opponents coalesced in groups such as the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Sierra Club. Additionally, after the Three Mile Island explosion in 1979 a group of 13 states banded together creating moratoriums against building new nuclear power plants.

In the state of Wisconsin, voters passed a referendum in 1983 banning new construction without increased federal oversight and any financial burden from being passed on to utility ratepayers (McNally, 2016). Wisconsin has three nuclear generating stations in the state, however, only the Point Beach facility is operational. The moratorium against new construction received vast news coverage around the state at that time and was celebrated by citizens of various political ideology (McNally, 2016).

However, 33 years later and just five years after the Fukushima, Japan meltdown, the moratorium was lifted with minimal media attention. The issue was driven by political events as it was introduced in the Wisconsin State Senate on 6 October 2015 and in the Assembly on 8 October 2015. It passed the Legislature by Republican majorities before being signed by Governor Scott Walker (R) on 1 April 2016. Environmental and consumer groups condemned the bill, however, they received little media coverage outside their own strategic efforts. Clean Wisconsin listed the issue in its annual “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly” report as the ugliest bill of the year (Katie Nikola, General Counsel for Clean Wisconsin, Personal Communication, May 15, 2017).

I think the repeal passed when it hadn't previously, because of a combination of the makeup of the legislature this time around and the lack of organized opposition. Proponents of nuclear power did pause after Fukushima for a couple of years before they renewed their efforts at repeal. But the American news media has done such a terrible job of covering the ongoing crisis in Japan that I think most Americans think that crisis is over now, so it no longer affects their opinion about nuclear safety very much. And the nuclear power industry did a good job of minimizing what happened in Japan and assuring the public that it "couldn't happen here." The industry messaging around the Wisconsin repeal bill was misleading, as well; the law had only imposed sensible conditions on the construction of new reactors, it didn't prohibit their construction if they were regulated sufficiently. Nuke proponents were saying they "couldn't even talk about nuclear power". (Katie Nikola, General Counsel for Clean Wisconsin, personal communication, May 15, 2017)

1.4. The research hypotheses

For this study, content, sources and frames in the news stories were expected to reflect Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) theory of influence on mass media content due to professional routines, organizational structures and the need for source credibility. Newspaper coverage was predicted to reflect government events, followed by energy industry strategic communications, public opinion and least of all environmental frames used by advocacy organizations.

Formatting of the news articles in newspapers following the development of this issue were likely to reflect the organizational and professional changes that have affected the news industry in the twenty-first Century. Increased influences from strategic communicators facilitated through digital technology in the context of shrinking news staff means more press dependency on information subsidies provided by the Associated Press and issue stakeholders. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: Before the nuclear energy moratorium is lifted newspapers will contain the most wire service stories.

H1b: Before the nuclear energy moratorium is lifted newspapers will contain more press releases than original stories.

H1c: After the nuclear energy moratorium is lifted newspapers will contain the most original stories.

Regarding content within the newspaper articles, these were expected to reflect genres of news that are conducive to that content supplied by those with the most influence on the press. Political events that occurred would drive hard news and stakeholders would vet the issue in opinion and editorial stories before the act was passed. After the act's passing, however, a lack of events driving hard news should have relegated the issue into the opinion/editorial section. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: Before the nuclear energy moratorium is lifted newspapers will contain the most hard news stories.

H2b: Before the nuclear energy moratorium is lifted newspapers will contain more opinion/editorial stories than soft news stories.

H2c: After the nuclear energy moratorium is lifted newspapers will contain the most opinion/editorial stories.

Sources in nuclear energy articles were expected to align with Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) theory of influence, showing that before the act was passed that a majority of sources would be politicians, followed by energy industry sources. Even after the act's passage, citizen sources were expected to outnumber environmental advocacy organizations. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: Before the nuclear energy moratorium is lifted newspapers will contain the most political sources.

H3b: Before the nuclear energy moratorium is lifted newspapers will contain more energy industry sources than environmental organization sources.

H3c: After the nuclear energy moratorium is lifted newspapers will contain the most citizens sources.

Sources should be featured in content that aligns with the news genre for which journalists index credible information (Bennett et al., 2004). Hard news should be predominated by politicians explaining political events while soft news stories should feature more environmental advocacy sources. Citizens without any expertise will be featured most often in the opinion/editorial section, resulting in the following hypotheses:

H4a: Hard news stories will contain the most political sources.

H4b: Soft news stories will contain more energy industry than environmental sources.

H4c: Opinion/Editorial stories will contain the most citizen sources.

Finally, the theory of influence should cause journalists to construct story frames about the lifting of the nuclear energy moratorium that reflect the levels of power in society. Front page, hard news stories would be populated with political frames. Less hard-hitting news stories would be presented in environmental frames, and opinion/editorial stories would be framed in conflict, resulting in the following hypotheses:

H5a: Hard news stories will contain the most political frames.

H5b: Soft news stories will contain more progress frames than environmental frames.

H5c: Opinion/Editorial stories will contain the most conflict frames.

2. Methods

Literature review and preliminary analyses of media coverage began this case study of energy communication in Wisconsin. Interviews with government officials and media professionals subsequently guided the design and structure of the newspaper textual and content analysis.

2.1. Operationalization

The sampling timeframe for this case study extends from 1 January–1 July 2016, which is three months before and after the passage of Wisconsin Act 344 on April 1, which lifted the moratorium on nuclear power plant construction. The Archive of Wisconsin Newspapers was used to survey the media landscape with the search term “nuclear energy” to cull articles from 251 newspapers across the state including dailies such as the *Wisconsin State Journal*, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and the *La Crosse Tribune*. Smaller weekly and bi-weekly newspapers were also included in the sample such as the *Tomah Journal and Monitor-Herald*, resulting in a mix of community and regional journalism for a total population of 451 stories.

2.2. Content and textual analysis

Two methods were used to review the contents: traditional quantitative content analysis and a qualitative method of frame analysis. Holsti (1969) offers a broad definition of content analysis, which is the “characterization” of any form of message such as text or actions. To perform a content analysis,

the researcher must qualitatively survey a substantial amount of text at a specified unit of analysis, such as the story in this study, so that relationships can be quantified into statistical outcomes. This technique lends itself to a sociological approach for the conceptual definition of a frame because different samples express a frame through myriad identifiable markers.

For this study frames are operationalized through a constructionist approach conceived as a sociocognitive process involving sources, journalists, and the audience. This approach focuses on the structures of news that can guide the researcher to identify specific types of news formats, which indicate different types of content and frames (Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

“Frames are *organizing principles* that are socially *shared* and *persistent* over time, that work *symbolically* to meaningfully *structure* the social world” (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2008). Frames organize our understanding of the social world through a core set of concepts that determine meaning.

Gamson and Modigliani (1989) stress the importance of identifying the central organizing idea of a frame, surrounded by less-related concepts to create media packages. These include cultural symbols, pictures, catch-phrases, and specific events, which have widespread meaning to individuals in society and are often persistent over time. Conflict is typically an important basic feature of a frame, which can be identified by the choice of actors in news discourse, which present different positions and ideas.

Different uses of vocabulary can also serve as reliable indicators of a frame. Finding repetitive loaded language used by a certain position on an issue can induce a frame in a text. For example, since the 1980’s the state of the earth’s changing environment has been termed “greenhouse effect,” “global warming,” and “climate change.” Each phrase signals a different response by the audience to the issue of environmental change.

Operationally, previous studies by Griffin and Dunwoody (1997), and Gamson and Modigliani (1989) guided the procedure for this content analysis. Griffin and Dunwoody (1997) used coders to examine the use of science and government frames in an environmental issue by reading the headline and first three paragraphs of the story. A government frame was considered present if the item referenced the government, the political system, politicians or public employees (Appendix A Figure 1). A science frame was considered present if the scientific community, scientists, experts or research were referenced (Appendix A Figure 2). Business frames were indicated if businesses, industry actors or financial systems were present.

Also repurposed for this study are issue-specific frames for energy issues. Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) study of nuclear power news coverage provided issue-specific frame definitions in a media package that incorporated more cultural markers that were specific to energy and environmental issues. For these studies and the present analysis, more than one frame can be present in a unit of analysis.

Following these steps, this study identified broad generic frames such as conflict, human interest, morality, and economic frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). With frame definitions, issue-specific frames related to politics, industry and environmental advocacy organizations were also identified. By identifying key actors, concepts, narrative structures, vocabulary choices, and audience roles, the researcher modeled different types of frames and hypothesized relationships among categories, frames and sources, making the appropriate methodological choices for conducting a content analysis.

Concept operationalization followed previous coding schemes deductively take from scholarly work and coded manually in a quantitative content analysis. The manual-holistic approach is essential for correct interpretation of framing devices. Coders used the most prominent focus as the classifying principle for identifying the predominant frames in each unit of analysis. Each unit of

analysis was coded for the presence of the coding category item. If present, the treatment of that topic was scored as (1) and if missing the topic was scored as (0).

Information sources used by a newspaper to explain an issue were also coded using the same items.

To ensure successful coding of the aforementioned coding scheme, each coder received training from the author concerning identification of content and frame categories, as well as application of codes. The general principle is that coders understood the presence of content, sources and frames. Differences in judgment by coders was determined by identifying unreliability due to poorly defined or vague categories, which resulted in varying interpretations of content.

Inter-coder reliability was calculated using both percentage agreement and Krippendorff's alpha, which is a chance-corrected agreement rate that is considered a more conservative statistical indicator (Krippendorff, 2004). A total of 100 units were analyzed with 25 chosen randomly from each of the data sets in story format, news genre, main source and story frame to ensure agreement in different communication formats.

Acceptable levels of agreement were achieved for the following measures: original story format (85%; $\alpha = .69$), opinion/editorial news genre (90%; $\alpha = .80$), political main source (95%; $\alpha = .90$), and political story frame (92%; $\alpha = .82$).

3. Results

Newspaper articles about the repeal of the nuclear moratorium show patterns of news coverage consistent with the theory of influence expected in such a high-stakes societal issue. Looking at the frequency of an item occurring before and after the passage of Wisconsin Act 344 illuminates the type of stories editors and journalists chose to incorporate into coverage of the issue.

The results for story format supported the hypotheses (see Table 1). Prior to the lifting of the nuclear moratorium, newspapers ran a majority of Associated Press wire service stories that followed the political process as the bills were approved in the Wisconsin Senate and Assembly. Next, over one-third of newspaper articles were actually altered versions of press releases announcing the passing of the bills, showing a clear information subsidy in the newspapers. Only after April 1, with the passage of Act 344, did the number of original stories rise to make up a majority of the news coverage. The following is an example of an AP newswire story "Assembly to Vote on Lifting Nuclear Power Moratorium, Rep: Nuclear is clean and affordable."

MADISON (AP)—The state Assembly is set to take up a bill that would lift Wisconsin's moratorium on new nuclear power plants.

Republicans who control the chamber placed the bill on Tuesday's calendar during a meeting Thursday.

Under current law, state regulators can't approve a new nuclear power plant unless a federal storage facility for waste from nuclear plants nationwide exists and the plant wouldn't burden ratepayers. No centralized federal repository exists. Nuclear plants have been storing waste on-site.

Republican Rep. Kevin Petersen's bill would erase the storage facility and ratepayer language from state law, in effect clearing the way for new plants. Petersen, R-Waupaca, has argued that nuclear is a clean, affordable option as the state works to meet new federal greenhouse gas emission rules.

Wisconsin is currently home to only one operational nuclear plant (*Beaver Dam Daily Citizen*, January 13, 2016).

Table 1. Story format, by publication date

	Before passage	After passage	Total
Original story	26.0%	36.1%	27.2%
Wire service story	38.8	33.7	37.8
Press release	35.2	30.2	34.8
N	307	144	

Notes: For original story $N = 123$, wire service $N = 166$, press release $N = 157$. The percentage (%) represents the frequency compared to the total N units of analysis. Comparisons across columns were significantly different.

These findings support the hypotheses about story format. H1a: Before the nuclear energy moratorium was lifted newspapers contained the most wire service stories (38.8% wire service; $\chi^2 = 216.09$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$). H1b: Before the nuclear energy moratorium was lifted newspapers contained more press releases than original stories (35.2% press releases, 26.0% original story; McNamer's $\chi^2 = 71.453$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$). H1c: After the nuclear moratorium was lifted newspapers contained the most original stories (36.1% original stories; $\chi^2 = 340.14$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$).

Findings for news genre of the content in the newspaper articles showed the more precise allocation of information into different categories. Before the act's passage by the Wisconsin governor, hard news stories with a public policy component made up a majority of the news articles. Opinion/editorial stories made up the next largest category where stakeholders and newspapers themselves wrote testimonials about the implications of new nuclear reactors. Opinions and editorials also increased after the repeal, showing a response to the legislation such as Senator Kathleen Vinehout's widely published editorial "Speed and Secrecy Kill Democracy."

"... People testified against removing the effective ban on nuclear power plants. Citizen after citizen who testified share their concerns about the bill and offered some version of 'I don't know what's in the bill and I don't know if you've fixed the problem,'" wrote Vinehout. "Speed and secrecy

Table 2. News genre, by publication date

	Before passage	After passage	Total
Soft news	27.1%	14.8%	23.1%
Hard news	38.9	40.0	39.9
Opinion/editorial	34.0	45.2	37.0
N	307	144	

Notes: For soft news $N = 104$, hard news $N = 180$, opinion/editorial $N = 167$. The percentage (%) represents the frequency compared to the total N units of analysis. Comparisons across columns were significantly different.

Table 3. Main source, by publication date

	Before passage	After passage	Total
Politician	57.2%	52.1%	56.1%
Energy industry	6.3	2.0	4.0
Environmental organization	3.0	7.9	2.0
Citizen	13.1	16.9	13.7
Expert	7.8	12.1	10.6
Journalist	5.7	0	5.3
None	5.9	9.9	8.3
N	307	144	

Notes: For politician $N = 253$, energy company/agency $N = 18$, environmental organization $N = 7$, citizen $N = 62$, expert $N = 48$, journalist $N = 24$, none $N = 38$. The percentage (%) represents the frequency compared to the total N units of analysis. Comparisons across columns were significantly different.

have become all too common in the Capitol. Democracy suffers. Public interest suffers” (*Jackson County Chronicle*, May 2, 2016) (Table 2).

These findings support the hypotheses regarding news genres. H2a: Before the nuclear moratorium was lifted newspapers contained the most hard news stories (38.9% hard news; $\chi^2 = 259.61$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). H2b: Before the nuclear moratorium was lifted newspapers contained more opinion/editorial stories than soft news stories (34.0% opinion/editorial, 21.7% soft news; McNamer’s $\chi^2 = 3.253$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). H2c: After the nuclear moratorium was lifted newspapers contained the most opinion/editorial stories (45.2% opinion/editorial; $\chi^2 = 237.39$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$).

Results for sources cited in newspaper articles about the repeal of the nuclear moratorium show clear signs of indexing routines among journalists. Political officials overwhelmingly made up the majority of sources cited both before and also after the passage of Act 344. Additionally, energy industry sources made up the next largest group of sources, which is consistent with the theory of influence. After the act’s passage, citizens were cited more frequently, however, politicians continued to dominate coverage of the issue. Citizen’s were expected to garner a larger percentage of the sources represented in the news content with their reactions and viewpoints.

“There is no good reason to expose Wisconsin communities and Indian tribes to the risks of radioactive contamination when there are nuclear-free and carbon-free renewable energy technologies that truly cleaner, safer, faster and cheaper,” wrote Al Gedicks. “The legislative sponsors of the repeal seem to be unaware that the moratorium was enacted to protect Wisconsin citizens from becoming the host to a permanent geologic nuclear waste repository,” (*The La Crosse Tribune*, May 12, 2016) (Table 3).

These findings support two of the three hypotheses about main sources in news stories. H3a: Before the nuclear energy moratorium was lifted newspapers contained the most political sources (52.7% politician; $\chi^2 = 194.60$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). H3b: Before the nuclear moratorium was lifted newspapers contained more energy industry sources than environmental activist sources (6.3% energy company/agency, 3.0% environmental organization; McNamer’s $\chi^2 = 86.012$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). H3c: After the nuclear moratorium was lifted newspapers did not contain the most citizen sources (16.9% citizen; $\chi^2 = 140.32$; $df = 1$; $p < .NS$). This hypothesis was not supported because politicians made up 52.1% of the main sources for the news stories.

The dominance of politicians as sources continues when looking at the genres of news in which they were cited. Politicians were expected to continue to dominate hard news stories, but were also found in a majority of opinion/editorial pieces, while the energy industry monopolized soft news feature stories promoting energy.

Table 4. Main source, by News Genre

	Soft news	Hard news	Opinion/editorial	Total
Politician	52.1%	61.1%	55.7%	56.2%
Energy industry	13.0	6.1	1.0	4.0
Environmental organization	8.9	1.0	3.6	2.0
Citizen	10.0	5.0	24.9	12.9
Expert	8.1	7.0	37.3	12.0
Journalist	3.0	6.7	6.7	5.1
None	4.9	13.1	10.2	7.8
N	104	180	167	

Notes: For politician $N = 254$, energy industry $N = 23$, environmental organization $N = 14$, citizen $N = 38$, expert $N = 54$, journalist $N = 23$, none $N = 35$. The percentage (%) represents the frequency compared to the total N units of analysis. Comparisons across columns were significantly different.

“I stand for personal freedoms, liberty, and property rights. That’s what I’ve crafted this legislation to do and why we as a legislative body are moving it forward,” said State Sen. Frank Lasee (R-De Pere) (*The Independent Register*, January 13, 2016) (Table 4).

These findings support the first two hypotheses. H4a: Hard news stories contained the most political sources (61.1% hard news; $\chi^2 = 290.65$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). H4b: Soft news contained more energy industry sources than environmental sources (13.0% energy company, 8.9% environmental organization; McNamer’s $\chi^2 = 86.012$; $df = 1$; $p = .05$). H4c: Opinion/ editorial stories did not contain the most citizen sources (24.9%; $\chi^2 = 194.60$; $df = 1$; $p = NS$). This hypothesis was not supported because politicians were the majority, making up 55.7% of the sources in opinion/editorial stories.

Not only was the theory of influence expected to delineate story types and sources, but even the way in which stories were presented through the framing of information. Here news articles were expected to contain political process frames in a majority of the hard news stories and issue-specific progress frames in soft news feature stories. Opinion/editorial stories were expected to contain conflict frames presented by opposition to the repeal, however, political frames continued to dominate even the opinion section of the newspapers.

An example of a progress frame can be found in the soft news article “Nuclear Options: Scientists join Republicans in push to diversify energy choices in Wisconsin” (*The Isthmus*, January 21, 2016) (Table 5).

The findings support hypotheses a and b. H5a: Hard news stories contained the most political frames (64.4% political frame; $\chi^2 = 140.32$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). H5b: Soft news stories contained more progress frames than environmental frames (33.4% progress frame, 12.6% environmental frame; McNamer’s $\chi^2 = 120.981$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). H5c: Opinion/ Editorial stories did not contain the most conflict frames (18.2% conflict frame; $\chi^2 = 403.65$; $df = 1$; $p = .NS$). This hypothesis was not supported because political frames dominated 40% of the stories.

5. Discussion

The job of journalism today in the twenty-first Century is arguably a very different role than that of the previous generation of reporters. With skeleton newsrooms covering increasingly complex societal issues with fewer resources in the wake of the Great Recession, it is no wonder journalists take advantage of information subsidies in government and industry public relations. But while these strategic communications help the newspaper to meet a deadline, the broader implications on society must be examined as persuasive communication increasingly permeates spheres previously reserved for purely informative purposes.

“I am a former statewide political reporter and I’ve covered a lot of energy issues. I suspect what were seeing is that the newspapers have lost some of their best reporters, and the beat reporters they do have don’t have any institutional memory about what a big issue nuclear energy was and still is,” said Director of Communication for Clean Wisconsin John Adams. “Energy and the environment is so poorly covered these days.”

Table 5. Frame, by News Genre

	Soft news	Hard news	Opinion/editorial	Total
Political frame	36.5%	64.4%	40%	39.7%
Environmental	12.6	2.8	8.4	10.4
Progress	39.4	31.1	33.4	32.2
Conflict	11.5	1.7	18.2	17.7
N	104	180	167	

Notes: For political $N = 179$, environmental $N = 47$, progress $N = 145$, conflict $N = 80$. The percentage (%) represents the frequency compared to the total N units of analysis. Comparisons across columns were significantly different.

Indeed, the findings of this case study show that not only do journalists actively participate in the indexing of credible sources, but that often the number of wire stories and press releases outnumber original material. Interestingly, more than 13% of stories did not contain even a single citation of a source for the information presented.

This doesn't mean that newsrooms necessarily can't cover important issues, but rather that editors increasingly make strategic choices about where to place resources. So while the gatekeeping role of news in general may be lessening online, for traditional media the role of gatekeeper may be becoming increasingly important.

"I think the reason we paid some attention to it is because we've been watching the decommissioning process at the Dairyland nuclear facility. So we're fairly familiar with the problem of finding homes for your casks of nuclear waste. But not every small town newspaper in the state has had that first-time look," said Local News Editor for the *La Crosse Tribune* Marc Wehrs. "Given the dynamics in Madison, that was a low priority issue for people. We're dealing with real bread and butter kinds of things. Nuclear power doesn't really register anymore and doesn't really impact. Nuclear power is too expensive and the lifting doesn't mean anything will actually be built. Really only investors and opponents would be interested in the issue."

Wehrs was not the only editor to think the issue would not be relevant to his readership.

"It got very little coverage because it was a unique situation," said City Editor of the *Wisconsin State Journal* Phil Brinkman. "There are no nuclear power plants in our area that would affect our readership so we didn't put a lot of resources into the story."

Findings in this case study show that the lack of resources invested in reporting the story resulted in a majority of news coverage framed as political process and progress for the state. This was a result of strategic communications on behalf of political and industry public relations.

"Putting Wisconsin on the same regulatory footing so that the same nuclear technology would be out there. That's the way we wanted to frame that viewpoint. Just get rid of the old regulatory information so there aren't higher regulatory hurdles," said Policy Advisor Rob Kovak for Senator Frank Lasee (R). "Fukushima was an issue, but was easy to dispel that we wouldn't have an earthquake here in Wisconsin. We used the media to excite people to come testify at public hearings. So if I can orchestrate compelling testimony from three to four persons in each hearing that is good. Hopefully the people I've worked with have coached and swayed the committee more than any of my opponents."

To combat fear of unsafe conditions in nuclear power plant facilities, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and energy companies such as Wisconsin's NextEra Energy utilized public relations materials to communicate with concerned citizens and media alike.

"We try to highlight successes of the plant. And emphasize the benefits to the community and safety to the community at the local level," said Julie Zoeck, NextEra Energy director of regulatory and legislative affairs based out of Florida. "We reiterated our safety record at the Point Beach nuclear power plant, which is currently the only operating nuclear facility in Wisconsin. We communicated our compliance with safety regulations to legislators and explained additional precautions taken after Fukushima."

These varied political and energy industry stakeholders effectively communicated messages about the political process of repealing the nuclear moratorium while mitigating safety concerns and promoting progress across the state. Altogether, 25 lobbying organizations registered in support of Act 344, spending 178 h with legislators.

Conversely, the Citizens Utility Board, Clean Wisconsin, League of Women Voters of Wisconsin, Sierra Club, and Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters lobbied against the act, spending six hours with legislators. Newspapers, however, cited these groups rarely as sources and produced few stories with an environmental frame.

6. Conclusion

Like it or not, conflict is a central tenet of journalism. While audiences may stereotype the news media as “bleeds it leads” sensationalists of controversy, conflict plays a larger role than creating drama to attract audiences like entertainment media. While critics are correct that conflict frames might set up false dichotomies in the minds of some audiences, they at least create a space for another viewpoint besides that of the actor pushing the issue.

Conflict as a value and as a news story frame is rightly criticized for its shortcomings by post-modern scholars, but that criticism is situated in a realm where conflict is acknowledged and alternate views exist. This case study posits an example where rarely was any potential ulterior option made available to audiences. The strategic framing of the political process created a context where political majorities in the legislature allowed for no opposing view in the majority of news stories about the repeal of the nuclear moratorium.

Theoretically, this case study illuminates the processes and impact of strategic communications on news professionals through Shoemaker and Reese’s (1996) theory of influence. Additionally, the influence of these powerful sectors in society shape the very construction of these stories by journalists, especially due to the continued practice of indexing sources. Such dominance of these frames thus limits the potential for alternative master narratives about major societal issues. The strategic communications by these institutions delineates the ways in which citizens of the public sphere can even think about energy and the environment.

In conclusion, more research should analyze how the press operates within political, energy and environmental limits that have been established through organizational structures and professional norms over time, influencing media content. Today in a post-bureaucratic pluralistic society a lack of advocacy voices represented in the news compared to state and industry opinion poses new questions about the diversity of views allowed in the mediated public sphere.

The news industry shake-up of the early 2000’s did not break down media conglomerates such as Lee Enterprises and rearrange the media landscape. Instead companies refocused on their bottom lines, and more tightly gatekeeping the issues they cover in the news.

In a contemporary media environment, mass communications may not be sufficient for adequately explicating environmental advocacy (Dunwoody, 2007). The news media may be unable to fill information gaps between majority governing bodies and minority advocacy groups.

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Appendix A

Figure 1. Assembly to vote on lifting nuclear power moratorium

Assembly to Vote on Lifting Nuclear Power Moratorium

Rep: Nuclear is clean and affordable

MADISON (AP)—The state Assembly is set to take up a bill that would lift Wisconsin’s moratorium on new nuclear power plants.

Republicans who control the chamber placed the bill on Tuesday’s calendar during a meeting Thursday.

Under current law, state regulators can’t approve a new nuclear power plant unless a federal storage facility for waste from nuclear plants nationwide exists and the plant wouldn’t burden ratepayers. No centralized federal repository exists. Nuclear plants have been storing waste on-site.

Republican Rep. Kevin Petersen’s bill would erase the storage facility and ratepayer language from state law, in effect clearing the way for new plants. Petersen, R-Waupaca, has argued that nuclear is a clean, affordable option as the state works to meet new federal greenhouse gas emission rules.

Wisconsin is currently home to only one operational nuclear plant.

Figure 2.

MADISON—It’s hard to find a more knowledgeable advocate of nuclear energy than Michael Corradini, a professor of engineering physics at the UWMadison, a past president of the American Nuclear Society and a longtime advisor to governments at home and abroad. But if you ask Corradini whether a bill lifting a 1983 moratorium on building nuclear plants in Wisconsin will make a tangible difference any time soon, his answer is a starkly practical “No.” The reasons for his pessimism reflect the reality of the costs of building such a plant in a state where incentives to do so are virtually non-existent. Barriers include the low global cost of oil and natural gas, decades of planning and approval time, continued opposition by most environmental groups and a state regulatory structure that doesn’t allow owners of a nuclear plant to recover costs in any reasonable amount of time. Toss in the fact that energy demand in Wisconsin is relatively stagnant—the result of conservation efficiencies as well as economic trends—and the prospects for a “next-generation” nuclear power plant popping up in the Badger state are dimmer than a candle in a coal mine. Speaking of coal, the slow but steady move away from coal as a power source for generating electricity in Wisconsin and nationwide is among reasons why the state Assembly recently passed a bill lifting the decades-old nuclear power plant moratorium. Even those who deny the reality of global climate change know coal is among the dirtiest energy generation sources on the planet. It produces greenhouse gases, particulates, sulfur dioxide, mercury and more when it’s burned, especially in the massive quantities needed to power an electricity plant. Wisconsin utilities are trying to replace coal plants over time (federal regulations leave little long-term choice) with a portfolio that primarily features natural gas, wind and solar power sources, along with electrical power transmitted from other states. Corradini and others were a part of a Jan. 20 Wisconsin Cleantech Network panel that explored how Wisconsin is weaning itself from the coal habit, albeit slowly in some parts of the state, by embracing a mix of solutions. The Cleantech Network is produced by the Wisconsin Technology Council and its partners. While there was some disagreement over how Wisconsin’s energy portfolio may look 10 or even 20 years from now, there was consensus around some trends: “Wisconsin gets about 62 percent of its electricity from coal-fired plants today, but that percentage is certain to decline over time as older plants are phased out and replaced with new sources and technology. “Some utility companies are adopting wind and solar power more quickly than others as they strive to stay a step ahead of

current regulations, not to mention those they may face if President Obama's Clean Power Plan and international standards take hold. Costs are falling for wind and solar, although low oil and gas costs are slowing adoption in some cases". Breakthroughs in energy storage technologies can help smooth out the bumps in intermittent energy sources such as wind and solar. Mechanical, thermal, compressed air and other technologies can make it possible to efficiently store electricity produced when the wind is blowing and the sun is shining. "Natural gas is cheap today but it might not always be so, given the multiple uses of natural gas, including industrial, residential, commercial, chemical and transportation. The estimated reserves are immense, but that doesn't guarantee immunity from price spikes." "Transmission lines will help import power from the West, especially wind power from Iowa, Minnesota and the Dakotas. That is often a less costly option to building new plants in Wisconsin." Nuclear power produces no greenhouse gas, a major advantage, but safe waste storage remains a stumbling block. Still, the nation's fleet of 100 nuclear reactors produce about 19 percent of US electricity. Five US plants are being built and another 60 are under construction in 15 nations. As Obama noted during his 2008 campaign: "It is unlikely that we can meet our aggressive climate goals if we eliminate nuclear power as an option." Repeal the state moratorium on building nuclear plants? Sure, why not. It's an artifact of the Three-Mile Island era. Over time, however, Wisconsin's energy portfolio is more likely to diversify as a result of many new technologies, regulatory pressures, price sensitivities and consumer demand. *Tom Still is president of the Wisconsin Technology Council.*



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