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The Power of Representation

Institutional and relational hegemony

Media representations undoubtedly have some form of influence in society. However, getting a meaningful gauge on that influence is inherently problematic. The concept of hegemony has proven to be central in understanding the potential systemic influence of media in society. Gitlin (1980) credits Gramsci (1971) in defining hegemony as ‘a ruling class’s (or alliance’s) domination of subordinate classes and groups through the elaboration and penetration of ideology (ideas and assumptions) into their common sense and everyday practice; it is the systematic (but not necessarily or even usually deliberate) engineering of mass consent to the established order’ (Gitlin 1980: 253). Thus, through the latent but yet incessant repetition of ideology, the ideas and values of the elites eventually become the ideas and values of the masses. The elites are generally the owners, managers and leaders in society. The theory of hegemony argues that since elites control mainstream media, it is their perspectives that are given prominence. Hegemony is a central component to the conceived historical divides between the alternative and mainstream press as many would argue that it is the fundamental reason that the alternative press exists.

Hegemony is not static. It is constantly changing under the perpetually shifting forces of capitalism and culture. This amorphous development process is one of the principal reasons why hegemony is so difficult to measure and describe. Hegemony is the result of an unending negotiation between the dominant and subordinate classes, which renders it perpetually unstable. This instability means that there may be brief periods where alternative ideologies are given apparent prominence within society. However, hegemonic theorists would argue that these instances are often short lived and generally do not truly expose any meaningful structural weaknesses within hegemonic institutions. In fact, in many instances, these episodes of alternative ideologies are often co-opted within a commercialized media system while major hegemonic ideologies continue unabated or usurped over time. Many would argue that any remaining presence of alternative exceptions within mainstream culture serve only to validate the ‘natural’ mainstream acceptance of omnipresent ideologies. It is this apparent obviousness that is the fundamental strength of cultural hegemony. Institutional systems of power and domination are never

questioned as their purpose and merit are patently clear to those who work in constant support of their continued existence.

When counter-hegemonic ideology does arise, it has historically percolated from within alternative media. Gramsci (1971) has argued that social elites, created within an inherently biased class structure, can only be forcefully challenged with a clearly conceptualized alternate version of society. If counter-hegemonic ideologies are to penetrate mainstream thinking, this alternate version of reality must be articulated through the same institutions of cultural control that have dictated the modern capitalist structure: mainly media, universities, books and churches. The media are the 'first line of defense' (Downing 1984: 14) in sustaining, cultivating and even subverting social control. It is because of this power that alternative media have become particularly instrumental during periods of political instability or social unrest, which has reached a cultural apex. A counter-hegemonic movement can be created through media that directly questions mainstream ideology and simultaneously offers a sustainable and alternative ideological framework (Downing 1984). It requires some level of organized leadership but depends upon mass involvement over time to succeed. This communication model of counter-information (Jensen 1997) can be quite effective under repressive dictatorships and extreme ideological indoctrination.

It is important to point out that counter-hegemonic political participation, in general, increases with media use across the entire spectrum (Shah, Kwak & Holbert 2001) and not only after exposure to alternative media. Mainstream print news is a strong predictor of traditional counter-hegemonic political activity (McLeod *et al.* 1996; Shah *et al.* 2001), but so is all sorts of varying online information (Shah *et al.* 2005). Research has found that alternative media, such as protest websites, positively influence political protest (Boyle & Schmierbach 2009), but such findings are heavily mitigated by the focus of the protest itself. For example, use of mainstream news appeared to be strongly associated with political protest within the Tea Party movement of the United States (Barstow 2010). This suggests that the mainstream press is not solely a conduit for hegemonic messages in opposition to an alternative press, which conversely only carry radical content. There is fluidity between the alternative and mainstream press in content and in audience (Jakob 2010). This is not to say that alternative media do not remain absolutely central to the success of progressive, political change. Rather, that success is often dependent upon the negotiation and acceptance of selected hegemonic messages within alternative media content and the assimilation of counter-hegemonic messages into some mainstream media fare. Previous research has already suggested that hegemony involves an almost constant state of tension (Habermas 1992). However, it may now be that much commercially minded alternative media and traditional mainstream media have drawn from each other to such a degree that differences are increasingly small. For example, when comparing

globalization coverage in the mainstream and alternative press, recent research found that alternative media can be more 'fragmented, non-responsive and even *more* exclusionary than mainstream media' (Groshek 2010: 1). It remains true that the further an issue is from the elite group's core interests and values, the more likely it will be overlooked by mainstream media (Gitlin 1980). Yet alternative media have been shown to soften or homogenize the messages of more deviant organizations as well (Kenix 2007a). Experienced protesters now elicit positive, counter-hegemonic representation in the mainstream press (Leung 2009), and the alternative press have made impressive inroads into mainstream audiences. Alternative media can also function as a media opinion leader, creating counter-hegemonic frames that have been selected and fully adopted by the mainstream press (Mathes & Pfetsch 1991). Repeated instances of alternative public spheres successfully challenging the dominant mainstream suggest that there may now be an 'integrative continuum from radical to mainstream' (Groshek 2010: 5).

In *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky and Herman state that American media conforms to a propaganda model whose 'societal purpose' is to 'inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state' (Herman & Chomsky 1988). This may continue to be true on some level in the aggregate, but today's multi-layered and complex media system necessitates a more nuanced perspective that accounts for individual discrepancies in a more meaningful way. Such an argument not only acknowledges that hegemony involves constant negotiation between mainstream ideology and a virulent opposition but also that the two can, and do, co-exist relatively peacefully within the same institutions of power. Hegemony might not strictly prohibit any systemic growth on the part of opposing ideologies, but rather because of the constant negotiation involved within democratic systems, more counter-hegemonic information and independent processes of communication may be flowing into mainstream media *and* more hegemonic information and institutional processes of communication might be flowing into the alternative press as well. It has been persuasively argued that alternative media are a counter-hegemonic force that helps to negate some of the propagandistic effects of mainstream media (Bagdikian 2000; Bennett 2005; McChesney 1999). However, as this book has already illustrated, mainstream media also have operated in ways that can be construed as counter-hegemonic. The boundaries are now far from clear.

Embedded within the research on hegemony is an assumption that media have strong effects on society – a notion that has been heavily debated in media scholarship. Understanding the effect that media can have on society has been at the centre of media research for nearly one hundred years. McQuail (2005) argues that academic enquiry into media effects has moved through several paradigm shifts throughout the twentieth century. The first pronounced paradigm of media research focused on the strong effects of

media on the public. In the 1920s and 1930s, the hypodermic needle model of communication argued that the media directly inject thoughts into the receiver who unwittingly accepts every disseminated message. Also called the magic-bullet model of communication, this model fell out of favour by the 1940s when Lazarsfeld and colleagues from Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research first released *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet 1944). After examining voters in Erie County, Ohio, these authors theorized that interpersonal sources played an essential role in the diffusion and acceptance of news frames. They argued that it was not the media itself that was so instrumental in influencing opinion but, rather, opinion leaders who were pivotal in dispensing information from news sources to their own personal networks (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955).

The 1970s brought a return to stronger effects with the research of Noelle-Neumann, Gerbner, McCombs and Shaw who all argued, in very distinctly different ways, that the media held far more power than Lazarsfeld and his colleagues first considered. Noelle-Neumann (1984) found evidence for a 'spiral of silence', which helped explain how perceptions of public opinion, learned from media frames, can influence one's own individual actions and beliefs. Gerbner (1969) argued that there are profound, long-term effects of media, principally television, on society. According to Gerbner and Gross (1976), mass media have a homogenization effect akin to medieval religion that produces an apathetic and fearful society after repeated messages over time. McCombs and Shaw (1972) compared polling data with media coverage of the 1968 presidential campaign in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and developed the groundbreaking agenda-setting theory, which argued that media, in essence, tell the public what to think about.

The current stage of effects research has been predominated by what McQuail calls 'negation models' (McQuail 2005). This stream of research focuses centrally on priming and framing but also includes further incarnations of agenda setting. This current era of research as a whole argues that the media can potentially have strong effects, but these effects rely 'heavily on predispositions, schema, and other characteristics of the audience' (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007: 11), which also have a strong influence on message processing. This stage of research acknowledges that media reception does not occur in a vacuum but that certain media messages can resonate with the public and have a strong effect. Of course, the goal of media is to create frames that tap into our predispositions, schemas and other characteristics to create a lasting impression that resonates with the public (Shoemaker & Reese 1996) at the micro- and macro-level (Scheufele 1999). At the macro-level, the media actively attempt to create frames to connect with their viewers, and at the micro-level, individuals draw from this information as they create their own world views. Over time, media frames can have a tremendous impact on how we view our selves and each other.

Constituting a reality? Dominant and oppositional readings

Research has found that we may tend to forget specific components of a media story, but the impressions we gain through media coverage of an issue, event or people have a long-lasting impact on our perceptions of the world (Potter 1993). Others have gone further to state that ‘we need to go beyond representation to the recognition that *media constitute reality*’ (italics in original) (Angus 1988: 339). Within framing research, this powerful effect has been called the ‘reality definition function of the media’ (Takeshita 1997). Our public understanding of each other and our shared social issues are built upon a continually evolving construction provided by media over the entire length of our lives (Altheide 1976; Gamson 1992; Ryan, Carragee & Schwerner 1998; Tuchman 1978). As frames make certain aspects of a story more salient, they also activate dormant but corollary thoughts on the part of the audience member (Price & Tewksbury 1997). These corollary thoughts are then applied to later evaluations of the group, event, issue or person at hand. This process has been called the ‘availability heuristic’ (Shrum & O’Guinn 1993) or, similarly, the ‘accessibility bias’ (Iyengar 1990a). Whatever the label applied, this process is an almost instantaneous cognitive task repeated incessantly over years that eventually creates a meaningful link between media messages and personal opinions.

When we read stories about a particular organization, our perceptions of that groups’ legitimacy are affected (Shoemaker 1982). Unfortunately, much research has found that many media messages can encourage prejudice and public apathy (Gamson *et al.* 1992; Kensicki 2004). For example, if a story is particularly slanted against protesters, then readers are far more critical of that protest group and their social issue (McLeod 1995). If citizens are continually exposed to media that demonstrates status quo support (Campbell *et al.* 2002; Carragee 1991; Dardis 2006; Shoemaker 1984), then ‘it is possible that public perceptions of protest as a form of democratic expression may become more hostile over a long period of time’ (McLeod & Detenber 1999: 18). Put another way, specific cognitions may be much more accessible to readers who are consistently drawing from the same pool of descriptive frames (Shrum 1995). This is why diverse representations across the media spectrum have been seen to be so important.

Research examining the impact of media coverage surrounding social problems has repeatedly correlated false assumptions on the part of the audience with stereotypical portrayals of those affected (i.e. Fenton, Golding & Radley 1995; Martindale 1996). For example, media have disproportionately portrayed poverty as an African American problem even though they make-up less than one-third of the poor (Gilens 1996). Further, African Americans are more likely to be in unsympathetic and unpopular poverty stories (Clawson & Trice 2000). Poor people in general are often stereotypically portrayed as lazy,

sexually irresponsible and criminally deviant (Parisi 1998). Research has shown that negative media images of African Americans influence public opinion (Johnson *et al.* 1997; Mendelberg 1997). Indeed, after viewing negative media content, the public tends to overestimate the prevalence of African American poverty and subsequently voice a stronger opposition to welfare (Gilens 1995; Sotirovic 2001). A recent study by Gallup found that Tea Party members believe African Americans comprise the majority of the poor, and more than half of the Tea Party members surveyed said that their economic situation was not because of discrimination but 'because most African Americans just don't have the motivation or willpower to pull themselves up out of poverty' (Page 2010). A substantial one-third of those not affiliated with the Tea Party agreed with that statement as well.

Criminals are stereotypically represented as pathological individuals living in poverty-stricken urban areas and often suffering from alcohol and drug abuse (Gans 1995). Yet statistics reveal that 62 per cent of violent offenders in state prisons and 80 per cent of violent offenders in Federal prisons were not on alcohol or drugs when they committed the crime ('Bureau of Justice Statistics: Criminal Offenders Statistics' 2001). Another example of society's disconnect between reality and the media-constructed version of reality is found through media coverage of environmental problems. Media coverage of pollution has been framed as more relevant to upper classes (Kensicki 2001b), although those in lower socioeconomic classes suffer the most from health problems that are caused or exacerbated by environmental problems (Eckholm 1977). Coverage of pollution has also been shown to increase at times when there has been an overall reduction in pollution (Ader 1995). These kinds of inconsistencies permeate media coverage of social issues and suggest that the media help to structure a reality that does not exist. Further corollary evidence comes from research that has found rising coverage of violence at times when actual levels of violence in society were decreasing (Ghanem 1996).

When readers are exposed to environmental information that discusses consequences to the planet, there is a sharp rise in the intent of readers to participate in environmentally responsible behaviours, such as conservation and recycling (Davis 1995). In the political arena, the press has been found to have a statistically significant effect on bringing voters to the polls, especially during close elections (Brynin & Newton 2003). Media content has been found to influence 'citizens' evaluations of government, feelings of self-efficacy, and levels of participation in the political system' (Gandy Jr & Baron 1998: 524). These kind of results suggest that there are significant consequences to information learned through the media. Perhaps Angus (1988) was correct in stating that scholarship needs to 'go beyond representation to the recognition that *media constitute reality*' (Angus 1988: 339, *italics in original*). Harkening to the early work of Lippmann (1921), agenda-setting theory has attempted to do just that and suggests that the public salience of an issue directly

reflects the agenda put forth by media (McCombs & Shaw 1972). More recent second-level, agenda-setting research has shown that by emphasizing certain attributes of a subject, the media influence not only what to think but also how the public views an issue as well (Lopez-Escobar *et al.* 1998; McCombs 1994; Murley & Roberts 2006). Framing scholars have charged that by examining how an issue is framed, one can uncover how the qualities (Jasperson *et al.* 1998) of an issue help create the 'reality-definition function of the media' (Takeshita 1997).

It should be noted that all of this research, however, depends upon dominant readings of media frames. Social movements are an interesting example of how audiences can integrate media coverage into their own personal world view. As was discussed in Chapter 3, the overwhelming majority of studies concerning the media and social movements have centred on how the media trivializes protest in its coverage. One would assume that such damaging representations would translate into a negative image of social protesters. However, research has found that individuals who view coverage of social movements can also see these framing techniques as positive (Kenix 2008a). In that study, a majority of university students questioned through focus group interviews reported that images, which have been labelled 'immature' or 'carnival' through a dominant reading, were actually seen as positive (Kenix 2008a). By appealing to these students' sense of fun, these protest images actually engendered a certain level of empathy and support. This suggests that for some readers 'immature' and 'carnival' frames could actually be helpful to political causes by appealing to a playful sense of frivolity. Such oppositional readings of these images may be emblematic of a generational shift in media reception as readers increase their media literacy. Many now view media images, such as the 'immature' and 'carnival' protesters, as representative of citizens engaged in playful acts that are simply necessary for media coverage. Rather than demonstrating any frustration at such a sacrifice for media attention, many media-literate audience members are revelling in the fun of what has traditionally been viewed as negative immaturity. One could argue that this position may also contribute to a sense of powerlessness on the part of readers. The participants' sense of engagement with the frivolity of individual play, rather than the seriousness of mass protest, might actually be reflective of a more assimilative attitude within a mass-mediated culture. Knowing that media tend to highlight visual, eye-catching activities, and sensing that they possess relatively little political efficacy, the participants in this study (Kenix 2008a) seemed content to enjoy the process rather than strive for a determinist outcome. This enjoyment of the images of protester's costumes and antics was actually projected to the cause itself.

Based on the response of elite, political forces to immature, carnivalesque protests in the past (i.e. Hertog & McLeod 1995), it remains doubtful whether oppositional readings, such as these, could ever multiply into that of a 'minor preferred'. One would guess that if this were to happen, a 'modestly plural'

(Barthes 1972) range of expression would occur whereby dominant readings would be reinforced more vigorously with textual redundancy. Yet such a contradictory reading of a dominant frame calls into question the efficacy of using such images as demonstrative of a weak, silly or ineffectual protest movement, for example. Indeed, this demonstrates the danger of overstating the effect of dominant readings in any context. The possible 'reality' that the media might have hoped to construct could easily be negated by a media-literate audience who empathize with a particular cause, organization or group. The guaranteed reception of media messages is by no means concrete. That being said, the preponderance of research discussed in this chapter has found that media messages tend to be accepted via the dominant frames used. This ability of media to construct a reality that has the very real possibility of being accepted as truth over time suggests that it is useful to consider media messages at a larger, macro-level. In this case, we now turn to examine same-sex rights in two different countries with two very different media messages.

A study of same-sex rights

Since the 1970s, organizations in the United States such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) have been actively lobbying for the equal rights of same-sex couples in the United States. These organizations have met staunch opposition from organizations such as the Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family – both organizations that are openly supported by the majority of Republicans in Congress. As of this writing, 30 states have constitutional amendments defining marriage as only between two persons of the opposite sex. More than 40 states go further to restrict marriage between same-sex individuals under any name other than marriage, such as civil unions and domestic partnerships. Nineteen states explicitly state that no legal recognition will be allowed for civil unions between same-sex couples (McKinley & Goodstein 2008).

At the federal level, the then Democratic President Bill Clinton passed the Defence of Marriage Act in 1996, which defined marriage as a legal union between one man and one woman. This bill gave no federal recognition to same-sex marriages and allowed US states to disregard marriages performed in other US states. Former President George W. Bush more recently argued for the passage of a Federal Marriage Amendment, which would have explicitly banned marriages between those of the same-sex at the federal level. Throughout the long debate in the United States, there has been no movement to introduce legal civil unions for same-sex couples at the federal level.

New York, Washington, DC and Rhode Island recognize same-sex marriages from other states, although they will not perform them, which translates to a

rather awkward situation whereby these states grant same-sex divorces but not same-sex marriages. Domestic partnership rights are available in the District of Columbia, New Jersey, Colorado, Hawaii, Maryland, Washington, Wisconsin and Oregon. Partnerships are generally formed through a contractual agreement and do not allow for all of the rights given under marriage but generally provide couples with rights to legal issues such as joint property. These rights are limited in comparison to marriage but often cover areas such as inheritance, property ownership and banking account access (Silverman 2005). Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont and New Hampshire are the only six states that permit same-sex marriage. As of this writing, California has not resumed same-sex marriages that once were legal while the legal case works its way through the United States Court of Appeals. However, all of these changes in state-level legislation came through court rulings rather than popular votes. In each of the 31 states where same-sex marriage has been directly put to a popular vote, it has failed (Crary & Adams 2009).

As these examples help to illustrate, the American public appears to be decidedly divided on this issue, with most voicing opposition to gay marriage, and slightly more advocating civil unions, although as time passes more people are beginning to support the idea of same-sex marriage. In 2009, 42 per cent of Americans said that same-sex couples should be allowed to marry, and 25 per cent thought that civil unions should be permitted, while only 28 per cent argued for no legal recognition (Montopoli 2009). A poll taken by the Pew Research Center/Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life in March of 2006 found that 51 per cent opposed gay marriage. In July of 2005, the same research centre found that 36 per cent favoured gay marriage and 53 per cent opposed it ('Law and Civil Rights' 2005). Other polls found similar results. For example, a CNN/USA Today Gallup poll done from 29th April to 1st May 2005 discovered that 39 per cent of the public believed homosexual marriage should be recognized by the law, while 56 per cent said that homosexual marriage should not be legal ('Law and Civil Rights' 2005). Gallup has found that these numbers remain relatively unchanged – in May of 2009, 40 per cent felt that same-sex marriage should be recognized by the law while 57 per cent did not (Jones 2009). Finally, an ABC News/Washington Post poll taken from 21st to 24th April 2005 found that 27 per cent of the public supported same-sex marriage, 29 per cent supported civil unions and 40 per cent supported no legal recognition ('Law and Civil Rights' 2005).

In contrast, New Zealand passed the Homosexual Law Reform Act in 1986. This law decriminalized homosexuality and legalized gay sex. It was passed by parliament, 49 votes to 44 (Homosexual Law Reform Act 1986). This highly contested act laid the groundwork for what would transpire 18 years later. In December of 2004, New Zealand parliament passed the Civil Unions Bill, which came into effect the following April. Rather than take the approach of Argentina, Canada, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Iceland, Norway, Portugal,

Sweden and South Africa, which all have legalized same-sex marriage, New Zealand joined Uruguay in framing equal rights for homosexual couples in the context of a secular civil union between any two adults, whether gay or straight. In February of 2005, the accompanying Relationships (Statutory References) Act was also passed. This bill removed all discrimination based on relationship status from all New Zealand laws and gave same-sex and opposite-sex couples the same rights and responsibilities as those in a heterosexual marriage. These companion bills also officially recognized same-sex marriages from the rest of the world as civil unions in New Zealand. By December of 2009, a relatively small 1,630 civil unions had occurred in New Zealand. Of that number, 327 were opposite-sex unions and 1,299 were couples of the same sex (Statistics New Zealand 2010).

It is important to note that same-sex marriages are not allowed in New Zealand. The Marriage Act of 1955 continues to apply only to heterosexual couples. However, in 2005, United Future MP Gordon Copeland sponsored the Marriage (Gender Clarification) Bill, which sought to further clarify that marriage was strictly defined between one man and one woman. This bill was voted down in parliament by a wide margin of 47 in favour and 73 against ('Marriage (Gender Clarification) Amendment Bill' 2005). Several groups in New Zealand voiced opposition to the Civil Union Bill, namely the evangelical Destiny Church and the Catholic Church. However, there was relatively strong public opinion in favour of the bill, and key Christian groups lent their support. A block vote from Labour, the Greens and the Progressives ensured the bill's passage. Three months after its enactment, a majority of New Zealanders said they were happy with the civil union law (Berry 2005).

Certainly there are many reasons for such stark differences in the reality that exists for same-sex couples around the world. Cultures vary within families, states and nations, which can have an obvious effect on social policy. Yet how issues are discussed within the media – the framing of same-sex marriage and the overarching narratives used to describe gay and lesbian couples – could also be presumably having an impact on culture and social policy. Neither culture nor media representations exist in a vacuum. Certainly, culture can influence media, but the reverse is also equally true. It could also be extremely likely that media, and news media in particular, could have contributed to the success of New Zealand passing this social policy and the failure of the United States to do the same.

This study expands earlier work (Kenix 2008c) that examined the representation of same-sex rights through four frames. The first frame that this research explores is the conflict frame. Neuman *et al.* (1992) first argued that media emphasize the conflict frame between individuals, groups or institutions as a way of attracting audience attention. These authors found that the conflict frame was the most common frame found in political news. Articles focused on conflict tend to discuss the political affiliation of those in the news and discuss

events in terms of 'winning' or a 'contest'. This finding was replicated in election campaign news (Patterson 1993) and has been found to induce public cynicism (Capella & Jamieson 1997). Conflict is usually demonstrated through 'horse-race' reporting (Benoit, Stein & Hansen 2005), whereby one person or issue is reported as 'gaining or losing ground'. Such poll-driven content has been found to decontextualize issues (Rosenstiel 2005a) while also having strong effects on public attitudes towards the issue or person at hand (Farnsworth & Lichter 2006). Second only to the conflict frame, the human-interest frame can often be used to introduce emotion to an issue, event or problem (Neuman *et al.* 1992). This attempt to emotionalize the news is often relied upon to capture audience interest (Bennett 1995) as readers often relate to stories that have had some sort of personal impact on another human being. Through human-interest frames, the audience presumably feels a stronger emotional connection to the issue at hand.

In another attempt to personalize or bring emotion to an event, news often adopts a morality frame. This puts the event, problem or issue in the context of religious doctrine or moral resolutions, such as the use of the words, sin, special rights, religion, legal rights, civil rights, discrimination, marriage and equating marriage to a legal union. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) agree with Neuman *et al.* (1992) that these references may not be direct. Because of professional journalistic norms, reporters may often introduce morality into content via an outside interest group that mentions these issues through quotation or reference. Finally, the responsibility frame, first discussed by Iyengar (1990b), argues that news implicitly assigns responsibility for the event, issue or problem at hand. This responsibility is often passed to the individual, the government, business, the legal arena or civic-change organizations to 'solve' or correct the problem.

This research analysed alternative and mainstream news media content from 2003 to 2005 – a time period selected purposefully as it includes the debate in the United States surrounding same-sex marriage in Massachusetts and the Federal Marriage Amendment as well as the debate and passage of the Civil Union Bill in New Zealand. The newspaper article was the unit of analysis.

A grouping of 12 mainstream New Zealand newspapers, indexed by the Factiva database, was used for this comparative study. This grouping includes the major national paper, *New Zealand Herald*, as well as smaller New Zealand papers such as *The Timaru Herald*, *Waikato Times*, *The Dominion* and the *Taranaki Daily News*. The *New Zealand Herald* is read by an average of 530,000 people on a typical day (Herald Readership 2005). Alternative articles were sourced from Kiwiblog, the most popular right of centre political news blog in New Zealand, Scoop, the most prominent independent news resource in the country, and No Right Turn, the most popular left of centre political news blog in New Zealand.

In an attempt to obtain relatively comprehensive newspaper data from a country as large as the United States, a major newspaper from each of the three

geographic regions (west coast, the Midwest and east coast) was chosen for the study as well as two other major newspapers that were selected because of their reach and ideological position. The aim was to select news content that had geographical and ideological diversity given the often politically divisive issue of legal rights for same-sex couples. This resulted in the inclusion of *The New York Times*, *The Seattle Times*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *USA Today* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Alternative media examined for this study came from Red State, a leading conservative blog in the United States, AlterNet, an American independent media portal, and Daily Kos, a left of centre progressive American news blog.

Overall, a team of coders found that the rights of same-sex couples were presented neutrally in American media and positively in New Zealand. The findings from this study suggest that there is at least some relationship between culture and content. Contrary to some claims of 'universal' values embedded in journalism, this study suggests that broader, cultural factors, that certainly surround each journalist, play an important role in dictating content. The findings here do not present a monolithic portrayal of American newspapers against same-sex legal rights in United States and New Zealand papers supportive of those same rights. Rather, the findings present a mix of factors that suggest opposition to the legal rights for same-sex couples in US online news outlets and relative support of legal rights for same-sex couples in New Zealand.

The primary sources in media content from both countries were found to generally support same-sex rights. There was no significant relationship between the supportiveness of the source cited and the nation of publication. That being said, American news outlets were far more likely to present the political affiliation of the primary source, and when they did, that source was more likely to be conservative. When New Zealand media outlets cited official sources, they were more likely to be liberal. However, American outlets were much more likely to state the official standing of the primary source, and those individuals tended to be lawyers and judges, government officials and businesspeople. The US media were also more likely to mention 'content' and 'winning', which suggested that there was more reliance on the conflict frame in America than in New Zealand. Given the conflation of opposition to the legal rights of same-sex couples and conservative parties in both countries, the increased reliance of New Zealand papers on liberal sources suggests that the issue of legal rights for same-sex couples was given more sympathy from the sources cited. Support for this notion comes from recent history whereby the conservative Republican Party led the proposal to introduce a federal ban on same-sex marriages in the United States and the conservative National party created the main oppositional force to the Civil Union Bill in New Zealand.

If indeed, news stories 'become a forum for framing contests in which political actors compete by sponsoring their preferred definitions of issues'

(Carragee & Roefs 2004: 216), then one has to consider why and how these sources gained access to the newsroom. Certainly, this could be the result of personal relationships with individual journalists but is more likely the result of the 'economic and cultural resources available to sponsors to promote frames' (Carragee & Roefs 2004: 219). During the period of study here, the more liberal Democrat party had lost political power in the United States, while the more liberal Labour party had retained its political power in New Zealand. This political standing in society is clearly reflected by these frame sponsors' relative political power in the press. This relationship between political power and content brings into question the separation between the press and government. However, in the end, the use of liberal sources is a decision made by the media, not by the politicians themselves. So while it may appear that liberal sources in media content are a reflection of framing *through* the media, the use of these sources is more clearly an example of framing *by* the media (Van Gorp 2007).

New Zealand tended to shy away from mention of legal proceedings in relation to same-sex rights, while the American press did not discuss governmental debates as much as did New Zealanders. New Zealand news outlets were significantly less likely to present a 'solution' to the legal rights of same-sex couples than the American media, which largely suggested a public citizen's vote referendum was responsible for 'solving' the issue. Therefore, the responsibility frame was used in this instance to highlight the role of individuals in America and governmental debate in New Zealand.

New Zealand news outlets focussed on the human-interest aspects of the story and were more likely to examine the personal impact of same-sex rights. The human-interest frame was much less likely to be used in America. Neither country relied upon the use of words like sin, special rights or religion, although New Zealand discussed discrimination more than American media. The US media also discussed the term 'marriage' much more than New Zealand news outlets. These findings suggest that American news outlets tended to overlook the humanity of same-sex rights, while New Zealand publications focused on the larger cultural theme of humanity via a multitude of frames. A constructionist approach certainly recognizes that one person may be exposed to a news story and ignore a particular media frame, while another may strongly consider the salience of that same frame. However, when cultural frames actually 'constitute the central framing idea, there is probably a stronger basis for resonance between the media text and the schema of the receivers' (Van Gorp 2007: 69). Therefore, if the representation of same-sex rights was framed within a larger theme of humanity, there may have been a stronger propensity by the audience to oppose the discrimination of these individuals. Obviously, the framing of 'humanity' in media content was often not direct. Through this analysis, several manifest frames were examined in concert with one another, and a more latent but persistent pattern in content emerged.

For example, as has already been discussed, the US media cited the official standing of their sources much more than New Zealand newspapers did. These sources tended to be lawyers, judges, government officials and businesspeople rather than the generally communal social change activists, community services representatives, religious leaders, private citizens or scientific experts. The use of US newspapers to place these elite agents into a conflict frame of contest, where one side wins and the other side loses, further distracted the reader from the issue at hand. The conflict frame was not found to be as prevalent in New Zealand papers, and again, this could have contributed to New Zealanders feeling more bonded to the humanity of same-sex couples.

So while American papers focused on elite sources, conflict and legal action (coupled with a lack of discrimination on same-sex couples), New Zealand papers were far more likely to present a neutral human-interest frame. This human-interest frame, in combination with a lack of conflict frames in New Zealand content, may have created an important connection between the audience and the issue of same-sex rights. By removing the issue out of the conflicted, institutionalized, legal courtroom and into the fundamental cultural theme of humanity, New Zealand newspapers may have had a much more resonating and direct connection with the receiver's basic schema on this issue. Therefore, conflicting counter-frames, if encountered, were most likely marginalized by the audience (Festinger 1957) or attributed to a peripheral and relatively inconsequential factor (Fiske & Taylor 1991).

Finally, it is interesting to note that each of the variables examined here showed no statistically significant difference between the alternative and mainstream publications in their respective countries. It could be that the generally conservative outlets negated the generally liberal outlets, which then resulted in a lack of statistical significance. It may also be that this relatively small sample size failed to expose differences that might exist within the general population. However, these findings certainly indicate a high degree of homogeneity within the alternative and mainstream press, at least in regards to same-sex rights. This lends further collaborative support for a lack of ideological diversity across the mainstream and alternative media spectrum.

But what is it about the American media, as a whole, in this sample that so readily overlooked the basic humanity of these individuals? Why did New Zealand journalists embrace these frames? Certainly, the role of culture cannot be overlooked. Previous claims of universal news values should be re-examined, and culture should be explored as a fundamental component in the creation of news. It is possible, in the case of same-sex rights, that strong cultural factors such as religion, education and morality may have played a role in the creation of content. After all, culture is often examined in the reception of media frames. As Van Gorp argues (2007), 'by locating frames in culture, the framing process, which is often conceptualized as a matter of individual cognition, is directed by the larger culture' (Van Gorp 2007: 73). However, relatively little content

analysis explores cultural dimensions in the creation of media frames. Further study should examine these and other important cultural factors on a global scale to better understand the role that they may play in news content.

Clearly, media do not exist in a vacuum, and this research does not suggest that social policy in each country was dictated by newspaper content. However, just as media content does not exist in a vacuum, neither does social policy. It is argued here that social policy may have been influenced by media coverage, and the reverse may have also been true – that politicians influenced the media. What is certain through this detailed framing study is that a cohesive picture emerged in the United States of newspaper content that constructed a personally disconnected contest between official elites about marriage that had only legal ramifications without any resulting discrimination. The United States has yet to pass any law that allows for legal equality between same-sex and opposite-sex couples. Conversely, New Zealand content appeared to use unofficial liberal sources in relatively neutral debates that focused on issues other than traditional ‘horse-race’ reporting to present a personally connected human-interest story of civil unions that equated to marriage. New Zealand recently passed the Civil Unions Bill guaranteeing equal legal rights for same-sex couples.

This book does not argue that these relationships are one to one. However, these findings do urge that the standing of social issues, such as the one of same-sex legal rights, should be contextualized against media coverage. Just as media coverage and social policy cannot exist in a vacuum, neither can media and communication scholarship. Examining media frames within the broader political and social world allows scholarship to explore the power of these frames in society. Up until this point, this book has explored the definitions of alternative and mainstream media, media framing theory and the potential effects of media in society. This book now moves to a sociologically-based examination of media through the framework of individual motivations in the media, organizational practices, ownership and ideological influences. In doing so, this book attempts to examine alternative and mainstream media within the broader political and social world and not as individual entities. It is hoped that through this process, a more nuanced understanding of the shared similarities and remaining differences can continue to evolve.