



William A. Gamson

Movement Impact on Cultural Change*

"I shall not attempt further to define it . . . ; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it." (Justice Potter Stewart, struggling with the problems of a legal definition of obscenity, in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 1964.)

Is cultural change the latest candidate for the "it" in the above quote? How can we possibly assess the impact of social movements when we can't answer the question of impact on *what*? Various writers call upon us to consider changes at the level of personal identity and consciousness, in the lifeworld of the household and neighborhood, in our daily life in the workplace, in making the unthinkable thinkable, in the supplanting of one "moral-intellectual" universe with another. In fact, the referents for cultural change are all around us, diffused through the civil society in a thousand ways, but this doesn't tell us where to look to assess impact. If the changes are everywhere, then one can look anywhere. One is left to wonder whether, in observing the cultural changes around us through the myriad ways in which people in different social locations live their lives, we will have any common referent at all by which we can assess movement impact.

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Perhaps this is one reason why, to quote McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996: 6), “the literature is long on ringing programmatic statements regarding the necessity for ‘bringing culture back in,’ but short on the kind of cumulative scholarship that we now have on political opportunities or mobilizing structures in the emergence and development of movements.” Furthermore, this weakness seems most acute on the issue of impact. In contrast, there has been detailed specification of cultural processes in movement mobilization which helps us to understand why symbolic processes and identity processes are central. But, as Polletta (1996: 483–4) observes in reviewing a recent collection of essays on cultural politics and social movements, there is considerably less success “in demonstrating the *impacts* of cultural challenge.”

Fortunately, a solution is at hand and is already well begun – *assess movement impact on cultural change through public discourse*. This has several advantages. For one, it differentiates a cultural level of analysis from social psychological processes such as personal identity, political cognition, public opinion, and political socialization. The conflation of these levels of analysis invites the-culture-is-everywhere-so-look-anywhere confusion. If we want to know whether one moral-intellectual universe has been supplanted by another, we look at particular forums of public discourse to see if it has been supplanted in that forum. Whether it has been supplanted in the hearts and minds of citizens is a separable issue involving the complex ways in which people use public discourse in combination with other resources in making sense of issues raised by social movements.

A second advantage is the way in which the study of public discourse lends itself to the Swidlerian view of culture as a tool kit (Swidler 1986). We ask what has happened to the tool kit available to people through public discourse and whether any changes reflect an input from social movements that is in some sense distinguishable from that of other social actors. By not making culture everything – and by recognizing the ways in which people use their personal experience and popular wisdom as well as public discourse – one can specify the referent and make manageable the assessment of cultural impact.

Finally, it enables us to extend the well-known typology of outcomes used in *The Strategy of Social Protest* (Gamson 1990, herein referred to as *Strategy*). In doing so, it highlights the problems of using the outcome measures in *Strategy* for assessing *cultural* change. But by looking to public discourse to find outcome measures, we can use the same typology, thereby helping to

integrate cultural change into studies of movement impact on social policy and power alignments.

Constructing Public Discourse: A Working Model

The focus on public discourse also has some limits, as I hope to make clear in proposing a working model of the construction of public discourse.¹ Public discourse means public communications about topics and actors related to either some specified policy domain or to the broader symbolic interests of some constituency. It includes images as well as information and argumentation. The production of images rather than information or argumentation is worth emphasizing because this more subtle form of meaning construction is at the heart of measuring cultural impact. It is useful in reminding us to attend to the visual, to verbal imagery, and other modes of conveying a broader frame – through music, for example. It encourages us to look beyond conventional discussion of public affairs to advertising and entertainment as additional sites where images are communicated. But the distinction between images and factual information can be overdrawn: facts as much as images take on their meaning by being embedded in some larger system of meaning or frame.

Public discourse is carried out in various forums. A forum includes a site or arena in which meaning is being contested plus an active audience or gallery. The contributors or players in any given forum are aware of the gallery, some of whose members may themselves become active players at

¹ This working model is a collective one, shaped by numerous discussions with my partners in research on the construction of abortion discourse in Germany and the United States: Myra Marx Ferree (University of Wisconsin), Friedhelm Neidhardt and Dieter Rucht (Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung) and Jürgen Gerhards (University of Leipzig) and by the participants in the Media Research and Action Project (MRAP) at Boston College. It is informed by a broad and eclectic literature and developed most fully in Ferree et al. (2002). On the role of the mass media in framing issues, it draws especially on Tuchman (1978), Gans (1979), Gamson and Modigliani (1989), and Gamson (1992). On the interaction of movements and media, it draws on Gitlin (1980), Ryan (1991), and Snow and Benford (1988, 1992). On the role of public discourse in a democracy, it draws on Dahlgren and Sparks (1991), Entman (1989), Fraser (1995), Garnham (1986), Gerhards (1996), Habermas (1987, 1989), and Keane (1991). On the mediation of discursive interests, it draws on Rucht (1995). On movements as a field of organizations, it draws on Melucci (1989) and Klandermans (1992).

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other times or in other arenas. We define the public sphere as the set of all forums in which public discourse takes place.

Every forum has its own norms and practices governing both the form and content of expression and who has standing to participate. The model does not assume that any given forum is “fair” in the sense of providing a level playing field for all participants. On the contrary, the rules and practices of the gatekeepers in any forum are part of the explanation of cultural impact or its absence. Not only do the assemblers of discourse provide opportunities and constraints for cultural challengers, especially around issues of access, but they actively participate as important sponsors of meaning in their own right.

The *mass media* are the most important forum for understanding cultural impact since they provide the major site in which contests over meaning must succeed politically. First, they provide a master forum in the sense that the players in every other forum also use the media forum, either as players or as part of the gallery. Among the various forums of public discourse, it provides the most generally available and shared set of cultural tools. Social movements must assume that their own constituents are part of the mass media gallery and the messages their would-be supporters hear cannot be ignored, no matter how extensive the movement’s own alternative media may be.

Second, the mass media forum is *the* major site of contest politically in part because all of the would-be or actual sponsors of meaning – be they authorities, members, or challengers – *assume* pervasive influence (whether justified or not). The mass media often become the critical gallery for discourse carried on in other forums, with success measured by whether a speech in the legislative forum, for example, is featured prominently in the *New York Times* or the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

Finally, the mass media forum is not simply a site where one can read relative success in cultural contests. It is not merely an indicator of broader cultural changes in the civil society but influences them, spreading changes in language use and political consciousness to the workplace and other settings in which people go about the public part of their daily lives. When a cultural code is being challenged, a change in the media forum both signals and spreads the change. To have one’s preferred framing of an issue increase significantly in the mass media forum is both an important outcome in itself and carries a strong promise of a ripple effect.

Political Interest Mediation

This dual role of the mass media as both sponsor of meaning and site of a meaning contest emphasizes its role in a complex system of what Schmitter (1977) and Rucht (1995) call "political interest mediation." Various actors in this system – political parties, corporations, associations, and social movements – attempt to generate, aggregate, transform, and articulate the interests of some underlying constituency. Social movements are only one of several potential *carriers* of the interests of a given constituency in this larger system of interest mediation. To assess their impact on any kind of change – be it cultural or institutional – one must consider their relationship to the other carriers.

To call this a mediation system, as Rucht (1995) reminds us, implies the linking of at least two external elements which, for a variety of reasons, can not or do not communicate directly. They "obey conflicting logic and principles which permit no direct link" (Rucht 1995: 105) or, more metaphorically, they don't speak the same language. But the mediation system discussed here does much more than simply translate inputs and outputs into a common language. It takes on a life of its own with its own operating logic and interests and transforms and shapes what is being communicated; indeed, its processes often override the intentions of actors in the external systems being linked.

If social movements are part of a complex mediation system, what are the external systems being linked? On the one hand, we have constituencies. One may think of these as solidarity groups or, to borrow Anderson's (1991) useful concept, "imagined communities." Examples would include women, workers, Christians, greens, conservatives, Latinos, the "left" and many others. Since people have multiple identities, they are potentially part of many constituencies. A given solidarity group may provide a lead identity for some people that they use on all or most issues while for others, it may be one of several which vary in salience from issue to issue. The degree of solidarity or personal identification with a particular imagined community is an empirical question, with the operation of the interest mediation system providing most of the explanation.

The other end of the mediation system is more problematic and forces us to take a closer look at what is meant by "interests." Consider, for example, that the constituency whose interests are being mediated is "farmers." The term "interests" conjures up images of crop subsidies, regulations, and other

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agricultural policies that will operate to the advantage or disadvantage of this group. Or perhaps of power arrangements that will increase or decrease the political influence of those who carry the political interests of farmers. In this narrow sense of policy interests, the other end of the mediation system is the system of authorities who are able to make binding decisions on policies and how they are implemented.

In considering cultural change, however, the term “interests” seems too narrow and restrictive. Farmers also have certain “interests” in the nature of public discourse and these include both interests in promoting desired policy frames in various forums, but also more subtle ones that do not relate to any specific policy contests. As an example of the former, support for policies favoring farmers is likely to be greater if the image of farmers in public discourse emphasizes the small, independent family farm rather than the agribusiness that is, in fact, the dominant “farmer” in the production and distribution of most crops. But aside from this instrumental and strategic use of public discourse to further policy interests, some groups of farmers may have concerns about the degree of respect they receive in the broader culture – for example, about the disparaging depiction of white farmers in the South as “rednecks” or “hillbillies” in movies and in television entertainment forums. In short, the various constituencies whose interests are being mediated have *symbolic interests* and these should be the focus of an assessment of cultural impact.

For the mediation of symbolic interests, the other end of the mediation system is less clear. Authorities do not make binding decisions about language use nor does anyone else. Their decisions about usage may or may not be adopted by others and often authorities may simply follow the lead of various parts of the mediation system – especially the dominant usage in mass media discourse. Hence, for symbolic interests, it is the outputs of the mass media system, rather than the decisions of authorities, that are being linked to constituencies via the mediation system.

Both authorities and the mass media, then, play a dual role in the system of interest mediation. For power and policy interests, authorities function as the external system being linked – that is, as the target of the carriers in the mediation system. But at an organizational level, some official agencies may function as carriers of the interests of some constituency – as an inside voice for these interests in the internal discussions of decision-making bodies. In this role, they are part of the mediation system rather than the external sys-

tem being linked. The Department of Agriculture, for example, may be less a producer of binding decisions than a carrier of a particular definition of farmers' interests within internal government forums.

To complicate matters further, we can not assume that the state is merely a target system that produces outputs but must recognize that it has system-wide interests of its own. These may or may not be engaged on a given issue but can not be ignored. On abortion, for example, state interests may involve the maintenance of a given population level, thereby providing a link to the abortion issue and reproductive policies more generally. Certain carriers in the mediation system may also be carrying these state interests. Clearly, those who do will enjoy advantages in any contest with rival carriers.

Similarly, when the media are a site in which various carriers compete to further the symbolic interests of their constituencies, they are the external end of the mediation system. But when we examine how their structure and practices shape the outputs and how journalists articulate the symbolic interests of particular constituencies, we are considering them as part of the mediation system in their own right.

The mass media system, like the state, can also be assumed to have autonomous interests of its own, beyond the varying organizational interests of the field of actors that comprise it. Again, these system wide interests may or may not be engaged on a given issue but cannot be ignored. We do not assume that the mass media system is neutral among different types of carriers – for example, between members and challengers – but that the openness varies from issue to issue and must therefore be part of any assessment of cultural impact.

Nature of the Mediation System

The political parties, corporations, associations, and social movements in the interest mediation system are each *fields of actors* that may overlap. Green interests, for example, may be mediated by a movement/party that is simultaneously part of the political party and movement sub-systems and is variously linked with associations as well. One cannot assess the impact of movements independently of their role in this broader system. The symbolic interests of a given constituency may be shared by a field of actors who pursue them in different ways – including a movement sector.

If we find an improvement in the salience of preferred frames in public discourse, we can not attribute it to the movement component in particular

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unless we can differentiate the symbolic interests it emphasizes from those that are common to the network of carriers. Since the internal decisions of this network are typically the site of a contest about what are the best frames and policies to pursue, one can often use this internal discourse to distinguish the particular symbolic interests being articulated by social movement organizations and advocacy networks.

The mediation system as a whole structures the opportunities and constraints in which carriers of particular interests must operate. Different opportunity structures may make it easier or more difficult to mediate a given set of interests. Movements, parties and associations each may have more or less opportunity for influence within the mediation system . . . For cultural change, we should focus on the *media opportunity structure* – that is, the linkage between the mass media subsystem and the various carriers of symbolic interests. In addition to internal norms and practices, the political economy of the mass media also affects the rules of access for whose and which ideas are taken seriously. Any comparative assessment of the success of movement symbolic strategies must reflect differences in media opportunity structure lest we underrate success in movements challenging more fundamental aspects of cultural codes and, hence, face more formidable obstacles to change.

Public Discourse and Public Policy

Success in having an impact on public discourse is important but it does not necessarily translate into impact on either public policy or a broader set of practices in everyday life. With respect to public policy, decision makers in the political system are clearly an attentive part of the gallery and may be directly influenced by the metaphors, images, and arguments that they watch and read. But other forums may be more important – including a policy forum where the gallery is less the general public and more those with professional work interests and responsibilities in the policy domain.

Most of the impact of the media forum on public policy is indirect – mediated by the perceived or actual impact of media discourse on the distribution of individual opinion among voters. To the extent that media discourse shapes these opinions on issues that are electorally relevant, it will constrain political decision makers or induce them to follow dominant tendencies to avoid defeat at the next election. This argument can be seen as a version of the two step flow of influence – in this case, from the media to voters to policy-makers. But the opinions of voters – whether in the form of sample

surveys or the words of one's taxi driver – are open to interpretation with various carriers competing to give their spin on what the “public” really thinks. For advocates in the policy arena, media discourse may be primarily a cultural tool whose content they can use in their own efforts to garner support rather than something by which they are influenced directly.

Policy processes, however, are not driven only or even primarily by ideas. Decision makers may be influenced by many other factors that operate with substantial insulation from public discourse – for example, the exchange relationships and deal-making of political insiders, the maintenance of support from influential political supporters who may have substantial material interests engaged, and the demands of party discipline. It is quite possible to win the battle of public discourse without being able to convert this into the new advantages that flow from actually changing public policy.

But doing badly in mass media discourse creates vulnerability in pursuing policy interests. Political parties and individual politicians looking for issues that will attract voters for themselves and embarrass or divide their opponents may make the issue electorally relevant. For supporters of existing policies, the success of challengers in the mass media forum puts supporters on the defensive and complicates their work. They are left consistently vulnerable when their would-be allies are worried that their policy choices will become an issue that opponents are likely to use against them in the next election. If challengers are sufficiently successful in defining the terms of debate in media discourse, the support of a powerful but discredited interest group may stigmatize those who carry its water in policy disputes.

The link between cultural success and policy outcome is further mediated by the complicated relationship of media discourse to public opinion. In their attempts to make sense of the world of public affairs, ordinary people are only partially dependent on media discourse and dependency varies widely among different issue domains. *Talking Politics* (Gamson 1992: 179) likens people's efforts to make sense of issues to finding their way through a forest. “The various frames offered in media discourse provide maps indicating useful points of entry, and signposts at various crossroads highlight the significant landmarks and warn of the perils of other paths.”

On certain issues, media discourse may be a first resort and the primary resource for making meaning but even on such issues, ordinary people typically will find multiple frames available. The openness of the media text requires that they use other resources as well to complete the task. People control their

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media dependence, in part, through their willingness and ability to draw on popular wisdom and experiential knowledge to supplement what they are offered. If media dependence is only partial when media discourse serves as the starting point, it is even less so where experiential knowledge is the primary resource for finding a path through the forest.

However, lack of dependence does not imply lack of use or influence. Most people on most issues construct meaning by different combinations of media discourse, experiential knowledge, and popular wisdom. They integrate these sources of meaning with varying degrees of success into a coherent cognitive schema for those issues that are important to them; for many policy domains, they may never have thought or talked about it, or ever felt the need to have any opinions about it. The flow of influence from media discourse to public opinion is itself heavily mediated, indirect, and partial, further diluting the impact of success in the mass media forum on policy outcomes.

Finally, success in public discourse also fails to guarantee that broader cultural and institutional practices will necessarily change. One may win the battle of words while practices remain unchanged or even change for the worse. Here, the abortion issue will serve well as an illustration. Most studies of media discourse on abortion suggest that – in the United States, at least – the proponents of frames emphasizing rights of individual privacy and women’s self determination do very well. At the same time, access to abortion is not increasing and has significantly declined in some areas. Some states have only a single abortion provider, requiring women to travel great distances. The symbolic contest over the framing of abortion may be very far from the minds of potential abortion providers who are deterred by the fear that they may become the target of anti-abortion violence – regardless of whether the violence is roundly condemned in media discourse.

Nevertheless, there is solid evidence that abortion access is heavily influenced by public support for abortion rights. In Wetstein’s (1996) quantitative study of abortion rates in the 50 American states, he examines the percentage of counties within a state which have one or more abortion providers. Using a multi-variate LISREL analysis to estimate a path model, he finds that two primary factors can account for 63% of the variation in abortion access. “Greater support in the mass public translates directly into greater levels of access to abortion ($B = .32$). The only other significant variable to influence the level of providers is the socio-economic variable [a combined measure using median income, median education, and other similar indices] ($B = .53$)”

(Wetstein 1996: 120). Wetstein included no measures of media discourse in his analysis but his results certainly suggest that the cultural climate on the issue in a given state is one of the most important predictors of abortion practices.

Measuring Success

Cultural social movements are sustained with [?] self-conscious challenges to cultural codes by a field of actors, some of whom employ extra-institutional means of influence. Extra-institutional refers to everything other than the use of the electoral system, the judicial system and the peaceful petitioning of public officials (lobbying, testifying at public hearings, presentations, letters, petitions). In the case of cultural challengers, the extra-institutional means may include guerrilla theater or other dramatic displays, demonstrations, vigils, marches, burning of effigies, graffiti, "culture jamming," and other norm violating symbolic politics.

ACT UP, an AIDS activist organization, has been especially inventive in this regard, using such venues as a Mets game at Shea Stadium to denormalize taken-for-granted codes. J. Gamson (1989: 351) describes their slogans, using baseball themes: "No glove, no love," "Don't balk at safer sex," and "AIDS is not a ballgame." He quotes a straight fan who complains, "AIDS is a fearful topic. This is totally inappropriate," suggesting that the fan has inadvertently summed up the point of the action. The opportunity to challenge invisibility and the taken-for-granted is there for challengers willing to use unconventional forms of collective action.

Many movements seeking structural change also challenge cultural codes. The civil rights movement, the women's movement and the environmental movement, for example, are cultural movements by the above definition. Rather than classifying movements, it seems more useful to ask how any movement that has a cultural challenge as one component, can measure success in this realm, even if it is not their primary emphasis.

The Strategy of Social Protest (Gamson 1990) offers an approach to measuring success which can be adapted to measuring cultural impact as well. *Strategy* suggests that we think of success as a *set* of outcomes, recognizing that a given challenging group may score differently on equally valid measures. However, it divides the outcome measures into two basic clusters: one concerned with the fate of the challenging group as an organization and one

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		<u>Acceptance</u>	
		<u>Full</u>	<u>None</u>
	<u>Many</u>	Full Response	Preemption
<u>New</u>			
<u>Advantages</u>	<u>None</u>	Cooptation	Collapse

Source: Gamson 1990: 29

Figure 1: Outcomes of Challenges

with the distribution of new advantages to the group’s beneficiary. The central issue in the first cluster focuses on the *acceptance* of a challenging group by its targets as a valid representative for a legitimate set of interests. The central issue in the second cluster focuses on whether a group’s constituents gain *new advantages* during the challenge and its aftermath.

By combining these two questions, as in Figure 1 above, we can specify four possible outcomes: full response, co-optation, preemption, and collapse. The full response and collapse categories are relatively unambiguous successes and failures – in the one case the achievement of both acceptance and new advantages; in the other, the achievement of neither. The remaining are mixed success categories: co-optation refers to acceptance without new advantages and preemption to new advantages without acceptance. *Strategy* operationalizes these variables with a strong structural bias, inadequately meeting the challenge of measuring cultural impact. But with appropriate modification, the same outcomes can be used.

Acceptance

Acceptance in *Strategy* assumes the existence of a visible antagonist or set of them. “This antagonist necessarily begins with a relationship of active or passive hostility toward the challenging group or, at best, indifference. Acceptance involves a change from hostility or indifference to a more positive relationship” (Gamson 1990: 31). As indicators of a more positive relationship, *Strategy* focuses on consultation, negotiations, formal recognition, and inclusion in positions of authority in the antagonist’s organizational structure.

This operationalization of acceptance ignores the fundamental dilemma of those who challenge cultural codes – the invisibility of the antagonist. Much

of what ACT UP is fighting, for example, “is abstract, disembodied, invisible: control through the creation of abnormality” (J. Gamson 1989: 352). The premise of a visible antagonist who can grant acceptance is violated, requiring a different type of operationalization. But by focusing on media discourse, there is a ready solution to a cultural definition of acceptance.

Acceptance, for cultural challengers, can be measured by media *standing*. In legal discourse, standing refers to the right of a person or group to challenge in a judicial forum the conduct of another, especially with respect to governmental conduct. The rules for according legal standing have been anything but fixed and clear. Former Chief Justice Earl Warren, in *Flast v. Cohen* (1968), referred to it as “one of the most amorphous concepts in the entire domain of public law.” Rather than a matter of clear definition, legal standing is a battleground and the environmental movement, in particular, has had considerable success in expanding who has standing to sue the government.

By analogy, media standing is also contested terrain. In news accounts, it refers to gaining the status of a regular media source whose interpretations are directly quoted. Note that standing is not the same as being covered or mentioned in the news; a group may be in the news in the sense that it is described or criticized but has no opportunity to provide interpretation and meaning to the events in which it is involved. Standing refers to a group being treated as an agent, not merely as an object being discussed by others.

From the standpoint of most journalists who are attempting to be “objective,” the granting of standing is anything but arbitrary. Sources are selected, in this view, because they speak as or for serious players in any given policy domain: individuals or groups who have enough political power to make a potential difference in what happens. Most journalists would insist that their choice of sources to quote has nothing at all to do with their personal attitudes toward those sources. If they choose to call Operation Rescue and quote its erstwhile spokesman, Randall Terry, on his reactions to a Supreme Court decision on abortion, this has nothing to do with whether they like or dislike Operation Rescue or Terry. They are simply reflecting a reality that is out there – for better or worse, the group has enough power that it needs to be taken into account and Terry is able and willing to speak for them.

Croteau and Hoynes (1994) conducted studies of the guests on *Nightline* and identified some apparently significant sources who did not appear. Host Ted Koppel and his associates defended their choices. The authors quote

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Nightline executive producer Richard Kaplan who argued, "We're a news show, not a public-affairs show. Our job is to bring on guests who make the news – the players, in other words."² News, in this world view, is about those powerful enough to make a difference – this objective reality is the basis of standing for a news show.

Of course, sophisticated journalists such as a Ted Koppel or a David Brinkley are aware that an appearance on their show also enhances the claims of players to be taken seriously. Presumably, they are both flattered by their ability to influence who has standing with other journalists and made uncomfortable by the unwanted responsibility. They would like it to be true that they merely reflect rather than create standing and their awareness that this is only half true is disquieting. In the end, they content themselves with trying to pursue the ideal of objectivity as best they can in an imperfect world.

In the model offered here, media standing is the endpoint of a contest over which sponsors of meaning will have an opportunity to appear in a mass media forum *that defines membership in terms of political power*. Defining *acceptance* in these terms, emphasizes standing as a measure of achieved cultural power. The model here assumes that journalists operating in a news forum try to reflect their perceptions of who the key players are but that, in practice, they are influenced by various other factors in choosing sources and quotes. Choice of sources – at least in the U.S. media – is often driven by the need for spectacle and drama; the sources who are used are those who give good sound bite or provide footage of people with fire in the belly. In cultural contests, sources are often chosen because they are seen as representing a particular perspective. Rather than being seen as representative in the sense of typical, they are chosen as prototypes who represent a particular cultural tendency in a compelling and dramatic way. In this sense, standing still reflects a journalistic political judgment about which cultural movements make a difference or are players.

Note that this discussion of standing operationalizes the concept for policy discourse; to assess some broader cultural acceptance, one needs to look beyond news forums to include such mass media forums as television entertainment, movies, talk shows, and advertising. It is especially problematic to

² In the case of *Nightline*, this defense fails to deal with one of Croteau and Hoynes (1994) principal findings – that the most frequent appearing guests were often *former* players, not those who were presently active.

ignore these when talking about cultural change because they may be more sensitive indicators. Standing, measured as who gets quoted in news accounts, does not capture this broader form of cultural acceptance. It does not deal, for example, with the portrayal of gay and lesbian characters in a sympathetic or matter of fact way in entertainment forums which may say more about the acceptance of the homosexual constituency than quoting a person from ACT-UP or the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

New Advantages

Much of the discussion of this variable in *Strategy* is relevant here in spite of the structural bias in operationalizing it. Did the potential beneficiaries of the challenge receive what the group sought for them? The challenger's perspective and aspirations are the starting point for assessment. We are left to judge whether the benefits sought were or would have been "real" benefits; they are benefits as defined by the challenger. On the issue of whether the benefits actually happened, *Strategy* supplemented the group's own assessment of success with that of the antagonist and professional historians, looking for consensus.

By using media discourse as the measure of new cultural advantages, we have a simpler and more quantifiable measure of success than perceived outcome by observers in different social locations. Challengers to cultural codes have an alternative way of framing the issues in some normative domain. Their preferred alternative frame calls into question the taken-for-granted assumptions of the code being challenged – for example, about the nature of what is normal and abnormal, visible or invisible, or what is appropriate behavior in work and family settings. Often such challenges focus on visual images, language and labels – whether on the abortion issue, for example, one uses the term "fetus" or "baby."

If one charts mass media coverage of some issue domain over time, frames and their associated idea elements and symbols will ebb and flow in prominence. Success in gaining new advantages in cultural terms is measured by changes in the relative prominence of the challenger's preferred frames compared to antagonistic or rival frames. Take, for example, a specific cultural practice challenged by the women's movement – the use of the generic "he" in English, to be replaced by various alternative forms of gender inclusive language. To assess success, one compares media samples from today with those before the second wave of the women's movement began in the late

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1960s. If gender exclusive language is reduced or has disappeared, here is a clear measure of success.

Extending this measure of success to other non-news forums is less problematic than it is for standing. Frames can be extracted from cartoons, films, advertising, and entertainment as readily as from news accounts. The prominence of preferred movement frames can be assessed over time in such forums in the same way as in news forums.

Using these two measures, the four outcomes above are redefined for cultural challengers. *Full response* means that a challenger receives both media standing and a significant increase in the prominence of its preferred frame. *Collapse* means it receives neither standing nor increased prominence for its preferred frame. *Cooptation* means that the group receives media standing but no significant increase in its preferred frames; finally, *preemption* means that the challenger's preferred frame has significantly increased in media prominence in spite of the absence of media standing for its sponsor.

Explaining Success

Cultural movements face a number of daunting obstacles in competing with public officials, corporations, political parties, organized interest groups and other more resource-laden sponsors of meaning. Some do well in spite of the uneven playing field. Why do they succeed? To answer this, we'll examine each of the four major factors in determining the success of a frame in the mass media forum: sponsor activities, media norms and practices, cultural resonances and narrative fit.

Sponsor Activities

Frames succeed, in part, because of sponsors who promote them through such tangible activities as speech making, interviews with journalists, advertising, article and pamphlet writing, and the like. Many of these sponsors are organizations who employ professional specialists whose daily jobs bring them into contact with journalists. The sponsor of a package is typically an agent who can draw on the resources of an organization to prepare materials in a form that lends itself to ready use. Professionalism abets sophistication about the news needs of the media and the norms and habits of working journalists.

Cultural challengers can rarely hope to compete with the full array of pro-

duction assets that defenders of cultural codes can muster but they can compete successfully in some realms. Production assets include not only material resources such as personnel and money that are available for sponsoring preferred frames in the media but also sophistication and know-how about how the mass media work in a practical way. Many cultural challengers can and do acquire this know-how.

The abortion issue in the U.S. is a ready illustration. Both pro-choice and pro-life movement groups have highly skilled professionals with a sophisticated understanding of what works in the mass media forum. They concede nothing in this respect to organized religious groups or political parties, for example. Many of the actors in the movement organizational fields have a relatively stable flow of resources although some, of course, struggle to survive. In this case, the general disadvantages movements face in production assets have been neutralized to the point at which they can compete on more or less equal terms with non-movement sponsors.

The importance of production assets is mitigated by what Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina (1982: 87–88) call the *threshold hypothesis*. They suggest that the simple linear hypothesis – the greater the production assets, the higher the probability of success – is inadequate. It is more useful to specify a desirable threshold for different kinds of assets. “Those groups of potential challengers that fail to meet this threshold have a deficit with negative consequences [for success]. But enough is enough. Once a group has sufficient assets, no further advantage accrues from having more.” By this argument, cultural challengers must overcome any deficits in production assets to succeed but having achieved a certain threshold, increasing production assets will only add marginally to the probability of success.

Media Norms and Practices

Hallin and Mancini (1984, p. 841), building on Habermas’ arguments about the structural transformation of the public sphere, note the replacement of a participatory, decentralized bourgeois public sphere “by a process of political communication dominated by large scale institutions: political parties, unions, and other organized associations of the private sector, and the mass media.” This public sphere is structured quite differently in the U.S. and in Germany, for example. Political interpretation in Germany is provided by the institutions that have traditionally dominated the modern public sphere: political parties, unions, industrial associations and organized religion. In

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such a situation, the journalist does not need to play a very active role as an interpreter of meaning.

In the U.S., in contrast, the institutions of the public sphere are weak. Political parties are loose coalitions organized to compete for public office, not for expressing unified frames. The meaning of events is often a matter of internal party contention; to sponsor any given frame is to risk a potentially costly internal division which may weaken the party in competing for electoral success. As a result of this relative institutional vacuum, the mass media become *the* primary institution of the American public sphere in performing the function of providing political interpretation.

Partly because of this function of giving meaning to the events of public life, certain journalistic conventions have developed in the United States that are unusual in Europe. These include, Hallin and Mancini (1984) argue, a greater tendency to frame and interpret, and to use narrative structures and images. The result of these differences in journalistic conventions and the nature of the public sphere is a greater opportunity for social movements to shape media discourse in the United States. The relatively smaller importance of institutional actors leads journalists to seek other interpreters, including social movement spokespeople. The consequence is that movement actors are generally more likely to be given standing in the media as interpreters of meaning even though they must compete with rival movement actors, public officials, corporations, and private interest groups to get their ideas across.

The operation of the journalistic *balance norm* also opens opportunities for challengers, albeit in a complicated way. In news accounts, interpretation is generally provided through quotations and balance is provided by quoting spokespersons with competing views. The balance norm is vague and the practices that it gives rise to favor certain frames over others. Organized opposition to official views is necessary to activate the norm which, once invoked, tends to reduce controversy to two competing positions – an official one and the alternative sponsored by the most vested member of the polity.

The balance norm is not generally interpreted to include challengers unless they have already achieved standing. But even challengers without standing can open doors for allies. In the U.S. antinuclear movement, for example, access to the media was greatly enhanced by the 1977 site occupation of the Seabrook, New Hampshire reactor by the Clamshell Alliance. This action helped to define nuclear power as controversial, thereby invoking the media's balance norm. The chief beneficiary in terms of enhanced media standing

was not the Clam but the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS). As Gamson (1988: 235) puts it, "When demonstrators are arrested at Seabrook, phones ring at UCS." Preemption is one likely outcome for cultural challengers who use extra-institutional means to draw the attention of the media – their preferred frame increases in prominence through the words of others even though they do not themselves receive standing.

Of course, internal rivalries between movement actors can undermine such convenient divisions of labor. Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993: 123) point out that movements frequently offer multiple frames, each identified with different actors. Those who increase movement standing through their unconventional actions may find that their particular preferred frame is poorly represented by those who become the media-designated spokespersons. They may attack and attempt to undercut these spokespersons.

The internal movement contest can easily become the media's story, distracting attention from the issue and blurring the preferred frame. There is an underlying tension between the more pragmatic and cynical culture of journalism and the more idealistic and righteous culture of movements. Movements, of course, do not have a monopoly on self-righteousness, moralizing, piety, and the like. Conventional politicians frequently exhibit these traits as well but they often privately share the journalists' culture of cynicism in off the record contacts. They are playing a public role with a wink to journalists – although this does not make them immune to discrediting accounts when their private behavior blatantly seems to contradict their public persona.

Only those who are true believers are operating counter to the culture of journalism but they are also operating counter to the culture of conventional politics. Most movement participants believe in an injustice frame and *are* indignant rather than faking it for public consumption. Movements hector people, including journalists, and call them to account. This righteousness is unappealing to those who are living with the inevitable compromises of daily life. Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993: 120) suggest that this means "that internal movement conflicts and peccadilloes will have a special fascination for journalists, giving them an opportunity to even the score from their standpoint. The fall of the righteous is a favored media story wherever it can be found and movements offer a happy hunting ground." Hence, a division of labor is likely to work only if there is a common frame and a willingness to subordinate concerns about who gets credit for being the messenger.

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Cultural Resonances

Not all symbols are equally potent. Some metaphors soar, others fall flat; some visual images linger in the mind, others are quickly forgotten. Some frames have a natural advantage because their ideas and language resonate with a broader political culture. Resonances increase the appeal of a frame by making it appear natural and familiar. Those who respond to the larger cultural theme will find it easier to respond to a frame with the same sonorities. Snow and Benford (1988: 210) make a similar point in discussing the “narrative fidelity” of a frame. Some frames, they write, “resonate with cultural narrations, that is, with stories, myths, and folk tales that are part and parcel of one’s cultural heritage.”

Talking Politics (Gamson 1992) suggests that this level of analysis can best be captured by focusing on the dialectic between cultural themes and counterthemes. Themes are safe, conventional, and normative; one can invoke them as pieties on ceremonial occasions with the assumption of general social approval, albeit some private cynicism. Counterthemes typically share many of the same taken-for-granted assumptions but challenge some specific aspect of the mainstream culture; they are adversarial, contentious, oppositional. Themes and counterthemes are linked with each other so that whenever one is invoked, the other is always present in latent form, ready to be activated with the proper cue.

Discursive strategies, for challengers as well as for other players, center on the use of language, symbols, and images that resonate with cultural themes and counterthemes. The basic strategy is to invoke the resonances of themes and counterthemes on behalf of one’s preferred frame and to neutralize the potential resonances of the most important rival frames. Framing contests often involve competition over a particular theme.

The battle over the symbol of “equal opportunity” in the United States is a good illustration. In the civil rights movement of the early 1960s, demonstrators carried signs demanding “Equal Opportunity for all Americans.” The demand was that every individual be given a fair chance to succeed, regardless of skin color. The symbol of equal opportunity utilizes the resonances of the powerful self-reliance theme which invokes a world in which with resourcefulness, pluck, and a few breaks, even a poor bootblack can become a millionaire. Rival frames, far from competing for the resonances of this theme, were vulnerable to the charge that they denied individuals the opportunity to succeed on the basis of their efforts and talents.

But during the 1970s, as policy controversy centered on affirmative action programs, the power of these resonances was effectively challenged and neutralized. The major vehicle, a *reverse discrimination* package sponsored by a neo-conservative advocacy network, fought over the same resonances. Advocates embraced equality of opportunity and colorblindness claiming that this is what they sought while opposing only those programs in which “some are more equal than others.” The power of the original resonances was effectively neutralized since there is no effective resonance when discordant frames play the same note.

When dominant frames that are being challenged rely heavily on resonances with certain themes, challengers can sometimes compete by invoking the countertheme. The antinuclear movement, for example, found themselves confronting a dominant frame that invoked the theme of progress through technology. Existing alongside this theme is a countertheme that emphasizes harmony with nature rather than mastery over it and suggests that technology can sometimes develop a life of its own. To quote Emerson, “Things are in the saddle and ride mankind.” The more we try to control nature through our technology, the more we disrupt the natural order and threaten the quality of our lives. Much popular culture reflects the countertheme: Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Kubrick’s *2001*, and countless other films and books about mad scientists and technology gone wild, out of control, a Frankenstein’s monster turned on its creator.

Before there was an antinuclear movement, supporters of nuclear power handled the potential tension between nuclear energy as a symbol of technological progress and as a symbol of ultimate destruction by a strategy of nuclear dualism. Atoms for Peace invoked the progress theme and the countertheme was safely compartmentalized in the nuclear weapons discourse. By invoking the resonances of this countertheme, the antinuclear movement was able to interpret events in ways that helped to destroy nuclear dualism and, with it, the resonances of nuclear power as a technofix for America’s energy problems.

Narrative Fit

A theory explaining the success of frames must be based on an epistemology that recognizes facts as social constructions and evidence as taking on its meaning from the master frames in which it is embedded. The essence of frame contests is competition about what evidence is seen as relevant and

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what gets ignored. Does this social construction model force us to abandon all attempts to evaluate the implications of empirical evidence for the claims of competing frames? Does it reduce us to what Goodman (1978) calls a “flabby relativism” in which all frames have an equal claim in interpreting the world?

Clearly, there is an important and complicated relationship between the characteristics of events and the success of certain frames. The accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl did not make life easy for those who frame nuclear power as technological progress. But neither did they provide empirical refutation of this frame. As its advocates will point out, Three Mile Island “proved” the “defense in depth” safety system works; even in this most serious of nuclear accidents, no one was killed and no significant amounts of radiation were released. And Chernobyl “proved” the wisdom of the American nuclear industry in building reactors with the reinforced concrete containment structures that the Chernobyl plant lacked.

Frames provide a narrative structure which leads one to expect certain kinds of future events. No spin control is necessary when the frame already suggested that such events were likely. But when the narrative confronts unexpected events, some ad hoc explanation and special effort is required by advocates to sustain the frame. A poor narrative fit with unfolding events that cannot be ignored places the burden of proof on those frames that must make sense of them; with a good narrative fit, unfolding events carry the much easier message: “I told you so.”

Conclusion

To assess cultural impact, this paper urges a focus on mass media discourse. This is the most important forum for understanding cultural impact because it is the major site in which contests over meaning must succeed politically. One can use the outcomes at this site to read relative success in cultural contests. More specifically, one can use it to define acceptance and new advantages in cultural terms – where acceptance is measured by standing and new advantages by relative success in having ones preferred frame and its idea elements displayed there. This allows one to redefine the outcome categories of full response, co-optation, preemption, and collapse in cultural terms.

Cultural challengers operate on a playing field that is rarely level and is tilted against them to various degrees, depending on the issue domain.

However, even an uneven contest does not prevent some challengers from success. The ones who succeed, do so by overcoming deficits in production assets and acquiring the necessary know-how; by using media norms and practices to their advantage; by the use of discursive strategies that resonate with broader cultural themes and counter themes and by providing an expected scenario that can anticipate and include unfolding events easily and comfortably in its narrative structure. Of course, challengers may still perform as skillfully as possible and fail because their rivals are equally skilled and have additional structural advantages as defenders of the status quo.

Cultural success is important but winning the battle of words does not guarantee success in other realms. It is a necessary condition for success in changing policies and practices and one major factor in the set of sufficient conditions. But policy processes are political processes and political influence does not operate primarily through persuasion with words and symbols. Nor are broader institutional and cultural practices determined merely by the outcomes in the mass media forum. Nevertheless, there is much evidence for ripple effects.

Success in media discourse is one important influence on public opinion and on which issues will be relevant for electoral politics. Losing the battle of words certainly adds to the difficulties of those who rely on other means of influence to shape public policy. Cultural and institutional practices are influenced by other factors as well but the climate created by media discourse plays an important role in maintaining or changing them. Cultural impact is not everything but it is a significant goal in its own right for cultural challengers.