Mediating Unresolved Conflict Through Mass Media News Discourse: On Cultural Tensions and Collective Memory

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ABSTRACT: Particularly in coverage of unresolved conflicts, mass media news of both the one-to-many broadcast era and the new networked era are not guaranteed to sufficiently provide the historical and analytical depth required for publics to understand these infinitely complex tensions in their respective cultural and temporal context. Mass media news coverage of the day, however, *does* perpetuate mediated images that seek to affect how publics contextualize and collectively remember simmering cultural conflicts into the future, afar and close to home. This article conducts a small-scale theoretical review of the theories of collective memory and agenda-setting, complemented by an analysis of mass media news coverage and literature on unresolved conflicts concerning the *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ) and "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland. This interrogation, in light of theoretical conceptions of dominant news discourses, offers an explanation as to how publics may come to understand ongoing conflicts in the external world. In shaping understandings of unresolved conflicts by publics, mass media news can play a biased role in making certain political tensions affectively salient for the preservation of a nation's collective *past* by attempting to influence how compassion is evoked from publics in the *present* and even into the *future*. While certainly historically and geopolitically situated, a commonality exists between the unresolved conflicts of the FLQ terrorist attacks in Québec, Canada and the Troubles in Northern Ireland: nationalist cultural tensions, ones that simmer cyclically until discontent erupts between players on opposing sides. Although apparent collectives can seek out countless contemporary alternative sources of information in the digital era of abundance, this paper argues that collective memory remains significant in the context of scrutinizing how mass media news problematically sets biased agendas, which then promotes quite different historical worldviews of deeply complex conflicts.

KEYWORDS: mass media news, collective memory, agenda-setting, conflict

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If temporality is understood as a linear, static progression of time—of the past, present, and future—then mass media news may be understood as existing to report primarily on the explosive events of the day. Particularly in coverage of unresolved conflicts, mass media news of both the one-to-many broadcast era and the new networked era are not guaranteed to sufficiently provide the historical and analytical depth required for publics to understand these infinitely complex tensions in their respective cultural and temporal context. Mass media news coverage of the day, however, *does* perpetuate mediated images that seek to affect how publics contextualize and collectively remember simmering cultural conflicts into the future, afar and close to home.

This article will conduct a small-scale theoretical review of the theories of collective memory and agenda-setting, complemented by an analysis of mass media news coverage and literature on unresolved conflicts concerning the *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ) and "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland. This interrogation, in light of theoretical conceptions of dominant news discourses, offers an explanation as to how publics may come to understand ongoing conflicts in the external world. In shaping understandings of unresolved conflicts by publics, mass media news can play a biased role in making certain political tensions affectively salient for the preservation of a nation's collective *past* by attempting to influence how compassion is evoked from publics in the *present* and even into the *future*.

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On Collective Memory and Unresolved Conflict

In the context of unresolved conflict, collective memory works to perpetuate intergenerational tensions and affectivities. Beyond the self, collective memory—popularized by Maurice Halbwachs in the twentieth century—embodies the connective

elements that conjoin groups and societies in a shared remembering of the past, mediated in part by mass cultural representations and images. Referring to Schudson's work on mass media news, Hoskins and O'Loughlin illuminate how an "oral culture" created by political elites and journalists was mediated through news discourses of the broadcasting era, perpetuating hegemonic, common-sense understandings of conflicts using intentional rhetorical structures.[1] Building on Hoskins and O'Loughlin's analysis, Edy argues that these rhetorical techniques are used by journalists to depict events that animate the public's understanding of past events, present tensions and social relationships, and future outcomes and expectations.[2] This depiction of the past fosters *collective memory*: "the meaning that a community makes of its past" that is "home to critical aspects of political culture, community tradition, and social identity."[3]

The political project of nation-building inherently necessitates building collective memory to perpetually support national myths of the past during the present and far into the future, which raises the problem of exclusionary and/or biased mass media news coverage of unresolved conflicts. However, Sturken keenly emphasizes the tangled set of meanings which prevent one uncontested narrative of collective memory from collective consumption.[4] The past, then, attempts to be narrated by voices competing for the loudest volume in a process of "contestation, credentialling, discrediting, and marginalization" over time to complicate the politics of remembering, as Zelizer asserts.[5]

Speaking to the role of individual action, Van Dijck sets forth a nuanced explanation of collective memory, arguing that while present experiences are mediated through sociocultural practices, technological affordances, and discursive norms for impression into future memory,[6] the tension between these frameworks and individual agency in recalling significant events is generative.[7] The productive space between this tension is analyzed by Hoskins, who contends that in the digital age marked by hyperconnectivity, technological dependency, and immediacy, remembrance does not function solely by *receiving* fixed representations of the world, as collective memory suggests on the surface; rather, we remember

through *creating* representations of the world that become limitlessly archived in digital formats.[8]

Hoskins describes the *memory of the multitude* as contrasting collective memory in its limitless nature and its freedom from representational constraints of traditional mass media, which inherently require that audiences receive, not participate.[9] Hoskins therefore argues for us to move beyond collective memory to a new conception of memory of the multitude that sees individual-group-societal relations as hyperconnected, facilitated by and through participation in digital archival networks, platforms, and applications.[10] Hoskins describes how publics in the broadcast era were unable to respond to the mass media,[11] identifying the age of collective memory as the age of mass media, given the capacity for radio and later television to mediate cultural events as shared experiences (imagined or otherwise) simultaneously to a national—and later global—audience.[12] Illustrating the unidirectional flow of mass media, Edy finds that news events that invoke collective memory are reported using superficial, dramatic, and rigidly-contextualized narratives that do not foster critical engagement with the past.[13] Peters consequently illuminates how the concepts of heritage, nostalgia, and nationalism are romanticized by the media to shape national collective memory in the present.[14]

Although apparent collectives can seek out countless contemporary alternative sources of information in the digital era of abundance, I argue that collective memory remains significant in the context of scrutinizing how mass media news problematically sets biased agendas which then promote quite different historical worldviews of deeply complex conflicts.

On The Troubles in Northern Ireland and Mass Media News Discourse

Unresolved conflicts attract selective mass media news coverage, thereby helping amplify hegemonic discourses and subsequently swaying the understanding of significant cultural conflicts for collective publics. Notably, according to Höijer, pervasive news media coverage of images depicting distant suffering

has an affective impact on ordinary citizens' perceptions of ongoing crises.[15] The dominant mass media news discourse surrounding the Troubles in Northern Ireland illustrates quite clearly Höijer's claim. The Troubles, persisting from the late 1960s until the 1998 Good Friday Agreement on April 10, involved violent conflict over the political location of Northern Ireland under the rule of the United Kingdom, effectively dividing Ireland into two nations: the overwhelmingly Protestant unionists and the overwhelmingly Roman Catholic nationalists. In an aggressive effort to combat British hegemonic powers, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) unleashed death-dealing guerrilla tactics.[16]

On January 31, 1972, the front-page article of *The Toronto Star,* titled "IRA vows to avenge army 'slaughter' of 13 men," (Figure 1) reported on the murder of thirteen unarmed Roman Catholic civil rights protestors by British Army paratroopers in Londonderry on Sunday, January 30, 1972—collectively remembered today as "Bloody Sunday."[17]

Yet, interestingly, the newspaper article includes a large, eye-drawing photograph of "a hysterical mother" being "helped to an ambulance by [a] policewoman while an ambulance man carries her baby" following a series of bomb explosions from the previous day, which were blamed on the IRA.[18]

The Toronto Star

four star ★★★★ edition

IRA vows to avenge army 'slaughter' of 13 men

Sponsored by Ontario

Mission to China seeks trade for all-Canadian firms

Ottawa planning new aid for poor to buy homes

Bernadette Devlin hits

Figure 1. Jones, Frank. "IRA Vows to Avenge Army 'Slaughter' of 13 Men." The Toronto Star. January 31. 1972: 1.

The agenda-setting function of the mass media delineates the process in which contrasting news discourses become salient in opposing nations or groups to structure public understandings of conflict. According to McCombs and Shaw, the public learns about ongoing issues in direct proportion to the emphasis placed upon them by mass media news.[19] McCombs and Shaw quote Lang and Lang, who observe how the mass media "constantly [present] objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, have feelings about."[20] The editorial decision to accentuate an affective image of a devastated woman and a helpless baby suffering from the horrors of *the IRA's* vengeful terrorism—in an article about *the British Army's* bloody violence—pulls on heartstrings. To evoke compassion from publics across borders for victims of the IRA, the readers' own eyes are drawn to a mediated image amidst a narration of bloody events. This decision is intentional, imbued with a latent bias towards the British Army and the Protestant police fighting on the opposite side.

Supporting this textual and visual interpretation, Molloy finds that newspapers from the same countries were generally consistent in discursive narratives of the Troubles, analyzing how stories in two English newspapers used the words "terrorist" or "terrorism" in relation to the IRA over five times as often as *The Irish Times,* and *The New York Times* thirty percent more often.[21] Mass media news organizations in different nations therefore framed stories to render specific discourses more salient as a strategy to compete for compassion from publics towards the atrocities of unresolved terrorism in a time marked by active hostilities *as well as* into the future, given that nationalist cultural tensions still resonate with collectives.

Furthermore, McCombs and Shaw highlight Cohen's succinct statement that the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*."[22] Additionally, speaking directly to the victimization of civilians through agenda-setting, Höijer argues that the news media may be constructed as an inextricable social link between violent conflicts and both the public and politicians, thereupon influencing public opinion and political

intervention.[23] This theoretical hypothesis, in tandem with the mediated victimization of civilians, reflects how the repetition of discursive news narratives in different collectives—for example, the narrative that the IRA is, indeed, a malicious terrorist organization, as per the judgment of UK and American newspapers[24]—directs public attention to differential sensational aspects of conflict depending on the source of information consumed. Consequently, affective reactions to the victimization of innocent civilians by violent tensions may very well heighten.

Mass media news does not necessarily dictate the ethical or moral principles of consumers in any given nation, but it executes an important function in informing public awareness on dominant conflictual discourses of the day, and in doing so, can complicate the ability of publics to see balance in the mediated images which they consume.

On the FLQ and Mass Media News Discourse

In Canada, the years between 1963 and 1970 are remembered collectively (certainly in Québécois communities) as a period characterized by incessant violence and hundreds of bombings by terrorist cells of the separatist *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ) movement. The October Crisis in the fall of 1970, however, marked the eruption of a long, dispute-ridden history of cultural tensions between English Canadian nationalists and French Canadians in Québec. In contextualizing the October Crisis, Cohen-Almagor explains that the Québécois, over hundreds of years, shared the traditional elements of a nation: a common language, culture, history, and geographical homeland. Hence, according to Cohen-Almagor, many Québécois were profoundly opposed to the language policy imposed on their province during the 1960s, resisting the hegemonic nationalism of the Canadian government to preserve a distinctive French identity. Cumulating the effects of these tensions, on October 5, 1970, British trade commissioner James Cross was kidnapped by the Liberation Cell of the FLQ, and a political manifesto enumerating seven specific demands was broadcast by Montréal radio station, CKAC. The crisis intensified on October 10, when Pierre Laporte,

Québec Minister of Labour and Immigration and Deputy Premier, was kidnapped and later murdered by members of the Chénier Cell.[25]

Cohen-Almagor argues that during the October Crisis, English-language editorials were hostile towards terrorism and the FLQ's actions, strongly backing the invocation of the *War Measures Act*. Meanwhile, French-language editorials did not associate Québec separatism with terrorism.[26] Hence, two sides of the hostile conflict were mediated through two sides of biased media coverage, subsequently altering public understandings of the crisis dependent on language, culture, and geopolitical location. Reflecting two starkly oppositional frames of collective memory, the notion of differential public understandings offers valuable insight into the intergenerational tensions that persist in the contemporary moment between Québec and the rest of Canada, and which will likely persist as unresolved into the future.

One frozen image of collective memory entails a fight for national unity against terrorism, while the other advances an honourable fight against deteriorating civil rights and French culture. There are democratic implications to such exclusionary news coverage, hindering the ideal of well-informed public debate. This example represents a tendency for mass media news to frame such conflicts as heavily polarized binaries, which is a barrier to the outcome of rationalized public debate due to the difficulty for those with differing viewpoints to achieve empathetic shared understanding.

Moreover, as presented in Robin Spry's 1973 documentary, *Action: The October Crisis of 1970,* on October 13, three days before invoking the divisive *War Measures Act,* Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau is questioned by CBC reporter Tim Ralfe on how far he would go in suspending civil liberties. Without hesitation, Trudeau replies, "Well, just watch me."[27] Trudeau's response sparked further outrage, ultimately concretizing the notorious political phrase in the Canadian collective memory of the twentieth century—echoed today in contemporary Canadian political discourse. Trudeau's phrase signifies a mediated moment in Canadian history where the nationalist agenda of the federal government was pitted directly against the separatist movement in Québec, affecting which side the

two respective collectives identified with out of compassion for the innocent citizens and political actors involved. These deep-seated, biased identifications have the potential to persist over time, to an extent supporting the unresolved status of cultural tensions.

Conclusion

The mediation of unresolved conflicts on terrorism remains persistent today, especially in popular culture; take, for instance, the 1983 song *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* by U2, representing the atrocities of January 30, 1972, in Northern Ireland, or the close relationships depicted between the IRA and those in Enoch "Nucky" Thompson's organization in the 2010-2014 television show *Boardwalk Empire.* In unpacking the literature and mass media news coverage on unresolved conflict concerning the *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ) and "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland considering theorizations of collective memory, agenda-setting, and news discourses, this article affirmed how the mass media news can perpetuate biases in cultural milieu by attributing salience to particular aspects of cultural tensions, essentially working to preserve these tensions in a collective's past in an effort to determine the experience of compassion in the present and in some ways, into the future.

Acknowledging the brevity of this article much undoubtedly remains to be questioned and scrutinized on the temporal, physical, and psychic relations between mass media news journalists, political figures, and publics in relation to cultural tensions and terrorism in what Hoskins deems, quite correctly, a "media-drenched age."[28]

Notes

[1] Michael Schudson, “Ronald Reagan Misremembered,” in *Collective Remembering,* eds. David Middleton and Derek Edwards (London: Sage, 1990) quoted in Andrew Hoskins and Ben O’Loughlin, “Pre-Mediating Guilt: Radicalisation and Mediality in British News,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 2, no. 1 (2009): 81.
[2] Jill A. Edy, “Journalistic Uses of Collective Memory,” *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 2 (1999): 71.
[3] Edy, 71.
[4] Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (University of California Press, 1997), 182.
[5] Barbie Zelizer, “The Kennedy Assassination Through a Popular Eye: Toward a Politics of Remembering,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 16, no. 2 (1992): 22.
[6] José Van Dijck, “Mediated Memories: Personal Cultural Memory as Object of Cultural Analysis,” *Continuum* 18, no. 2 (2004): 261.
[7] Van Dijck, 263.
[8] Andrew Hoskins, “Memory of the Multitude: The End of Collective Memory,” in *Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition,* ed. Andrew Hoskins (New York: Routledge, 2017).
[9] Hoskins, 106, 99.
[10] Hoskins, 85-86.
[11] Hoskins, 86.
[12] Hoskins, 99.
[13] Edy, “Journalistic Uses of Collective Memory,” 83.
[14] Erin Peters, “The Heritage Minutes: Nostalgia, Nationalism and Canadian Collective
Memory,” in *The Memory Effect: The Remediation of Memory in Literature and Film*, eds. Russell J. A. Kilbourn and Eleanor Rose Ty (Wilfried Laurier University Press, 2013), 264.
[15] Birgitta Höijer, “The Discourse of Global Compassion and the Media,” *Nordicom Review* 24, no. 2 (2003): 21.
[16] Declan Molloy, “Framing the IRA: Beyond Agenda Setting and Framing Towards a Model Accounting for Audience Influence,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 8, no. 3 (2015): 478-479.
[17] Jones, Frank, “IRA Vows to Avenge Army ‘Slaughter’ of 13 Men,” *The Toronto Star,* January 31, 1972: 1.
[18] Jones, 1.
[19] Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 177.
[20] Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang, "The Mass Media and Voting," in *Reader in Public Opinion and Communication,* 2d ed., eds. Bernard Berelson and Morris Janowitz (New York: Free Press, 1966), quoted in McCombs and Shaw, 177.
[21] Molloy, “Framing the IRA,” 485.
[22] Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 120, quoted in McCombs and Shaw, 177.
[23] Höijer, “The Discourse of Global Compassion,” 21.

[24] Molloy, "Framing the IRA," 485.
[25] Raphael Cohen-Almagor, "The terrorists' best ally: The Quebec media coverage of the FLQ crisis in October 1970," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 25, no. 2 (2000).
[26] Cohen-Almagor.
[27] Robin Spry, dir. *Action: The October Crisis of 1970.* 1973; Montreal, QC: National Film Board, Film.
[28] Andrew Hoskins, "Temporality, Proximity and Security: Terror in a Media-Drenched Age," *International Relations* 20, no. 4 (2006): 453-466.

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