Media, Bureaucracy, and the Success of Social Protest: Newspaper Coverage of Environmental Movement Groups

Julia B. Corbett

Department of Communication
University of Utah

In this study, I investigated a point of disagreement in the literature: Does organizational bureaucracy help or hinder the success of social protest, measured here as prestige newspaper coverage given to environmental groups. Contrary to previous research, these data found a curvilinear relationship between bureaucracy level and media success: Medium bureaucracy groups were most successful at receiving coverage and being featured prominently within it. Low bureaucracy groups were virtually ignored by these newspapers. Contrary to previous studies, this study found no relationship between type of tactic and bureaucracy level—all groups were associated with high levels of "institutional" protest actions.

Since the rise of commercial mass media, social protest groups have recognized the importance of gaining access to media to help raise awareness for their causes and mobilize supporters. Media coverage can greatly influence the nature, development, and ultimate success of social protest (Kielbowicz & Scherer, 1986).

Popular wisdom views the successful social movement group as small, grassroots, loosely organized, and energetic. What a small group lacks in finances or prestige it makes up for in spontaneity and a cadre of loyal volunteers, who are enthusiastic and are able to organize well-attended protests or orchestrate turnout at public hearings. However, many protest groups do not fit this stereotype. For example, some environmental groups hire in-house attorneys, scientists, and public relations practitioners and use direct mail to attract massive numbers of largely...

Requests for reprints should be sent to Julia B. Corbett, Department of Communication, LNCO 2400, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112. E-mail: julia.corbett@en.cc.utah.edu
in Miller (1992) about the public relations role in marketing and advertising cigarettes.

Prime Time Activism: Media Strategies for... Resources such as Ryan's 101).

(p. 1... 1... 101).

Ms. also an anecdotal report by Steinem (1990) regarding advertising in

See "accession in social movement theory. Roscho (1975) held that an indicator of

success for protest groups was an... "guard... "central battleground"... "ignore... "dogs"... "guard... "peril"... "resist-social change."

Instead of public interest "watchdogs," media more accurately act as "guard dogs" (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1995), protecting those in power and attacking those in vulnerable or weaker positions who threaten the power structure. When conflict surfaces, media often selectively use or suppress information (the so-called

gatekeeping role), or distribute information and apply pressure to selected groups, increasing the likelihood that the larger system will respond (Donohue et al., 1973; Olien, Tichenor, & Donohue, 1984). In this way, media are able to either reproduce the status quo in a conservative manner or promote selected reforms.

Media coverage of social protests is, therefore, both symbiotic (Molotch, 1979) and interactive (Wolfsfeld, 1991). Media receive useful, newsworthy information subsidies (Gandy, 1982) from protest groups and gain access to resources controlled by protest organizations (Ball-Rokeach, Power, Guthrie, & Waring, 1990). Social protest is a valuable news commodity for practical reasons: A protest fits into existing news frames and is supplied as noninstitutional news. Yet, the fundamental asymmetry of this relation (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993)—protest groups need media more than vice versa—maintains the media's position in public policy debates. Despite the increase of information outlets on the Internet and elsewhere, mainstream mass media remain "the primary link between the public and the political system" (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1990, p. 254).

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND MEDIA COVERAGE

A social movement is a more or less persistent and organized effort by a relatively large number of people designed to bring about—or resist—social change. Once a social movement emerges and begins to articulate and define a social problem, messages must be brought to movement members and potential members through a variety of channels. Channels controlled by movement groups—such as direct mail, newsletters, or specialized publications—are important but limited in reach (Kielbowicz & Scherer, 1986; Zald & McCarthy, 1987). Eventually, social movement organizations (SMOs) seek to expand their base of support and gain the attention of policymakers and elites through coverage in the mass media.

Gusfield (1981) argued that a social movement occurs when people are conscious that a movement is occurring, and that one significant way awareness is constructed is through the mass media. Media depiction affects not only the public but members of the movement as well (Gitlin, 1980). Some scholars maintain that movements have become even more dependent on media over the last few decades. Gamson (1990) concluded that media are the "central battleground" for addressing social problems that protest groups "ignore at their peril" (p. 147). Media coverage signals the ability of an SMO to relate movement goals to a larger public agenda and participate in the discussion of social issues (Zald, 1979). Kielbowicz and Scherer (1986) argued that because the media's role in the ongoing maintenance of SMOs was so important, newsmaking should be regarded as a "conceptual building block" (p. 90) in social movement theory. Roscho (1975) held that an indicator of success for protest groups was an "accession to a permanently newsworthy status" (p. 101). Resources such as Ryan's Prime Time Activism: Media Strategies for

---

1See also an anecdotal report by Steinem (1990) regarding advertising in Ms. and a historical account in Miller (1992) about the public relations role in marketing and advertising cigarettes.
Grassroots Organizing (1991) suggested a growing sophistication in SMO media work. Mass media attention appears to be important for all SMOs, whether they are large or small, informal or formal, but the reasons for this importance may vary. For informal, new, or resource-poor groups, coverage is important for mobilizing, gaining legitimacy, and acquiring access to a wider audience. According to Wolfsfeld (1991), newsworthy behavior (particularly disorder, if it is covered) can substitute for status and resources. Attracting media attention is also extremely important for established SMOs in the “maintenance” stage (Zald & McCarthy, 1987). Resource mobilization theorists note a strong need for media coverage by groups sustained by large paper memberships; media can thus mediate between isolated, distant members and SMOs (Kiebrowicz & Scherer, 1986; Zald & McCarthy, 1987). Van den Hoonaad (1991) concluded that in large groups, solidarity with distant members must be attained not through direct personal contact or selective incentives (Olson, 1965) but through special publications and mass media.

THE ARGUMENTS: BUREAUCRACY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Scholars have argued that the need for sustained media attention can drive a SMO to change its internal organization to better suit the media’s needs (Kiebrowicz & Scherer, 1986), and thus shape a SMO’s leadership, tactics, and ultimately its success (Molotch, 1979, p. 81). Although the desire for media coverage or other external factors can affect SMO internal organization over time, a great deal of the social movement literature has demonstrated a “preoccupation with the beginnings of movements” (Gusfield, 1981, p. 319). Sociologists have, however, long theorized about the long-term effects of one of the very characteristics that distinguishes a SMO: the degree of formal organization or bureaucracy. Blau (1974) wrote that despite connotations with inefficiency and red tape, bureaucracy is used “neutrally” by sociologists to refer to the administrative aspects of organizations, often indicated by the energy devoted to organizational maintenance more than to achieving objectives.

The German sociologist Max Weber (1904/1930; 1917/1964; 1946) provided one of the first and most articulate definitions of bureaucracy. Weber believed bureaucratization was the optimal type of organization for a capitalist market economy because it demanded that business be conducted in a precise, objective, unambiguous, and efficient manner. Characteristics of bureaucratic organization include jurisdictional areas ordered by rules, a hierarchical ordering of positions, concentration of leadership, and management based on written documents. A bureaucratic organization has differentiated staff positions that require specialized qualifications or training. Despite its efficiencies, Weber saw dismal consequences for increasing bureaucratisaiton: an “iron cage” of rationalization as an expanding bureaucracy became more oligarchical and rigid, less democratic and spontaneous, and related more and more on isolated “experts” and abstract authority.

There are two opposing models concerning the effect of bureaucratisation on protest group success, defined by Gamson (1990) as the ability to secure advantages or acceptance. One model (based on Weber and supported by Michels, 1903/1949; Breines, 1982; Gerlach & Hine, 1967; Piven & Cloward, 1977) holds that highly bureaucratic groups are less successful because they become more conservative and ineffective, suffer from a diffusion of protest, and are alienated from their grass-roots base of support. Weber (1917/1964) said bureaucratisation led inevitably to conservatism, as charismatic leaders with radical aims were replaced by administrative leaders more concerned with organizational maintenance than social change. Michels (1903/1949) held that large-scale social organization and democracy were fundamentally incompatible: “Whoever says organization says oligarchy” (p. 401).

The more bureaucratic a movement, the more hierarchical it became, reflecting the characteristics of the surrounding social order it was seeking to change.

Several scholars have found utility in the Weberian model for modern-day movements. Van den Hoonaad (1991) concluded that formally organized SMOs showed less “radicalism and decisiveness” and had subdued their extreme aspirations, “lest they offend any element within the group” (p. 34). Piven and Cloward (1977) insisted that organized movements cannot protect themselves from co-optation and divert the collective energy of mobilized individuals into routine politics. Gerlach and Hine (1967) said that a defining element of a social movement—face-to-face recruitment at the grass-roots level—was compromised by a hierarchical, distant organization. Gerlach and Hine (1967) and Breines (1982) concluded that decentralized, informal movements were more likely to succeed.

The other model, based on resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), views bureaucratically organized as a resource, producing a differentiated, professional staff that contributes to long-term maintenance and stability. Gamson (1990) found that bureaucratically organized groups were more successful (in reaching goals and gaining acceptance) because a bureaucratic structure gave them a “higher readiness for action” (p. 91) and helped with group maintenance. Gamson, using bureaucratic characteristics similar to Weber’s, found that the larger the group, the easier it was to gain acceptance, although size made no difference in securing new advantages.2

2Frey, Dietz, and Kalof (1992), in their reanalysis of Gamson’s (1990) data and the data of his critics, investigated the contributions of 12 variables in gaining new advantages. They found that the variables most strongly associated with group success were displacement goals (adverse to success because displacement is so hard to achieve), factionalism (adverse to success because it diverts and drains resources), and the use of violence. The researchers concluded that the degree of bureaucractic had little effect on overall group success.
Staggenborg (1988, 1989) found in her study of prochoice SMOs that a formalized structure served to maintain the movement, especially when issue conditions made mobilization difficult. She concluded that it was the combination of formalized structure and professional leadership that facilitated organizational maintenance and overall success.

Kielbowicz and Scherer (1986) said that bureaucratization derives in part from the need for sustained media attention, which can help the movement expand its concerns to the public and onto the policymakers’ agenda. However, the scholars said the demands of media reporting routines (such as the need for authoritative sources who are credible and easily located) also has a moderating and conservatizing force on SMOs.

**THE ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL MOVEMENT**

Although many modern environmental groups do not fit our stereotypes of social protest groups, all environmental groups are nevertheless members of the environmental movement and, as such, are working to bring about social change. The environmental movement was chosen to test the relationship between SMO bureaucratization and media coverage because it is the only modern, U.S. movement with a sufficient number of individual groups (of varying sizes, ages, and styles) that receives consistent media coverage at the national level. In addition, many consider the current environmental movement to be truly national in scope and dominated by groups that seek a national constituency (Mitchell, Mertig, & Dunlap, 1992). Today, environmental groups are just one voice in a broad social discourse concerning the environment, a discourse that, in large measure, helped to effect (Buttel, 1992). Environmental SMOs must compete to publicize their stance on environmental issues, and as this literature review has argued, media publicity is vital to SMOs, regardless of their developmental stage, size, or organizational style. In this study, therefore, mass media coverage is considered one important indicator of the success of environmental SMOs.

**HYPOTHESES: BUREAUCRACY AND MEDIA COVERAGE**

H1: The greater the degree of bureaucratization in an environmental movement group, the greater the amount of media coverage it will receive.

This hypothesis is based on arguments of the resource mobilization model regarding bureaucratization—a more compelling model because it relates SMO success to media access and recognizes the awareness and legitimation provided by media coverage. Formalized groups have an advantage in sustaining media attention because of the legitimated status granted SMOs that establish themselves as centralized, authoritative sources (Kielbowicz & Scherer, 1986). Kielbowicz and Scherer argued, for example, that the development of a public relations apparatus “can make news on demand without resorting to the extreme tactics that might prove counterproductive” (p. 86). Fishman (1980) said bureaucratic groups have an advantage in gaining coverage due to the “principle of bureaucratic affinity” (p. 143), meaning that it takes one bureaucracy to deal with another, and bureaucratic organizations can best satisfy media demands with reliable, predictable raw materials delivered in scheduled ways. Staggenborg (1988) acknowledged that the work routines of bureaucratic SMOs are well-suited to media needs. A reporter can easily locate a source who works regular business hours in groups with hierarchical, centralized structures (p. 597).

For media access to benefit a SMO, coverage must be received continually, after an issue’s “newness” wears off. Problem definition surrounding issues is a continuous, competitive process (Buttel, 1992; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988), and SMOs must present their role in particular issues as serious and newsworthy. Movement-controlled channels (such as magazines, newsletters, direct mail, and Internet sites) present information to members, but media publicity is vital to SMOs for access to broader audiences and for third-party legitimation.

H2a: The greater the degree of bureaucratization in an environmental group, the more likely a group’s institutional actions will be mentioned in media coverage.

H2b: The greater the degree of bureaucratization, the less likely direct action tactics of a group will be mentioned.

These related hypotheses derive from much of the same literature regarding the newsworthiness (and riskiness) of social protest actions as well as which groups engage in them. Researchers on both sides of the bureaucratization argument agree that the formalization of SMOs often signals a shift away from direct action tactics (Piven & Cloward, 1977; Staggenborg, 1988) and toward tamer institutional actions. Direct actions include demonstrating, picketing, and interfering with others’ use of resources (such as tree spiking, plugging effluent pipes, and chasing whaling ships). Such tactics are newsworthy because they are visual, are easily grasped, involve conflict, are high in drama and emotion, and are readily packaged into existing news constructs. In addition to its inherent newsworthiness, direct action can substitute for status and resources and aid in mobilization. However, disruptive direct actions also carry risks: Media coverage may marginalize the group, weaken its ties to the power structure, and alienate a wide base of members (Cohen & Young, 1973; Shoemaker, 1984). Both Barkan (1987) and Vogel (1980) noted that direct action was a liability to some groups in the antinuclear movement.
Institutional protest actions—or participation in political, legal, government, or business arenas in a nondisruptive manner acceptable by those institutions—are generally safer but, as such, may prove less appealing and interesting to media. Examples of institutional tactics are testifying at a hearing, holding a news conference, issuing a scientific report, filing a lawsuit, joining a coalition, or attending a meeting or conference. Professional, specialized bureaucratic groups typically have available a much wider range of institutional tactics—tactics that also are more compatible with the working schedules of professional activists and reporters alike.

The environmental movement’s evolution undoubtedly contributed to a reliance on institutional tactics. New regulatory agencies and environmental laws were incentives for SMOs to switch their routines and adjust their division of labor to match the institutional structure with similarly oriented tactics (Mitchell et al., 1992). Growing public consensus about the need for environmental protection allowed SMO leaders to shift attention to organizational efficiency and stability, goals better suited to institutional tactics than potentially alienating direct action.

H3: The greater the degree of bureaucratization in an environmental group, the closer the relation between the issue agendas of the group and the media.

One final consideration is the relation between the environmental issues to which SMOs devote organizational resources and attention and the environmental issues that media focus on, or the match between the issue agendas of each. Whereas traditional agenda-setting studies have attempted to answer whether media (as senders) influence what the public (as a receiver) thinks about, other studies have considered the ability of other senders to influence the media (as receivers). This directionality dimension to agenda setting (Trumbo, 1995) seeks to identify external sources of influence over the media’s agenda, such as public relations efforts, public opinion, and media’s influence on other media. Olien, Donohue, and Tichenor (1995) discussed a similar concept of system control by external institutions on media reporting practices.

An organization may have a direct or indirect influence on media coverage. Direct influence is obvious, such as references to news releases and quotes by individuals. Indirect influence is less easily identified. Media attention to an issue may be influenced by a SMO’s participation in related institutional arenas (legislative bodies, courts, or regulatory agencies) and by the information (news releases and other publications) it makes available, whether the group itself is ever mentioned. In their model of ideology diffusion, Strodthoff, Hawkins, and Schoenfeld (1985) found that both substantive and doctrinal information from environmental groups flowed more or less intact from the specialized environmental press through the mass media to the general public.

Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) hypothesized that the greater the resources, organization, and professionalism of a movement and the more it dedicated itself to media strategies, the greater its media standing and the more prominent its preferred frame in media stories (p. 121).

Applying the notion of bureaucracy to sender influence on media coverage, it follows that more bureaucratic groups would be more adept at influencing the media’s issue agenda concerning the environment, both directly and indirectly. Highly bureaucratic groups possess greater resources to participate in more arenas, and their greater specialization enables them to employ media specialists and other professionals with experience and credibility. Because of the greater influence wielded by these groups on media coverage, one would expect the issue agenda of bureaucratized groups to match the media’s issue agenda more closely.

METHODS AND MEASURES

Based on an extensive review of published material on the environmental movement (including Brainard & McGrath, 1992; Gifford, 1990; Hansen, 1993; McCloskey, 1992; Mitchell et al., 1992; Pearce, 1991; Shabeccoff, 1993) and consultation with environmentalists, 16 groups were chosen. Groups were chosen to provide a range of bureaucratic characteristics identified in the literature. Selection criteria included tactics, number of members (from over 1 million members to 10,000), age (from less than 10 to over 100 years old), and goal orientation (reform vs. radical, and lobbying vs. nonlobbying). Although this represents a small, purposive sample, it is perhaps one of the most extensive investigations of multiple SMOs within the same movement. The sample is very representative of the current environmental movement; for the most prominent groups in particular, the sample can be considered all-inclusive. (Groups are listed in the next section.)

Three large, prestigious newspapers located in important policy centers were chosen: The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Los Angeles Times. Newspapers from both coasts were included to provide balance to the East Coast- and West Coast-based environmental groups. The Washington Post was included because that city is considered the center of environmental regulation and decision making. The large news content in these newspapers ensured an adequate number of stories, particularly from smaller groups.

The name of each environmental group was entered in a key-word search of the Nexis/Lexis database. The time frame chosen was the first 9 months of 1992, which

---

1Eighteen groups were chosen initially; two (Defenders of Wildlife and Conservation International) refused to participate in a telephone survey to determine the level of bureaucracy and were dropped from the study.

2Electronic databases can work well when searching with very specific key words. Because this research is concerned with a sample of coverage, located in one database, and uses very specific key-word search commands, database searching was an appropriate method of data collection (see Neuzil, 1992; Kaufman, Dykes, & Caldwell, 1994; Corbett, 1993).
yielded close to 2,000 stories. If any group was mentioned in fewer than 20 stories, all stories were downloaded and later weighted in appropriate analysis. To reduce the time and expense of downloading, a systematic random sampling procedure was used to download two thirds of the remaining stories. These stories were then culled to exclude stories less than 10 words, wedding and obituary announcements, and duplicate stories in different geographic editions of the same newspaper. The culled sample was then reduced by one half, again with a systematic random sampling procedure. Final sample size was 490 stories.

A codebook was established and tested using the culled stories. In addition to coding basic story information (such as number of words, location in newspaper, and attributed sources), specific information was coded for each mention of the 16 groups. Of particular interest were issues in each story, tactics (such as direct action and institutional action) taken by SMOs, and how prominently SMOs were portrayed. All coding was done by the author. Two other coders helped establish intercoder reliability (with independent, blind coding) on an independent, random sample of 25 stories. Reliability among the three coders was 91%, using Scott’s (1955) procedure correcting for agreement by chance.

Prior research (namely the work of Blau, 1974; Gamson, 1990; McCarthy, Britt, & Wolfs, 1991; Staggenborg, 1988; Van den Houtaard, 1991; Weber, 1946, 1971/1964; Zald & McCarthy, 1987) had identified two bureaucracy dimensions: specialization and internal organization. Operationalization of the dimensions by these scholars guided the development of a questionnaire concerning bureaucratic organization, which was administered by telephone with high-ranking individuals in each group. Questions concerned internal organization, staff specialization, issues, decision making, media relations activity, history, and current activities. Questionnaire responses concerning bureaucracy were correlated into a specialization scale and an internal organization scale; several items were dropped from each that exhibited either marginal or negative relations. The specialization scale (Cronbach’s α = .78) and internal organization scale (Cronbach’s α = .85) were combined into an overall bureaucracy scale (Cronbach’s α = .83), primarily because the literature provided no precedence for considering either dimension by itself. Scale items are listed in Table 1.

Each group was assigned a low (L), medium (M), or high (H) bureaucracy level: Audubon Society (H), Citizens’ Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes (L), Earth

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Scale</strong></th>
<th><strong>Items</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internal organization</strong></td>
<td><strong>(8 points)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 point for each of the following the group possessed:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mission statement or charter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>executive committee within board of directors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organization chart</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>field offices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0, 1, or 2 points (representing small, moderate, large) for:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>number of group members</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 or 1 point (representing low or high) for:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perceived degree of formalization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 or 1 point (representing less or more conservative):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>type of group tactics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal specialization</td>
<td><strong>(12 points)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0, 1, or 2 points (representing small, moderate, large):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff size, full-time equivalents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 point for each indicator of staff specialization:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff attorneys</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff lobbyists</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff scientists</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff direct mail specialists</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff marketing or advertising consultants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff tax consultants or accountants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 point for each indicator of cross-over appointments:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff member who came from government or industry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff member serving on government advisory group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>board of directors member employed by government or industry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff member serving on industry board</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. 20-point scale, Cronbach’s α = .83.

Footnotes:

1. Initially, the entire year was chosen. The last 3 months were eliminated from the study so as not to bias the sample toward groups whose tax status permits political lobbying; many stories in these months concerned presidential election year endorsements. The only significant event during this time period was the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Although news of the summit dominated the headlines for a time, due to the random sampling of the stories and the fact that the sample was drawn with names of environmental groups, the Summit did not feature prominently in these stories. The average number of stories per issue was 48; the number of stories in the issue category into which Summit stories were placed (along with non-Summit stories) was 49.

2. The oversampling was necessary to get an accurate reading concerning prominence of social movement organizations mentioned, attributed sources, and tactics used. However, when analysis concerned amount of coverage (such as Hypothesis 1), the number reported for oversampled groups was reduced by the amount of oversampling before analysis of variance means were computed (oversampled n = 82).

3. Up to three issues were coded for each story: water, ocean/marine, wildlife (nonmarine), general land management, specific land protection (like wilderness), energy/transportation, air, waste/toxics, social power (such as environmental racism, corporate accountability, indigenous peoples’ rights), public consumerism and health, political (such as voting records), and environmental appreciation. Total number of issues coded was 578 in the 490 stories.

4. The prominence score was based on Shoemaker’s (1988) prominence score, which included the place in the story each group was first mentioned, number of paragraphs in which the group was mentioned, and the specificity of the mention.

5. In addition to bureaucracy as an ordinal variable, bureaucracy was tested as a continuous ratio-level variable using correlation analysis; the results did not differ in terms of significance.
First! (L), Earth Island Institute (L), Environmental Defense Fund (M), Friends of the Earth (L), Greenpeace (M), Izaak Walton League (L), National Wildlife Federation (H), Natural Resources Defense Council (H), Nature Conservancy (H), Rainforest Action Network (L), Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (L), Sierra Club (M), Wilderness Society (M), and World Wildlife Fund (H). It should be noted that bureaucracy level does not equate solely with group size.

RESULTS

Nearly 47% of the 490 stories were found in *The Los Angeles Times*, with 23% in *The Washington Post* and 30% in *The New York Times*. There were no significant differences among newspapers in story length, location, or story type. The three papers mentioned roughly the same number of environmental groups per story, but *The New York Times* gave significantly fewer mentions to medium bureaucracy groups. The environmental group is the unit of analysis for the three tested hypotheses.

H1: Bureaucracy and Media Coverage

The data provide only partial support for the first hypothesis, which expected that higher bureaucracy groups would obtain more coverage. As Table 2 shows, the relationship between bureaucracy and media coverage is not a simple linear one. An exploratory trend analysis discovered a statistically significant curvilinear relationship: Medium bureaucracy groups received the most coverage and the most prominence and low bureaucracy groups (adjusted for oversampling) received extremely little coverage. After centering the variables (to safeguard against a possible lack of invariance; see Aiken, 1991), a significant quadratic trend was found between bureaucracy and both amount of media coverage, \(F(1, 13) = 4.63, p = .05\), and overall prominence in coverage, \(F(1, 13) = 4.61, p = .05\).

Post hoc means comparison tests also were conducted to discern differences among pairs. In all cases, low bureaucracy group means differed from high bureaucracy group means, and low group means differed from medium group means in all but one instance. However, medium and high bureaucracy group means did not differ significantly from each other.

H2: Bureaucracy and Protest Tactics

Table 3 shows that the data are in the hypothesized direction, but the differences are not significant. All groups engaged in fairly high levels of institutional actions, perhaps not surprising due to the long history of the movement and the longevity of many groups within it. Institutional actions were reported in 39% of all low bureaucracy group mentions, 46% of medium, and 56% of high bureaucracy group mentions.

There was a significant positive relation, however, between age of the group and the mention of institutional action. The older the group, the more institutional actions mentioned (Pearson’s product–moment correlation \(r = .62, p = .01\)). This supports the Weberian model that over time SMOs become tamer in their actions.

### Table 3: Correlations Between Environmental Group Actions and Level of Bureaucracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Reports of Action</th>
<th>Level of Bureaucracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct action*</td>
<td>-02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional action*</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** Pearson’s product–moment correlation nonsignificant.

*Direct actions include marches, boycotts, sit-ins, demonstrations, and interfering with others’ use of resources (i.e., tree spiking, plugging effluent pipes, and chasing whaling ships). Institutional actions represent participation in various institutional arenas in a nondisruptive manner, such as testifying at a hearing, holding a news conference, issuing a scientific report, filing a lawsuit, joining a coalition, attending a meeting, or issuing a statement of objection.

---

10 This should be interpreted in light of \(N = 16\), making a Type II error more likely.
**TABLE 4**

Environmental Group Issue Agendas Compared With Newspaper Issue Agendas by Level of Bureaucracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Low (n = 7)</th>
<th>Medium (n = 4)</th>
<th>High (n = 5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Match of issue rankings</td>
<td>7.79 (1.51)</td>
<td>6.15 (1.37)</td>
<td>8.50 (2.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage success, participation in own issues</td>
<td>57.84 (19.76)</td>
<td>45.83 (7.01)</td>
<td>53.35 (21.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage success, participation in top newspaper issues</td>
<td>32.79 (20.12)</td>
<td>46.03 (22.76)</td>
<td>43.80 (19.41)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. One-way analysis of variance means.

*A match between environmental groups’ own identified most important issues and the rankings of the 12 most frequently portrayed environmental issues in the sampled newspaper stories.

Also noteworthy was the number of stories that did not mention any type of action taken. The SMOs frequently acted as a responder, providing an opinion or response for the story but no specific action by the group was mentioned. These passive, no-action stances constituted more than 40% of group mentions in each bureaucracy level.

**H3: Bureaucracy and Issue Agendas**

Table 4 shows that there was no relation between bureaucracy level and issue agendas. In the telephone survey, respondents named the top three issues on which their group focused; group issues were then matched with issues identified in each newspaper story.

The first test was a match of issue rankings (shown in the first row of Table 4) between the groups’ most important issues and the ranking of the 12 most frequently portrayed newspaper issues. The second test (second row of Table 4) was the percentage of success that groups had being mentioned in stories about issues identified as important to them. The third test (third row of Table 4) was how successful groups were in participating in the newspapers’ issue agenda, represented by the top three reported issues.

Medium and high bureaucracy groups were associated with a very wide range of issues, mentioned in stories concerning 10 of the 12 scored issues; low bureaucracy groups were mentioned in conjunction with about five issues, \( F(2, 13) = 11.08, p = .002, \eta^2 = .63 \). The diversity of issues associated with medium and high bureaucracy groups may have contributed to lack of a relationship between issue agendas; groups may strive to “cover all the bases” and diffuse their participation success in any one area.

**SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION**

Media coverage of social movement groups signals that “what they do matters in the world” (Molotch, 1979, p. 73). Getting coverage is important for building awareness of a movement (Gusfield, 1981) and for sustaining a movement and its SMOs. However, coverage is a fleeting commodity due to the media’s nature as a “restless spotlight” (Lipmann, 1922/1991), which forces protest groups to continually strive to fit media news routines.

This research attempted to resolve a dispute in the social movement literature: Are high levels of bureaucracy associated with increased or decreased media coverage, measured as prestige newspaper coverage obtained by national environmental groups? Although the small number of groups makes it impossible to generalize to all environmental groups or SMOs in other social movements, this study represents one of the first attempts to compare such a large number of groups within the same movement along one dimension—here, level of bureaucratic organization.

Although linear relations were predicted by both models, the results from this study suggest that the relationship is more complex. The quadratic trend analysis found a curvilinear relationship between level of environmental group bureaucracy and amount and prominence of media coverage, with medium bureaucracy groups receiving the most coverage and prominence. Yet, post hoc comparisons found no significant differences between medium and high bureaucracy group means. Because this study relied on media coverage to test the hypotheses, it is possible that other factors may be at work concerning bureaucracy and organizational success. Nevertheless, the results here should lead scholars to question previous assumptions about linear relationships between bureaucracy and SMO success, and to investigate bureaucracy as more than a simple dichotomous variable.

A nonlinear, complex relationship in many ways synthesizes the two bureaucratic models. As the resource mobilization model predicted, environmental groups needed a minimal level of bureaucracy to receive media attention. As Kielbowicz and Scherer (1986) hypothesized, low bureaucracy groups were unable to compete for media space because they lacked an organizational structure that established them as professional, centralized, and authoritative sources. However, the Weber model also has utility: The highest levels of bureaucracy did not necessarily secure the greatest advantages, at least when it came to media coverage.

By equating media coverage with SMO success, the assumption is that these groups desire media coverage. It is possible that some groups changed their organizational strategies to concentrate their involvement and participation in other
institutional arenas, rather than on obtaining media coverage. After all, media visibility represents only one aspect of organizational information control and, at times, groups may avoid media visibility and actually withhold information. However, all medium and high bureaucracy groups reported that media coverage was fairly or extremely important to group goals, and high bureaucracy groups had hired the largest public relations staffs to strive for that coverage.\(^{11}\) It is plausible that increasing bureaucratization allows groups to expand movement strategies into other areas, such as legal, political, or educational. According to these group informants, however, such expansion has not taken place at the expense of working diligently to obtain media coverage. There appears to be widespread recognition by these groups that, as Molotch (1979) argued, “the medium becomes the movement” (p. 81), making coverage too important to national visibility and sustainability to be ignored.

If high bureaucracy environmental groups are striving for media coverage and in very sophisticated ways, why did they not receive more coverage? Bureaucracy was operationalized with measures of internal organization and specialization (not just group size). According to bureaucracy theory, the more differentiated and larger a group, the more effort required for ongoing maintenance, the more rules and procedures governing daily operation, and the more reliance on isolated experts and abstract authority. A large, bureaucratic communication staff may spend more time in organizational maintenance of numerous communication channels. A staff of experts may allow a bureaucratic SMO to enlarge its scope of issues, but it may also indicate a lack of focus or intensity on any one issue or area that media find attractive.

Bureaucracy, as suggested by the resource mobilization model, has no doubt enabled environmental groups to change changing issue conditions for over a century, primarily because their developed internal structures were easier to perpetuate. Van den Hoonaard (1991) said highly bureaucratic groups would be less decisive and have subdued aspirations, and Weber (1917/1964) predicted they would become more rigid and less spontaneous. If so, these highly bureaucratic groups may appear less passionate and intense to the media, and, therefore, more likely to be placed in a passive stance in media coverage. They may be better equipped for tamer proactive campaigns than for reactive ones requiring immediate action and decisiveness.

This study did not find the correlation between bureaucracy and type of action predicted by both models. Despite environmental group factions during the 1970s and early 1980s that helped spawn a new radical arm of the movement (see Devall, 1992; Foreman, 1991; Manes, 1990; Scarce, 1980), direct action is simply not portrayed as a frequently used tactic in these newspapers. (The primary exceptions were Greenpeace, Earth First!, and Sea Shepherd, a splinter group from Greenpeace.) Some scholars have suggested that resource-poor SMOs must create disruptions to obtain coverage, but disruptions may be ignored by media because they are threatening to the status quo. What is unknown, however, is whether these groups and others undertake direct action much more frequently than reported by newspapers.

Also noteworthy were the nearly half of all stories that placed environmental groups in a passive stance by not mentioning their actions at all. As Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) maintained, “participants in problem definition continually struggle to present their role in certain social issues. Whatever merit being mentioned in The New York Times may have, such merit is less significant when readers are given no idea of actions the group is taking. Although most of these groups’ goals present relatively mild threats, as SMOs they nevertheless challenge institutions in the dominant power structure and may be denied attention.

Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) hypothesized that the more resources and organization in a SMO, the more prevalent its preferred coverage frame. Although the simple issue agenda measures used here do not quantify preferred frames, they do question the notion that organizational resources somehow help SMOs shape the media issue agenda. More resources may help a SMO enlarge its scope of issues, but this may also reduce the intensity brought to any one issue. The sheer number of environmental issues makes it less likely that a SMO could dominate in relation to any one of them, which contrasts with single-issue movements such as abortion or gun control.

A piece of the puzzle not explained by this study that deserves investigation is the role of SMO prestige in obtaining media coverage. Stocking (1985) found that medical school prestige and productivity were related to media visibility, yet public relations efforts were not. Wolfson (1995) found that SMO legitimacy aided success in getting legislation passed.

The Weber model predicts that social movements will eventually resemble the surrounding social order. The outcome of structural resemblance, according to the model, is accommodation and co-optation. If higher bureaucracy groups emulate the bureaucratic characteristics and structures of the power elite (Mills, 1956), does this resemblance indicate co-optation, or instead, an increased access to power and less need to rely on media coverage for obtaining group goals? Perhaps a little of both: Environmental groups have gained increasing amounts of access, but some would argue, not proportional increases in success.\(^{12}\)

---

\(^{11}\)Fourteen groups (87%) said communicating with the media was extremely important or fairly important in achieving goals. Public relations staff size was positively related to bureaucracy level, \(F(2, 13) = 8.17, p = .005, \eta^2 = .56\) (for the public relations aspects of this study, see Corbett, 1996).

\(^{12}\)For an interesting discussion of environmentalists gaining access but losing ground, see Dowie’s (1994) “A Lighter Shade of Green.”
Since the growth of the governmental environmental bureaucracy (which the movement worked hard to create), many environmental groups have hired their own legal staffs and lobbyists to better participate in decision making. Environmental groups have cultivated connections with the power elite, such as corporate donations and cross-over appointments (from government and industry) to their boards of director and paid staff. This degree of access to power may mean that environmental groups no longer must continually pound the pavement “giving gospel” about environmental values.

However, environmental group connections with the power structure did not prevent political and governmental institutions from weakening resource protection during the 1980s. Shabecoff (1993) noted that despite abundant environmental laws, there have been minimal changes in basic underlying social and economic values that lead to environmental degradation. By the 25th anniversary of Earth Day in 1995, some media analysts concluded that the environmental movement was in disarray, having lost “members, money and political influence since 1990” (Zaneski, 1995, p. A9). All this suggests a movement co-opted by the power structure, or by Gamson’s (1990) definition, a movement that has gained acceptance but not sought-after advantages.

One might speculate that if the highest bureaucracy groups have been co-opted by the power establishment, they should get more media coverage—not less—because media support and uphold establishment values. Higher bureaucracy groups did receive less criticism and slightly more mobilizing information than lower bureaucracy groups. It may be, however, that their connections to the power elite have made them less distinguishable as protest groups and easier to ignore or politely marginalize in the media debate. Herein lies the paradox: As the most highly bureaucratic environmental groups work hard to resemble or work with the power elite, they may be less attractive as news sources that truly represent a challenging environmental movement. In that regard, the medium bureaucracy groups may better represent “the other side” in reporting on environmental debates than “the same side” as the power elite.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article was based on the author’s dissertation while at the University of Minnesota, completed in 1994. Special thanks to advisor Phillip Tichenor and to David Demers and Mark Bergstrom.

---

1 Criticism of group or activities, F(2, 13) = 6.44, p = .011, η² = .50. Mobilizing information presented for groups, F(2, 13) = 1.68, p = .224.


