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Teachers and TAs, Unions Divided: Inconsistent News Coverage of 2015 Strike Action

In March of 2015, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) local 3903 of York University voted to reject the university's offer for a new collective agreement and walk away from bargaining. With all three units of the union on strike, all classes were cancelled (Brown "Both sides"). Recalling the three-month strike of 2008 and the academic and political disruption produced, news sources jumped to report the situation as it unfolded. Through March, national newspapers and broadcasts provided regular updates of the strike (Brown "All York classes"). Coverage was extensive through the labour dispute from start to finish. When classes resumed, many were excited to return to class but the overall response was mixed. Despite being able to return, a large contingent of students remained on the picket line, pledging their support (Levinson King "York U"). Many wrote open letters to the university's senate and over 5000 students signed a statement of solidarity with CUPE 3903 (Strapagiel). These individuals had understood the union's message and were strongly in favour of it.

Two months later, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) launched incremental "province-wide strike action" in response to the province's offer for a new collective agreement (CBC News, "Ontario elementary") that lasted to November 2015 (680 News Staff). Once again, news outlets jumped to report on the evolving story with the union's track record in mind. When this job action was resolved, however, the public's response was not nearly as favourable. There was no public outcry in favour of the union, no petition or open letters. In fact,

a Forum Research poll conducted three days after the union reached a deal showed that more than two thirds of Ontario voters said they disapproved of the union and the amount spent resolving the labour dispute (Forum Research). For some reason, the public response to this job action was totally different than the response to one just two months earlier. How did differences in news coverage between two incidents of job action contribute to such different public perspectives of the incidents themselves?

The public perspective is powerful. The way society perceives and interprets events influences public attitudes and behaviours for generations. If the news media is able to turn the public perspective for or against a labour dispute by deciding how to frame the story and choosing which aspects to focus on, then they can do the same for other events, people, and ideas. They can include and omit perspectives to further an emotional narrative or use principles of photojournalism to tell an entirely different story than the one set by reality. In a democracy, public attitudes and behaviours are paramount. If they are influenced by perception, perhaps people should spend a little more consideration on where their information comes from. Perhaps reporting is not so objective in how it captures a situation after all.

The news articles cited below represent the primary news coverage of both events from a range of political alignments. Despite the fact that each reports on events with its own slant and style, when combined, these sources provide a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the news coverage received by each incident of job action. Analysis for this paper was conducted by comparing elements of and observing patterns in news coverage between these two incidents. The use of photographs and video, use of language, and included/omitted information were considered in the process. Read together with insight provided by scholarly sources, these sources highlight the contrasts described below.

The first difference between how the CUPE and ETFO job actions were covered relates to the emphasis given to specific issues at the heart of the labour dispute. Throughout the CUPE bargaining process, the public was made aware of the union's "core demands", which were said to include tuition indexation (Brown "all classes", Chiose), equity language for sexual minorities (Brown "all classes", Chiose), multi-year contract and tenure-track positions for contract faculty (Brown "Both sides", Leslie), and increased summer funding for graduate students (Brown "all classes", Connor). Articles also included specific facts and figures from bargaining to provide context (Dehaas, Leslie), such as how members were willing to decrease proposed wage increases by 1.5% to emphasize job security as a priority (Connor). Indeed, the demands identified by news media correlate almost exactly with the proposals and counter-offers set out in Bargaining Updates from the period (CUPE 3903 Grievance Officer). Here, coverage of the job action ensured that issues relevant to bargaining were well-known to the public. This allowed for informed discussions among readers.

With ETFO, news coverage of the issues could not have been more different. Little was said about why the union initiated or escalated job action, or even which topics were being discussed in negotiation. News coverage of bargaining consisted of comparisons with other unions, such as reminders that "[t]he Government has reached deals with the other major teachers' unions, but not ETFO" (CBC News "ETFO, Wynne"). Whereas CUPE's "core demands" were clearly articulated by the news media, ETFO's eleven-item list of key priorities for bargaining and four-item list of objectionable employer demands were simply not covered (ETT). Instead of discussing relevant issues such as the extent of teachers' professional judgement and how much educational support is reasonable, space in the news was dominated by long lists of what teachers would and would not do under successive phases of work-to-rule

action (Artuso, Mangione). Whereas news coverage used official priorities to show that CUPE's fight was not for more money, it did not do the same for ETFO. Without any information about the issues, members of the public were forced to make assumptions about what mattered to the union and why exactly it was not reaching agreement in negotiations.

Scholarly sources confirm that the strategic benefits of covering the issues extend beyond simply briefing the readership. Kate Rousmaniere writes that coverage "rarely [explains] the issues for which teachers are striking—even if they are issues that benefit students" (4). In his article on the 2005 B.C. teachers' strike, Shane Gunster affirms the importance of covering the "broader social, economic, and political factors that set [a strike] in motion" (662). Without this foundation, he writes, "strikes appear as needlessly disruptive and confrontational events in which a select group of (privileged) workers holds the public hostage" (Gunster 662). Joshua Greenberg, however, adds in his article that failure to cover the central issues of a strike can also expose a union to "differing claims about causality, evaluation and solutions by competing actors", essentially losing control of the story overall (354). Furthermore, Gunster demonstrates that discussing actual issues on a talk radio show actually improved the quality of public debate, as future points from either side came to be understood by audiences as "*contestable*, subject to public deliberation and discussion" based on quality of reasoning and available evidence (678). In CUPE's case, it seems, not only did the extensive news coverage of their "core demands" help educate the public; it also both helped them control the story and actually worked to set a higher standard for public discourse. The absence of this coverage for ETFO, conversely, allowed both the narrative and the expectations for public discourse to be set by members of the public as well as those on the other side of bargaining.

The next difference in news coverage between the two job actions is the number of voices and viewpoints included in media discourse. When CUPE initiated job action, the perspectives of all possible stakeholders were featured in the news. The university administration expressed a desire to return to bargaining in order to minimize disruption for students (Brown "Both sides"). The chair of union spoke of the "chaos and confusion" that would occur if classes reopened before an agreement was reached (Strapagiel). Impassioned individual members spoke out about safety concerns on the picket line (Strapagiel). Informed yet disgruntled students both for and against the strike were able to articulate their views and describe how job action affected them personally (Brown "Both sides"). Even retired faculty members (Connor), government ministries (Levinson King "Why this"), and student leaders from other universities (Chiose) were invited to comment on the situation. The media landscape at the time provided readers with education on the subject and encouraged them to hear from multiple viewpoints. Audiences were shown how complicated the issue was and how widespread an impact it had on stakeholders.

When ETFO took job action just two months later, news articles offered a more limited range of perspectives. The union president spoke on the teachers' behalf in all cases, often framed in opposition to a spokesperson from the provincial government (Artuso, CBC News, Csanady). This core battle between the union and the government was only occasionally supplemented with parents/guardians speaking on the impact a strike would have on direct concerns like childcare (Mangione). There were no testimonials from individual striking members, disgruntled students (or considering their age, parents) aligning themselves based on the issues, or any other external or contributing perspective. Without presenting the complexities of the issue and the interconnected viewpoints of the many different stakeholders, news media failed to deliver the same level of education on the issue to audiences. The problems that led to

job action appeared simple, something that could be worked out if the (only) two sides could just stop bickering. The news media did not invite additional voices to show the messy and complex nature of a labour dispute issue.

This exclusion of stakeholders in the public discourse surrounding teachers' strikes is also well-documented by scholarly sources. Greenberg notes the "paucity of attention to the perspectives of student and parent voices" (361) and Rousmaniere affirms that "the media emphasis on the single union leader continues" (6). Greenberg attributes this focus on high ranking union officials and politicians to the "primary definition thesis", in which "actors in positions of authority will more likely come to be seen by journalists . . . as the most credible" because of their "access to . . . information" (354). Why then did coverage of CUPE continue from the union leader to a variety of other views when coverage of ETFO always started and ended with President Sam Hammond? Rousmaniere distinguishes the two, noting "teacher union leaders, like teachers themselves, are portrayed as individual actors, disconnected from other teachers" (6). Greenberg's assertion that the government is "unlike other employers" because it can "lay claim to the universal voice of the electorate" offers another explanation (357). Perhaps coverage of CUPE's negotiation with York University invited more perspectives because neither party's reason to exist includes representing the public view. Furthermore, the politically charged university setting may have created what Gunster calls "a public sphere" in which the role of "the audience as a passive consumer was challenged" and stakeholders of all kinds were "called upon . . . to actively engage with . . . the different arguments on the table" (677).

Lastly, coverage for these two incidents of job action differed in the featuring of individual faces and stories. For the CUPE strike, there was a demonstrated emphasis on what one reporter called the "faces of the . . . picket line" (Ngabo). His piece on the York University

picket line, for example, described detailed stories of some of those affected by the strike, such as sociology PhD candidate Louise Birdsell Bauer's perspective on the "exorbitantly high rent in Toronto" to social work student Emily Irwin "braving the cold" because "the leaders are turning the university into a corporation" (Ngabo). Ngabo's article is just one example. Virtually every article written about the strike featured a photo, sometimes even a video, showing picketers standing in the cold together in solidarity (Brown, Chiose, Connor, Strapagiel). With the camera looking down at the crowds of picketers, photojournalists almost romanticized the strike as the noble plight of the underdogs, the common people set against the rich and powerful university (Brown "Both sides", Levinson King "Why this", Leslie). Even the union leader was only seen this way amid a crowd of picketers (Leslie). The faces and stories of the picketers gave a unified face and story to the event, one with which audiences could empathize. Even those readers far removed from the York University campus and unaware of the issues at the bargaining table could feel compassion for those seen huddling to stay warm in the snow and wind.

In contrast, coverage of the ETFO job action barely featured individual members' faces or stories at all. In some cases, photos literally cut the faces of the teachers right out of the photo (680 News Staff, CBC News "Ontario elementary", Csandy). In other cases, the articles simply did not include photos of teachers, the very members of the union initiating the job action (Artuso, CBC News "ETFO, Wynne", Cohn, Morrow & Ross). Individual members and their stories were by no means the focus of those covering this job action. In their place was ETFO President Sam Hammond, juxtaposed against a spokesperson for the provincial government (Artuso, CBC News, Csanady). Both photographed with the camera looking up at them, neither side invoked empathy from readers. Sitting alone indoors in their comfortable suits (CBC News, Rushowy), the implicit narrative that emerged suggested that both sides were equally rich and

powerful. Without an underdog with which the public could identify, this job action was far less romanticized, and instead covered quite practically with great concern for the specific details of what the unions would allow and "forbid" their members from doing (Morrow & Ross, Rushowy). Without a real and personal focus, audiences were forced to engage with fine details in order to empathize with union members. Despite the fact that elementary teachers can be found in every single community in Ontario, the impersonal nature of the coverage made it more difficult for a reader to both figuratively and literally see the people at the centre of the story.

Scholarly sources also provide context for this disparity. Greenberg confirms that "it is primarily through the telling of stories . . . that labour news becomes meaningful" (362). Gunster adds that personal stories about classroom experiences can justify the strike for the public and counter perceptions that it is unpopular (676). He cites Fred Glass, who remarked that "workers are the best experts at [their] own lives", and adds they should be given "the opportunity to tell their own stories in their own words" (680). Indeed, this is why stories of CUPE members were shared surrounding CUPE's job action. Why then was there no coverage of the faces of ETFO? Rachel Brickner describes society's unique view of teachers, commenting that thinking of teachers as "political agents" emphasizes "an uncomfortable tension between the ideal of the selfless educator . . . and the professional who needs resources . . . in order to do that work effectively" (11). It seems teachers of children are expected to be more selfless than professors of grown professionals. Greenberg describes the conflicting connotations of the teacher's two needs, adding that when teachers speak out for their union they forgo the public image of "hard-working and committed professionals" in favour of being seen as "labour activists" who are "agitators and untrustworthy" (360). Rousmaniere summarizes this pattern by noting "good

teachers are individuals and bad teachers are union members" (2). With such a pervasive stigma-like double standard, it is no wonder their stories fail to make it to the front page.

So how did differences in news coverage between the CUPE and ETFO strike actions in 2015 contribute to different public perspectives? Kelloway and colleagues' model to describe factors of third-party strike support comes to mind. They argue that the existence of "perceived injustice, identification, and perceived instrumentality" predict whether a member of the public will dedicate their time to support a strike (Kelloway et al 807). Considering the evidence presented in this paper, these three factors of support seem relevant to how news coverage influenced perspectives of the two labour disputes. In the case of the CUPE strike, a thoughtful discussion of the issues educated the public on perceived injustices. Second, a robust and inclusive conversation consisting of many diverse viewpoints extended perceived instrumentality to the wider public. Finally, personal stories and engaging photos facilitated the public's identification with those on the picket line. While news coverage of CUPE's action possessed all the requirements to inspire a public perspective of support, news coverage of ETFO's action two months later therefore translated into such a very different public perspective. Its news coverage didn't inspire support because it lacked the three requirements needed for support to exist.

This analysis was conducted using news coverage from two incidents in Ontario in 2015. Future research might investigate to what extent similar observations might be found during other strikes in other periods or locations. Regardless, strikes are not the only event in which news media "select and highlight some facets . . . over others . . . and thereby promote a particular causal interpretation, evaluation and/or solution" (Greenberg 354). Any event or idea can be presented in such a way as to induce a particular public perspective or feeling in a reporter's audience. Future research might also look for other influences and actors present in

this subtle reinterpretation of events. Is it done intentionally? Can it be recognized or prevented before consequences occur? Gunster complicates the issue, arguing that this ability of a reporter to allow biases to frame a story has wider reaching consequences, such as "[establishing] the hegemony of certain views, values, and perspectives as widespread, normal, and reflective of common sense" (64). Indeed, the portrayal of the above labour disputes in the news had longstanding impacts on their public perception. Journalists must adhere to their code of ethics and the public ought to hold them to such a standard. Still, subjectivity is only human. The public must be responsible for considering the quality of the news and how events, especially similar events, are reported.

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