

The Irvings Cover Themselves: Media Representations of the Irving Oil Refinery Strike, 1994-96

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Abstract: This article focuses on the media coverage of a strike at the Irving Oil Refinery in Saint John, New Brunswick, between 1994 and 1996. A variety of central issues are examined, including: monopoly ownership of the New Brunswick media by the Irving Group of Companies, the ideological presentation of strikes in general, and the representation of changing labour relations in a postindustrial, globally oriented society. The four New Brunswick English-language daily papers as well as selected English-language papers elsewhere in Canada were analyzed for their representation of the strike. The paper argues that the media coverage reinforced an ideology of defeatism and aided in the increased legitimization of a “roll back” orientation in our society.

Résumé: Cet article porte sur la couverture médiatique d’une grève ayant lieu à la raffinerie de pétrole Irving à Saint John au Nouveau-Brunswick entre 1994 et 1996. L’article examine une diversité de questions centrales, y compris: le monopole des médias du Nouveau-Brunswick que détient le Groupe de compagnies Irving, la présentation idéologique de grèves en général, et la représentation de rapports de travail changeants dans une société post-industrielle sujette à la mondialisation. L’article analyse la représentation de la grève faite par les quatre quotidiens anglophones du Nouveau-Brunswick ainsi que par des quotidiens anglophones sélectionnés ailleurs au Canada. Cet article soutient que la couverture médiatique renforça une idéologie de défaitisme et aida à accroître la légitimité d’une orientation vers les coupures dans notre société.

Introduction

In this paper, I undertake an analytic critique of contemporary news output through a case study of the media coverage of a strike at the Irving Oil Refinery in Saint John, New Brunswick, between 1994 and 1996. A variety of central issues are salient in this case study, including monopoly ownership of the New Brunswick media by the Irving Group of Companies, the media’s ideological presentation of strikes in general, and the representation of changing labour relations in a postindustrial, globally oriented society. The study examines the way in which a select group of newspapers covered this event.¹ The papers chosen are the four

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New Brunswick English-language daily papers, *The Globe and Mail* (then “Canada’s National Newspaper”), and a selection of other Canadian newspapers.²

The media coverage of this particular strike involves a number of factors which make this case unique compared with previous case studies in the literature. The most significant factor for students of the media is that the Irving Group, which was in dispute with the workers, is the owner and *de facto* editor of every single English-language daily newspaper in the province. Thus the adage that “freedom of the press is for those who own one” is particularly salient in this case. Yet the coverage of this issue reveals that there were differences among the New Brunswick papers as well as in *The Globe and Mail* and the other Canadian papers. While the representations of the strikers in the Irving papers appear to be largely negative, they were done in a subtle way which may have prevented many readers from recognizing the control exerted by the publishers over the content of these stories.

Political economy perspective

A critical analysis of the media involves an examination of the ownership and economic control of the media. Political economy is a theoretical position that looks for the economic dimension underlying social and political life (Mosco, 1996). For example, when applied to the media, political economy seeks to highlight the fact that, to quote the First Lord Thomson of Fleet, “it is the business of newspapers to make money.” A political economy perspective emphasizes the need to examine the ownership of the press, the economic influence on the press by its for-profit nature, as well as direct and indirect influences by advertisers and/or government. Political economy theorists posit that the media are directly or indirectly affected by the social forces of our society—social forces that frequently are the expression of dominant economic interests and power. Marc Grenier (1992) notes that “the fact that mass media organizations are themselves businesses means that mass-mediated analyses of the causes of economic problems in society are likely to be sympathetic or even apologetic to the activities of capitalists” (p. 7). The political-economy perspective focuses attention on the way in which control can be exercised through media ownership structures. Dominant social groups can exert influence through representations that are in keeping with their political-economic interests. Grenier (1992) notes that emphasis is placed on “the capacity of mass media to distribute a monolithic perceptual system of symbols, images, and ideas, which tends to legitimate the established exploitative structure of economic relations in society” (p. 7). This can be achieved by having the structure appear to be natural.

The issue of ownership of the media has always been of central interest for those pursuing a critical analysis. As John Porter wrote in his landmark study, *The Vertical Mosaic*, “the existing pattern of ownership is conservative, supporting the *status quo* over a wide range of social and economic policies” (cited in Hayes, 1992, p. 135). We can explore how much influence a media owner exerts on the content of the news, either directly through edict or indirectly through the creation of an ideological climate that shapes the presentation of the journalists’ work. In

the case of direct impact by owners, we have seen examples of this in Canada where a corporate tycoon, such as Conrad Black, buys media outlets in a conscious effort to disseminate his worldview through his newspaper chain. James Winter has expressed grave concerns about the impact of private ownership on the media, and places special emphasis on chain ownership, cross-media ownership, and the interconnection between media, economic, and political elites (see Barlow & Winter, 1998; Winter, 1992, 1997). Winter provides countless examples of the cosy, long-term links between media owners like Conrad Black and Paul Desmarais, their senior editors, and major politicians like Jean Chrétien and Brian Mulroney. One of the consequences, he says, is the narrowness of the political discourse in the country's newspapers.

A similar, but less well-known situation exists in New Brunswick. Daily newspapers in New Brunswick are more firmly under the control of their owners than most Canadians are accustomed to, and the Irving Group is also a major advertiser in its own papers. When Neil Reynolds left *The Telegraph-Journal* (Saint John) in 1995 after a stormy reign as editor, he told reporters that the paper's owner, J. K. Irving, called him every day, telling him what he liked and did not like in the paper. Such close and frequent contact between the owner and editor-in-chief is denied by those who downplay the influence of owners, but it clearly did exist at *The Telegraph-Journal*, as is indicated by the frequent contact between the Irvings and the editor (Leger, 1995).

An incident during the 1997 federal election revealed some insight into the consequences of unsanctioned editorial action at an Irving-owned paper. In the weeks before the June 1997 federal election, the federal Liberal Party in New Brunswick was in electoral trouble. The province, like the region, was turning against the Chrétien Liberals. A few days before the vote *The Telegraph-Journal* took an editorial position in favour of Jean Charest's Progressive Conservatives. J. K. Irving, the eldest of the three Irving brothers, responded by writing a letter, *published on the front page on election day*, repudiating the editorial and arguing instead that Canada needed a majority government and that the Liberals had done a good job and deserved another term. (The Irvings, starting with their father, K. C., tended to support the Liberals. J. K.'s son-in-law, Paul Zed [M.P.-Fundy Royal], was one of the Liberal incumbents who would go down to defeat later that day, despite J. K.'s efforts.) This case shows that when the paper's editors took a position in opposition to that of their employers they were publicly dressed-down.

Labour coverage in the news

In this section, five significant sources and manifestations of media biases that disadvantage labour are reviewed as background for the analysis of the media coverage of the Irving Oil Refinery dispute.

First, media coverage of labour or workplace issues tends to focus on "events," not on *issues* (Knight, 1992). The media generally express little interest in workplace issues. Without discussion of concrete and complex labour issues in the media, most lay readers are unable to fully understand labour events, which

can have a significant impact on the population's long-term attitudes toward both labour and management.

Second, the media focus on a particular form of event known as the "strike" (Edwards, 1979; Schmidt, 1993). This tendency to focus on strikes has a number of implications. Even though most collective agreements are negotiated and signed without any kind of disruption, the media focus on strikes creates an exaggerated sense of workplace conflict (Bauer, 1986). The person who depends on newspapers and electronic media is likely to get the sense that "unions are on strike all the time," yet, relatively speaking, only a small percentage of worker-days are lost every year in the Western capitalist countries, including Canada. For example, in 1985, days of work lost because of strikes or lockout amounted to only 0.13%, or 13 days lost for every 10,000 worked (Labour Canada, 1985).

Third, the media tend to focus on the *effects* of the strike, rather than the *causes* and *dimensions* of the conflict, and tend to emphasize the effects on "innocent third parties." Media coverage usually avoids digging too deeply into the root causes of the dispute, from the perspective of labour or management, and often ignore the *dimensions* of the strike, including the nature of the jobs that the workers perform.

Fourth, the language the media use to address workplace disputes is generally biased against workers. Job action is almost universally referred to as a "strike" even if it is, in fact, a "lockout" (the latter being at the employer's initiative) (Hartmann, 1975-76). The ubiquity of the term *strike* implies, again, that the workers have taken the initiative to go on strike, no doubt in pursuit of unreasonable requests from the employer. The alternative term *labour dispute* (as opposed to "management dispute") also suggests that the workers have taken the initiative. In fact, regardless of the substantive issue, workers are almost always presented as making "demands" while employers make "offers" (Bauer, 1986; Walsh, 1988). Even when employers *demand* concessions, as is now virtually the norm, the media still refer to the employer's "offer" as though it is a zero-based world in which the employer is to be congratulated for offering anything more than nothing for every new contract (Knight, 1992).

Fifth, the media often base their coverage on assumptions that work against labour. One such assumption is that prices are a "natural" phenomenon, while wage claims are *made* by people (Morley, 1976). This may be the result of the "trickling down" of neoclassical capitalist economic theory in which it is assumed that all firms cannot manipulate the prices they charge (they are "price-takers"), though trade unions act as a "cartel" and artificially inflate the wages that a firm must pay (see DiLorenzo, 1996, for an example of this reasoning). This assumption allows management to present itself as a victim of greedy trade unionists, even though the corporation itself often amounts to little more than a "union of capital."

Michael Parenti (1986) has advanced perhaps the most comprehensive list of typical assumptions and standard operating procedures followed by media outlets.

While some of these have been covered already, it is worth paraphrasing them in their entirety. First, the media generally present unions as senseless and strikes as avoidable, and they neglect the possibility that strikes are part of a larger class struggle. Second, media tend to present management's offer in the most favourable light and they tend to downplay workers' grievances. Third, the media pay little attention to the entire compensation package offered to top executives, even when workers are asked to accept roll backs. Fourth, the media create the impression that striking workers are indifferent to the economy as a whole and to third parties by emphasizing the negative impact of the strike. Fifth, the media is likely to urge workers to accept the offer and unlikely to discuss the damage done to the workers' interests if they do settle. Sixth, the media generally ignore the solidarity of one group of workers for another. And seventh, the government and its agencies are presented as "neutral arbiters" regardless of evidence of their support for management.

Methods

In this project I am engaged in an analysis of the presentational data of news content and I seek to examine it in terms of variation across papers both within and outside of the Irving Group of Companies. There exist a number of methodological tools for analyzing media data of this type ranging from Berelsonian traditional content analysis to Barthian structuralist techniques. I have utilized a hybrid approach that involves quantitative and qualitative measures in order to unpack the meaning structure of the news stories.

Ericson, Baranek, & Chan (1991) note that the role of the content analyst is "to construct a reading of the text, where the text itself is a sequence of symbols—speech, writing, gesture—that contain interpretations" (p. 54). They note that qualitative content analysis begins by picking apart the order that is presented to us as common sense and involves a process of deconstruction, interpretation, and reconstruction:

Interpretation, understanding, and application are all part of the same process in which the analyst makes judgments and ultimately presents claims that compete with those of the people involved in the practices he or she is analyzing. . . . The human action of reading and producing texts, in social-scientific analysis as in everyday life, selects and privileges meanings and thereby constitutes preferred texts. It is a social and political activity. (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991, p. 55)

Yet the requirement for reliable data remains. The construction of regularities and patterns is accomplished through a combination of numerical data as well as narrative description and commentary. Ericson, Baranek, & Chan (1991) note that the data are built up into patterns over the course of the research through a process of reflexive and circular comparison, validation, and discovery.

Following the work of Hackett & Zhao (1998), I embrace the notion of a "critical realist" perspective that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative content analysis in order to create a useful methodological program that serves to

identify important elements in the analysis of media texts. I have used elements from both of these traditions in order to gain the benefits of the quantitative summary data as well as gain the insights of a more interpretive form of analysis that recognizes that words in different contexts do not always mean the same thing, and that placement and other similar issues also modify the significance of purely quantitative measures. In this paper, I focus on language and sources as key mechanisms through which ideology is manifested in the news media.

Context

The Irving Group's newspapers

To understand the Irving Oil Refinery strike, one must understand the Irving Group as an entity, as well as its significance in Eastern Canada. The Irving Group is composed of around 300 companies, with a net worth of perhaps 6 to 8 *billion* Canadian dollars. While it is like a multinational corporation, the group has always tended to take on the character of its brain, initially K. C. Irving and more recently his three sons, Jim (J. K.), Jack, and Arthur. The group has always been run as though it is a "Mom and Pop" small business. These companies are limited in liability and publicly registered, but are privately held. Consequently, little is known about their operations.

K. C. Irving acquired the province's English-language newspapers over a period of 25 years, beginning with the two Moncton papers, then called *The Times* and *The Transcript*, in 1944-45. Several years later, he bought the Saint John papers, *The Telegraph-Journal* and *The Evening Times-Globe*, from Howard P. Robinson, the dominant economic force in Saint John until the 1940s. It took Irving until 1968 to buy *The Daily Gleaner* (Fredericton), which had been owned for the previous 17 years by Michael Wardell, a former Brigadier in the British Army who was both a confidante of New Brunswick-born Lord Beaverbrook and a business associate of K. C. Irving (Hunt & Campbell, 1973).

By the early 1970s, the Irvings owned four newspapers, having decided to amalgamate the two Moncton papers into one, now called *The Moncton Times-Transcript*. Though the four papers ultimately have the same ownership, they hardly travel in lockstep. Of the four, *The Telegraph-Journal* is the only paper that aspires to province-wide circulation and coverage. *The Evening Times-Globe* is a purely local Saint John paper, the *Gleaner* covers the Fredericton area, and *The Times-Transcript* (Moncton) covers the eastern half of the province.

There are also certain differences in business strategy among the four outlets. In the late 1980s, all four papers were looking dreary and in need of a makeover, both in style and editorial content. *The Evening Times-Globe* and *The Telegraph-Journal* were the first to receive both a visual redesign as well as substantive changes. Both newspapers left the Canadian Press (CP) consortium and used the membership fees saved to hire several New Brunswick-based reporters instead. This is a particularly interesting move, in the context of the Irving Group, which aspires to exercise control over every facet of its business. By leaving CP, *The Telegraph-Journal* and *The Evening Times-Globe* increased the amount of

copy written by their own staffs and decreased that supplied by an organization headquartered outside of the province and the region. The papers then subscribed to cheaper sources of international news, such as the New York Times Service, and created exchange relationships with other papers, such as *The Ottawa Citizen*. *The Telegraph-Journal* and *The Evening Times-Globe* also created *The Reader*, a weekend magazine with its own editorial staff which publishes longer features, magazine pieces, and book reviews.

The *Gleaner* (Fredericton) and *The Times-Transcript* (Moncton) went a different route. *The Times-Transcript* undertook a visual redesign in the last two years, but with no real editorial changes. The *Gleaner* has only recently changed the look that it has had for at least 25 years. Both the *Gleaner* and *The Times-Transcript* count Irving-owned Summit Publications Ltd. as their parent company, and the two papers exchange material. For example, David Meagher covers the New Brunswick Legislature for the *Gleaner*, as he has done for 15 years, but his work now also appears in *The Times-Transcript* above the phrase "Summit News Service."

The 1994-96 refinery strike

The strike began as a result of significant cutbacks to staff and threats to job security by Irving Oil Ltd. in an effort to mimic the flexibility and restructuring of labour seen in the southern U.S. and elsewhere, elements in the changing face of global commerce. The strike was protracted and painful for New Brunswickers and working people to witness, involving two years on the picket line while the company sought to undermine the bargaining process by laying off workers and negotiating away from the table.³ Throughout the strike, the provincial government sided with the company by refusing to intervene and ignoring opportunities to pursue "anti-scab" legislation. The appointed Industrial Inquiry Commissioner, Innis Christie, was bullied by the company's managers, who were unco-operative participants in the bargaining process and who refused to appear at the arbitration hearings. Christie ultimately succumbed to the company's strong-arm tactics and declared the strike a loss for the union. At the strike's conclusion, a humiliating and restrictive final contract was imposed by the company that included the termination of 37 of roughly 50 workers left on strike, including all of the union executive, and mandatory ideological re-education programs for returning workers. It is clear that this strike was a test case for the Irving Group of Companies and for industries throughout the country, which were gauging their ability to roll back labour rights and increase corporate power.

Results

The treatment of the strikers during and after the strike was legitimized in the public eye through the Irving-owned newspaper chain. Not surprisingly, an examination of the media coverage of the refinery strike in the New Brunswick papers reveals a now-familiar pattern of labour news that typically shows demanding, potentially violent workers causing delays and harassing the public in a selfish attempt to increase wages. Yet, in many ways, the coverage of this strike differs

from some of the literature on media/labour issues. A close examination of the media coverage of this strike by the New Brunswick papers reveals that the legitimization tactics used to justify the company position were more subtle than previously documented in the literature.

Language

A total of 377 newspaper articles were examined from the four New Brunswick papers, *The Globe and Mail*, and an assortment of other papers across Canada. Analysis of the use of language in the newspaper coverage of this strike provides further evidence of traditional semantic practices that more favourably portray companies than workers. As noted previously, the existing literature shows that media depictions of labour issues routinely refer to strikers “refusing” or “rejecting” company “offers.” The bias of this terminology is particularly apparent when the “offer” in question is a roll back from the previous contract. All the papers in this study relied on this terminology and reinforced it in their coverage. While striking workers and union representatives often made a point of referring to their own union contract “offers” in their press releases and public statements, the papers do not mention them as making “offers,” nor did the papers ever adopt this terminology themselves.

The papers also echoed the practice of portraying the strikers as causing disturbances and harassing the public, for example: refinery workers *harass* a “scab” (*The Evening Times-Globe* [Saint John], September 25, 1995); *threats* of action by national labour groups and of *civil disobedience* mark a weekend rally in support of the striking Irving Refinery union (*The Evening Times-Globe* [Saint John], April 15, 1996); Irving Oil suing strikers after *fracas* at gas station (*The Evening Times-Globe* [Saint John], July 24, 1996). In *The Globe and Mail*, strikers are seen as a harassing the public—the strikers are reported to have been dropping nails outside Canada’s largest oil refinery, *presenting a threat* to vehicles that cross the picket lines (*The Globe and Mail*, October 19, 1994)—yet are only a nuisance to the company that clearly has the upper hand. For instance, the workers are said to have *blown their final chance* when they rejected the latest proposal and the strike’s mediator is quoted as saying “*They’ve lost the strike—they’re damn lucky to get anything*” (December 13, 1995). This final quotation is of interest in that mediator Innis Christie’s final report was highly critical of the Irving Groups’ behaviour throughout the strike, yet the defeatist language and the quotations most critical of the strikers received the most press coverage. The theme of workers as aggressive and destructive is also evident in the coverage by other Canadian newspapers: strikers *warn of tougher tactics* (*Calgary Herald*, May 12, 1996); strike backers *target tourists* (*Chronicle-Herald*, July 27, 1996); labour *threatens* Irving blockade (*The Guardian*, July 19, 1995); strike breakers suing union leaders for *intimidation* (*Daily News*, January 16, 1996); and protestors *lash out* at Irving (*Daily News*, February 25, 1996).

Despite the inflammatory language, however, these other papers also contain portrayals of the strike that were not as directly accusatory of the workers. The language in these articles emphasizes the inconveniences caused by the striking

workers and presents the Irving company as the party that has to cope with a situation caused by forces outside of itself. An item which appeared during the first week of the strike in the *Winnipeg Free Press* uses a different style of language than that found in the New Brunswick papers, describing the strike as peaceful and the workers as taking a stand, even while noting delays in traffic.

In terms of providing an explanation of the causes of the strike, these papers reinforced the research that shows the media emphasize events over issues. While the news stories may occasionally recite the line that the company is “seeking greater flexibility,” the actual debate, which is an important and complex one, is never laid out for the reader. Thus the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of one of the central issues of this strike, as well as many other labour disputes, is lost, leaving the public to wonder what is at the heart of the conflict. I argue that the absence of any discussion of this issue frequently leaves the reader with a false sense of what the strike is actually about. Even though the news articles about the refinery strike would frequently include a one-line summary of the key issues of the strike—maintaining principles of seniority and job security, overtime, limits on contracting out, and increases to the number of workers—the stories and headlines would, instead, often focus on the relatively high wages of the most senior of the skilled workers at the refinery. This then served as an agenda-setting technique in which the papers put wages on the table for public debate when in fact they were not *the* issue in the strike itself. Letters to the editor of the New Brunswick papers revealed the fact that some readers were under the impression that the strike was primarily about wage increases. These writers echoed the sentiment put out by the paper’s editors that given the jobless nature of the current economic recovery/recession, the strikers should consider themselves lucky to have a job at all.

New Brunswick papers. The most notable feature about the language use in the local papers’ coverage of this strike was the tone of defeatism evident in the stories about the strike. The papers portray the strikers as foolish in their attempts to go up against the might and power of the Irving empire. This is evident in the use of language that reveals an attitude of defeat: the strike is said to be likely to *drag on* for years (*The Evening Times-Globe* [Saint John], July 25, 1995); public hearings are said to offer *scant hope* of resolving the strike (*The Evening Times-Globe* [Saint John], January 2, 1996); and strikers were told by experts to expect *stress to last* (*The Telegraph-Journal* [Saint John], March 4, 1996). Shortly before Christmas of 1995, *The Telegraph-Journal* reported that the government was *giving up* on the strike (December 21, 1995). Later that winter, refinery manager Bob Chalmers is featured as saying that the refinery (while using replacement workers) has set production records and *does not need* some of its most senior employees (*The Evening Times-Globe* [Saint John], March 27, 1996).

One example of the defeatist nature of most of the stories in the New Brunswick papers is an article that came out early in the strike. The article provides information that documents the power of the Irving Company to prevent even small business people from hiring the striking workers to do odd jobs for extra

money because these businesses fear retaliation from the Irvings in the form of lost contracts or future employment if they are seen to support the strikers in this manner. Yet instead of emphasizing the monopolistic and totalitarian use of power by this employer, the tone of the article instead presents this situation as the reality of working in a company town and predicts that the refinery workers can expect to find *little support* for their cause in the city of Saint John (*The Times-Transcript* [Moncton], May 6, 1995). This tone of defeatism was a central characteristic of the New Brunswick media's coverage of the strike and one that was not paralleled in the other papers examined.

The coverage of the report by the inquiry commissioner, law professor Innis Christie, also exemplifies the focus of the New Brunswick media. While Christie had been outspoken in his criticisms of the Irvings' high-handed tactics as they pursued every legal action to avoid participating in the public inquiry, the New Brunswick media coverage focused on Christie's statement that the unions were *foolish and irrational* for refusing to bend on the fate of 37 workers Irving had blacklisted.

Another article utilizes numerous military metaphors to suggest that labour's relationship with the Irvings is a warlike one (*The Telegraph-Journal* [Saint John], May 25, 1994). The article refers to a *battleground*, where labour leaders are *strategists* who are *cryptic* and *play their cards close to the chest*. The strikers *train their binoculars* on their opponent. Yet the language of the article also suggests that in this conflict the Irvings will emerge victorious. If the strikers are *sleepy* and *slow*, and their leader is leaning against a luxury car *reading a newspaper*, one may doubt their ability to win as they face the new realities of the global labour climate.

These particular striking workers, who are highly skilled, well-paid, senior union activists, should rightfully be considered a significant voice of resistance to the Irvings' attempts to roll back labour rights. The fact that these particular workers went on strike in the first place, instead of just biding their time for early retirement packages, has been interpreted by labour analysts as a symbol of the importance of this strike and the status of labour's power over central principles of workers' rights across the country. Yet despite references to the threat the strikers pose to tourists and replacement workers, the overall sense one gets from the media coverage is that the strikers are foolish in their attempt to cross the Irving Oil giant. This type of coverage, whether a conscious decision on the parts of the journalists and editors or not, has, one could argue, the effect of minimizing the effectiveness of the resistance of the workers and bolstering the sense of power of the company. As explained more fully below, this sends a message to other Irving employees that the giant can take on all comers.

Furthermore, the New Brunswick media showed its support for the Irving dominance through its singular association of the company with "good news." In terms of coverage, this meant that what was good for the company was invariably assumed to be good for New Brunswickers. When Irving Oil maintained high production levels while replacement workers and management ran the plant during

the strike, the media heralded their accomplishment with laudatory coverage of this as a boon for New Brunswick's fiscal health. Yet when strikers threatened to initiate a boycott of Irving products, this was proclaimed as a dire threat to the health of the provincial economy. In short, the Irving papers associated the company's prosperity with that of New Brunswick instead of recognizing the conflicting interests of various sections of the New Brunswick population.

The *Globe and Mail* and other Canadian papers. One interesting result revealed in the language analysis is the way in which the New Brunswick papers and *The Globe and Mail* are set apart from the other Canadian papers in their apparent unwillingness to use certain language that directly criticizes the Irving company. This becomes particularly apparent when one analyzes the differential coverage of the strikes' conclusion. After the strike, the company required a process of ideological re-education which appeared to be a means for the company to win (or control) the hearts and minds of its now-broken labour force. While there is significant pressure against employees speaking out about this process because to do so jeopardizes their buyouts or jobs, the basic outlines of the program are known. Returning employees spent two weeks at a local hotel with facilitators from an American consulting firm called the Boston Innovation Group. According to a draft of the program, entitled *Expect Excellence*, employees were slated to go through a reorientation agenda which included "venting emotions," "problem people," and participation in a "public declaration." Successful completion of the first week of this program was a prerequisite to being "invited" to week two, which involved "team-building" exercises for union members and their former colleagues who crossed the picket lines as well as replacement workers who had been kept on. Week two, in turn, was followed by a practical test at the refinery lasting up to four weeks. Workers were assessed every day and did not get full pay until they passed the entire program.

Among the required reading for the course was American psychologist Judith Bardwick's (1995) book, *Danger in the Comfort Zone: From Boardroom to Mailroom—How to Break the Entitlement Habit That's Killing American Business*. A "must-read" book for corporate managers, this work describes the phenomenon of a "culture of entitlement" whereby workers are apparently preoccupied with their rewards rather than their responsibilities.

Returning workers at the refinery say that, in reality, the reorientation program was a combination "bitterness test" and "attitude alteration" exercise. Workers were told about how they were misled by their union president, Larry Washburn, and to doubt the credibility of the executives of their national and local union. Bob Hicks, President of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour stated: "Reorientation, in our estimation, would involve a simple retraining or reintroduction to the work force. It has nothing to do with the kind of cleansing and brainwashing that's going on there now" (Morris, 1997, p. A12).

At some point, the other Canadian (i.e., non-New Brunswick-based) newspapers in the study referred to this as Irving "brainwashing" and "blacklisting" of strikers, whereas these words never appeared in the New Brunswick coverage nor

that of *The Globe and Mail*. In contrast, the New Brunswick papers published the names of the 37 striking workers who were dismissed by the company under the headline “Not Welcome at the Refinery” (*The Evening Times-Globe* [Saint John], June 13, 1996). The reorientation was described as a “back-to-work program” which was a “tough transition” for the men who “failed” and were “told to go home” (*The Telegraph-Journal* [Saint John], January 17, 1997).

Analysis of the coverage also revealed that the other Canadian papers were more likely to see the Irving company as a bully in a way that was not seen in either the New Brunswick papers or *The Globe and Mail*. Coverage in these papers include information such as: New Brunswick’s labour board ruled that the *oil giant violated New Brunswick’s labour laws* (*Toronto Star*, August 9, 1995); the strike at Irving Oil was a *battle ground for workers’ rights* (*Ottawa Citizen*, July 24, 1996); the strikers were to face a *bitterness test* (*Toronto Star*, December 16, 1995); and Irving Oil was accused of *blacklisting strikers* (*Vancouver Sun*, January 3, 1996).

The other papers were also more likely to introduce alternative ways to solve the strike that would not be considered in the management’s best interest. For example the *Sun* (Vancouver) ran a story featuring a proposal put forward by the New Brunswick NDP leader, Elizabeth Weir, in which she suggests that the New Brunswick government should call in the Irving company’s loans if they do not agree to settle the strike. Weir’s press conference was not covered by the New Brunswick papers or *The Globe and Mail*. Thus, in comparison to the New Brunswick papers and *The Globe and Mail*, the coverage in these other papers gave readers more of a sense that the Irvings were violating labour codes, that worker’s rights were on the line during this strike, and that the strikes’ conclusion may result in a disturbing increase of corporate power through the introduction of an ideological re-education of the work force.

These differences may be explained as follows. The New Brunswick papers, which the Irvings own, use language that is more likely to support Irving Oil than the strikers, as we would expect. *The Globe and Mail*, in its *Report on Business* magazine, is one of the most neoliberal⁴ newspapers in Canada and it should not be surprising that it is pro-business in its coverage. Many other Canadian papers, during the strike at least, were not accountable to the Irvings who, because of their vertical integration investment strategy, have little influence in Canada west of the Maritimes. One of the consequences of withdrawing from the Canadian Press news co-operative is that the Irvings have also given up influence in that organization as well. So journalists, columnists, and editors in these papers had the luxury of casting a more critical eye on the Irvings’ actions.

Sources

Previous analyses of media (e.g., Clow, 1993) have pointed out that in order to examine ideological bias in the news, it is useful to examine who the journalists have approached for information and how that information is presented in the news articles. A news story that tries to achieve a balanced account of a controversial issue will make every attempt to include information and quotations from all

parties involved and will not overly rely on one side's account of events. In order to investigate this, each story was coded for a defining source and a responding source. The defining source is the lead person quoted in the article, while the responding source is someone on another side of the issue who responds to the view taken by the lead source. On occasion supporting sources are added to elaborate the position of either the defining or responding source. It was expected that this analysis would reinforce the previous evidence of the papers' decidedly negative tone toward the strikers, that is, that the Irving companies would be given significantly more opportunities to be the defining source and therefore have a greater opportunity to explain their view of the situation to the readership of the papers, with or without the union as a responding source.

Table 1: Percentage of Articles Defined/Responded to by Various Sources

	Total (n=377)	The Telegraph- Journal (n=80)	The Evening Times- Globe (n=112)	Gleaner (n=45)	The Times Transcript (n=31)	The Globe and Mail (n=12)	Other Canadian papers (n=97)
<i>Union</i>							
Defining	35	36	38	32	38	36	30
Responding	35	32	44	43	21	50	36
<i>Company</i>							
Defining	19	12	15	20	10	27	29
Responding	35	43	30	22	50	50	29
<i>Opposition Politicians</i>							
Defining	5	1	3	10	7	0	10
Responding	4	11	2	4	0	0	0
<i>Government</i>							
Defining	14	22	13	28	17	9	2
Responding	8	7	10	9	0	0	9
<i>Others, critical of the company</i>							
Defining	12	11	15	3	17	9	11
Responding	3	0	2	0	7	0	5
<i>Others, critical of the union</i>							
Defining	3	7	7	0	0	0	0
Responding	5	2	4	4	7	0	9
<i>Neutral</i>							
Defining	12	11	9	8	10	18	17
Responding	10	5	8	17	14	0	13

However, this was not the case, with the results of this analysis fairly consistent across all the papers covered (see Table 1). The union accounted for 35% of the defining sources while the company accounted for only 19%. Other defining

sources were government sources at 14%, sources critical of the company at 12%, neutral sources (such as local clergy urging a conclusion to the issue) also at 12%, opposition politicians at 5%, and other sources who were critical of the union at 3%. In terms of responding sources, the union and the company were more evenly matched at about 35%. Neutral sources made up 10% of responders, followed by government responders at 8%, those critical of the union at 5%, opposition politicians at 4%, and those critical of the company at 3% of all responders. Thus, the union was either the defining source in a story or the responding source in 70% of the articles, while the company was the definer or responder only 54% of the time. These findings reveal that the company was not featured as the defining source in the stories about the strike. This means that the union had more opportunities to put forward their version of events to the journalists and the readership. This raises the question: Why did the language analysis of the strike coverage not reveal a detailed portrayal of the strikers' issues? Given the hands-on nature of the Irvings' relationship as publishers of their papers, it is highly unlikely that the Irvings did not have access to the journalists, directly or indirectly, who were at the same time Irving employees.

Silence as a bargaining tactic. Some would argue that the fact that the union was the primary source of stories shows that the press went to great lengths to make certain that union sources were heard. Given that the extensive coverage given to the union spokespeople did not advance any detailed knowledge of the primary issues underlying the union's position, I disagree with that conclusion. Rather, it seems more likely that the reason we heard from the unions and not from the company was that the company was not interested in speaking to their own or anyone else's reporters. Why would this be so? The first possibility is that the Irvings assume the naturalness and universality (what I would call hegemony) of their position, so that since the vast majority consents to this position, there is no need to speak to the media. It may also be that this was a tactic on the part of the company to utilize the power of silence. Throughout the media coverage of the refinery strike, company president Arthur Irving and senior company officials refused to speak to the press, with only rare comments from refinery manager Bob Chalmers. In any other context, this would result in a lost opportunity for the company to share its side of the story with the public. In addition, most papers would draw attention to this fact and put pressure on the company to speak up by reporting that the company had "no comment" to make. Yet this was not evident in the media coverage of the refinery strike, either within New Brunswick or elsewhere. When the Irvings say "no comment," apparently the journalists retreat. The absence of Irving commentary on the strike was notable and, as the coverage of the strike continued over more than two years, the silence became noticeable as the absence of explicit communication.

Silence has been an area of increasing scholarly attention in recent years, particularly in the area of communications, where emphasis is placed upon the race, gender, and class aspects of silence in interpersonal communication.⁵ This literature suggests that silence is by no means an absence of communication; rather,

silence in fact has substance and can, as the adage goes, speak volumes. Jaworski (1993) notes that silence can be used to silence, to threaten, to trivialize, and to withhold information. In addition, some research has been done on the notion of silence as a political strategy. Brummett (1980) argues that much political power appears to be derived and maintained through the use of silence. He notes that when a public figure violates expectations by silence, the public's attention is riveted on the silence as it tries to attribute meanings to it. Brummett (1980) cautions that a context for any event must be carved out of the universe that surrounds events, and the meanings predictably attributed to silence guide that carving. Thus, when the public's expectation of an explanation of the Irving company's position on a more than two-year-long strike is met with silence, an attribution of meaning is developed which, in this particular context, becomes one of fear and foreboding.

I would argue that this silence was interpreted through the media as a pending threat. In the absence of statements by the Irvings, the media filled the silence by highlighting past incidents of other labour disputes in which the Irvings successfully threatened workers with retaliation to end their protests. For example, throughout the refinery strike, the media often referred to a threat made by the Irvings during the strike at the Kent Homes manufacturing plant in Bouctouche, N.B. (see, for example, *The Telegraph-Journal* [Saint John], May 25, 1994). During that strike, the company threatened to move the factory to Nova Scotia if the workers did not back off, and the company was successful in bringing about an end to the strike. Although there was never any threat to this effect made by the Irvings in regard to the refinery strike, or even any possibility that the billion-dollar refinery—the biggest of its kind in Canada—would actually be moved, the threat nevertheless remained a sinister subtext throughout the strike. Thus, the legitimization process operated such that the Irvings did not even have to coerce the refinery workers. The media—their media—did it for them. It can be argued that this tactic not only helped to undermine support for the striking refinery workers, but it also served as a cautionary note for workers at the Irving-owned shipyards, who were at this time without contracts and were considering labour action of their own. Those workers read the writing on the wall and signed concession-filled contracts that further extended company control over the labour process.

This silence tactic connects to a further issue highlighted in this strike, which is the matter of false balance. It has been noted by media analysts that media attempts to present a balanced view of an issue usually involve the journalists identifying themselves as “reasonable” observers who seek to identify a middle ground between the position of the company and that of the union. Yet when the company's position has been placed to the far right of the debate—in the case of assumed threats to close down the plant—we see a situation where the middle ground takes a sharp rightward shift. The consequence of this is an ideological legitimization process that not only obscures our understanding of the issue but endorses a mentality and action of roll back.

Conclusion

When one counts how many column inches were written about this strike in Canadian newspapers and then considers what the reader actually learned in the process, the results are very disappointing. Taking into account the need to update new readers on the issue, the newspaper coverage of the strike still runs to the equivalent of a 300-page book. Yet a comprehensive, balanced, detailed account of the central issues and events of the strike was never presented to the reader.

The consequence of this strike extends beyond the lives of the refinery workers in Saint John. It can be seen as the first step in a move toward roll back of labour and democratic bargaining rights that may be increasingly eroded. In addition, the parallel legitimization of this roll back—internally through the ideological re-education program and externally through the media—not only obscures our understanding of this particular labour issue, but it serves to endorse a defeatist mentality in the face of corporate and governmental intimidation. We see not only more evidence of roll backs in labour rights (which are occurring alongside roll backs in social services and other central features of Canadian society), but also witness an increased legitimization of these practices whereby corporations and corporate-controlled media are working to make the unreasonable seem, at first, unavoidable and, ultimately, acceptable.

Notes

1. The current study focused on newspaper coverage of the strike. Electronic media (e.g., television) coverage was not reviewed.
2. The New Brunswick papers are *The Times-Transcript* (Moncton), the *Gleaner* (Fredericton), the locally oriented *The Evening Times-Globe* (Saint John), and the provincially oriented *The Telegraph-Journal*, which is also based in Saint John. The other Canadian papers examined are the *Calgary Herald*, *The Chronicle-Herald* (Halifax), *The Edmonton Journal*, the *Telegram* (St. John's), *The Financial Post*, the *Guardian and Patriot* (Charlottetown), *The Daily News* (Halifax), *The Hamilton Spectator*, *The Gazette* (Montreal), *The Ottawa Citizen*, *The Toronto Star*, the *Sun* (Vancouver), the *Times Colonist* (Victoria), and the *Winnipeg Free Press*.
3. For a chronology of the strike see Steuter & Martin (1998).
4. I use the term *neoliberal* to refer to an ideology that is more moderate than Reaganite "neoconservatism" but which is still supportive of government deregulation and independence of capital from social responsibility.
5. See, for example, Tannen & Saville-Troike (1985).

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