

**Evidence of “Class Anxiety” in the *Chicago Tribune* Coverage of Organized Labor:
A Quantitative Study from 1991 to 2001**

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Introduction

Over the past three decades organized labor has grown decidedly more troubled about the quality of coverage it receives from daily commercial newspapers. From an earlier Twentieth Century period when seasoned and grizzled newspaper reporters dedicated their investigative and journalistic careers writing about unions, to the near contemporary disappearance of the newspaper “labor beat,” labor reporting has undergone a dramatic de-emphasis (Serrin 1992). Accompanying a reduction in the importance of labor relations news has been a general claim that the print media has not done a fair and balanced job in characterizing the behavior of organized labor (Martin 2004; Solomon 2002; Puette 1992; Hoynes 1994; Tasini 1990; McIntyre 1989). Labor leaders contend that too often newspaper coverage of unions is unjustifiably negative and is usually fixated on conflict and corruption. The newspaper industry’s own recent fractious labor relations may have also influenced union interpretations of media portrayals (Stranger 2000). While this attitude is broadly shared across the union spectrum, there has been little actual objective analysis of labor news reporting to substantiate or discredit the common belief.

In an attempt to assess the accuracy of labor’s claim that it gets bad press, a study of industrial relations coverage in the *Chicago Tribune* was conducted. The study examined actual press accounts of industrial relations events and subjected each story to a quantitative content analysis. As part of the analysis, the authors also identified and examined evidence of a “class anxiety” influencing the *Tribune*’s labor coverage. The authors’ contend that under certain proscribed conditions, the paper displays a decided apprehension about the organized working-class. While still somewhat speculative here, the concept of class anxiety is informative because

it may help to explain when, why and how the *Tribune* arrives at a particular vantage point for reporting labor events.

Before describing the nature of the study, it is important to note that it did not attempt to measure any trends in labor coverage. It was not the authors' intentions to suggest that labor reporting had become more or less good or bad, but simply to test organized labor's belief that they are not fairly treated by the press. What follows therefore is a descriptive assessment of news coverage over a designated time period. The study also offers no comparisons of the *Tribune* with either the *Chicago Sun-Times* or other major city dailies. Ideally, such comparisons would have better established that the *Tribune* is either broadly representative of labor news coverage or an abnormality in the industry. While the study's generalizability would have been enhanced by including more papers, the *Chicago Tribune* was selected for a single case assessment because its' editorializing on labor relations has routinely communicated a hostile conservative point of view and its assaults on organized labor have a long pedigree.¹ Past

¹. Much of organized labor's assessment of the *Tribune's* anti-union bias was hardened in 1985 when the paper's three production unions walked off the job after failing to bargain new contracts. The dispute escalated into a year long and bitter struggle, which resulted in a majority of the 1,000 strikers being permanently replaced. City labor leaders alleged that the paper was trying to break the production unions (Warren 1986). Five years later the Tribune Media Company – parent owner of the Chicago paper – further damaged its relationship with city labor officials when New York newspaper unions struck another company holding, the *Daily News* (Reilly 1990a). The *News* strike featured violence between union members and hundreds of company replacement workers hired by a “union-busting team in Chicago” (Reilly 1990b, 1). Six months into the strike the

and present city and Illinois state labor leaders have been very critical of how the paper characterizes union activity. The paper's alleged, anti-union philosophy is given further credence by labor leaders because the *Tribune's* reporters, as well as its other employees, are not union members, like those for the *Sun-Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

As a single case, the *Tribune* is also worth assessing because it is one of only two daily mass circulation papers in one of the most unionized large cities in the country.² Additionally, Chicago has a long labor history and lays claim to having more number one chartered union locals than any other American city.³ Finally, the paper is a critical holding of a large news media conglomerate, the Tribune Company. In addition to the Chicago paper, The Tribune Company owns fourteen other daily newspapers and twenty five broadcast and cable stations.⁴ Thus, in assessing the labor reportage of one of the company's holdings the study is targeting a media entity with sizeable public reach. In short, before embarking on a more extensive

Tribune Company reported that the *News* had lost over \$90 million in circulation and advertising revenues. The financial and physical bleeding eventually led the Tribune Company to sell the paper to a New York competitor (Reilly 1991a).

² . According to the Chicago Federation of Labor there are approximately 500,000 affiliated members in Chicago and Cook County. The CFL is the second largest central body in the nation, representing over 300 local unions.

³ . According to the CFL, the city's seven union locals bearing the number one is higher than nay other large city.

⁴ . For a complete breakdown of Tribune Company holdings see the Columbia Journalism Review online at www.cjr.org.

examination of print media, the authors decided to first determine if organized labor's concerns about reporting bias were substantive when leveled against a notorious anti-union employer.

The question of the validity of labor's charge against the editorial and reporting practices of the newspaper industry is critically important to how citizens and particularly non-organized workers view labor unions and the modern workplace. While annual Gallup Polls taken since 1936 have found that at least 55 percent of the public has approved of labor unions (Cornfield 1999), union leaders contend that their efforts to organize new workers, negotiate better agreements and win strikes are handicapped by a lack of balanced news reporting. Labor officials may be aware and reacting to polls like those taken by the National Opinion Research Center that have consistently ranked labor unions near or at the bottom of a list of institutions the public has a "great deal of confidence in" (Powers, Rotham and Rotham 1996,66).

In addition to polling data, a 1992 study revealed that national news reporting was more important than "the influence of family, neighbor, teacher, preacher, and co-worker" on the formation of public opinion about union behavior (Puette 1992, 157). In a second analysis, a positive and significant relationship was found between strike-related coverage and public disapproval of unions (Jarley and Kuruvilla 1994). A third study noted that compared to robust coverage of industrial relations conflict, the dearth of media attention given to "peaceful, cooperative [labor] settlements" produces mostly bad news for organized labor (Erickson and Mitchell 1996).

To be sure, how public opinion influences labor relations' outcomes is not systematically understood. Nonetheless, broad public support for striking Teamsters at United Parcel Service in 1997, and against a 2002 labor stoppage in Major League baseball prior to the initial September 11 anniversary, were reported by pundits to have had a major influence on how those dispute

concluded. On the other hand, strong public antipathy against Eastern Airline executive Frank Lorenzo during the protracted 1989 labor dispute did not save the workers or the company. Ronald Reagan, however undoubtedly knew of the public's antipathy for striking PATCO workers when he fired them all in 1981 (Cornfield 1999).

Of course determining the impact of public opinion on industrial relations conflict may be more manageable in each of the above cases because the events had national implications. Conflict between large companies or industries, and national unions evolves on a larger scale. Public opinion is then generated by media attention, which fuels repeated cycles of more media time followed by increased levels of public interest. But most work disputes are not writ large. In reality, the vast majority of labor relations are practiced between local employers and one or more of over twenty thousand local unions. Rarely in these instances is there more than anecdotal evidence of any registered public opinion. Despite the fact that an over whelming majority of labor relations events occur without any public involvement, union officials contend that the overall news media coverage of labor is derogatory. Bad press then contributes to labor's difficulties in attaining a favorable economic or political outcome.

If, however, labor's regularly repeated charges against the news media cannot be verified then union criticisms are misguided. On the other hand, if analysis reveals that news reporting is biased against labor unions then labor leaders have a legitimate complaint about how their organizations are characterized. The economic and political consequences of unfair newspaper journalism are potentially substantial. A drum beat of biased and negative reporting may badly disadvantage the economic efforts of workers in conflict with their employers. Unions are often dependent on the general public to support a strike picket line, a consumer boycott or a public relations campaign. How a newspaper represents a labor relation's event could determine the

material well being of many families. In addition, labor's influence in the electoral and public policy arena is partially dependent on being able to persuade non-union voters to act in accordance with labor's endorsement. In this case, the very process of citizen enfranchisement and pluralism is corrupted when the public is on the receiving end of one-sided news reporting.

The paper is divided into four sections. After a review of the scholarly work done on labor reporting, the *Tribune* study methodology is explained and is followed in section three by the study findings. Section four examines the presence of a "class anxiety" influencing *Tribune* reporting, and in the conclusion the authors discuss recommendations about further research and some concerns about the quality of union public relations' efforts.

Review of Literature

While there have been many qualitative analyses of the media, quantitative studies have been more difficult to find and hard data on labor coverage in the media are even scarcer.⁵ The few broad quantitative studies done on media coverage of labor relations have offered perspective, but little in the way of methodology. Nonetheless, existing qualitative studies have offered some interesting and common findings. Analysis conducted by Erickson and Mitchell (1996) confirmed the unsurprising but largely anecdotal belief that labor events were indeed a subject commonly found in newspapers, magazines and on television broadcasts. In a study of Canadian news reporting, however, Geoff Walsh (1988) found that 92 percent of labor items

⁵. An example of how invisible media analysis of labor coverage is consider that the prominent Center for Media and Public Affairs has published since 1982 forty-four books, monographs and reports without a single union or industrial relations focus (see CMPA online Archive). Additionally, since 1987 CMPA's *Media Monitor* publication has produced 111 issues without casting a lens on organized labor reporting.

were “conflict” articles. Walsh also notes that the most frequent adjectives used to describe workers were “low-paid,” “angry,” “militant,” and “divided” while management was most often labeled “confident,” “determined,” “firm,” and “tough.” Finally, Walsh pointed out that while 95 percent of labor disputes are settled peacefully, strikes were the overwhelming focus of labor coverage. The heavy and unwarranted emphasis on conflict reporting is suggestive of a 1930’s – 1940’s discredited newspaper practice of overtly siding with employers during labor disputes by conducting what amounted to “scientific strikebreaking” (Tracy 2001, 299).

Strike stories were also central to Diane Schmidt’s (1993) disturbing findings that media fixation on union work stoppages increased their ability to influence public opinions about labor unions. It is Schmidt’s intriguing finding that even while the frequency of strikes has been drastically reduced, the media have come to focus an increasingly larger share of their labor coverage on work disputes. Unbalanced coverage of this sort cannot help but foster a negative public image of unions. Francis Flynn (2000) took Schmidt’s thesis of media manipulation of the public trust and analyzed the instrumental role of news media on the success or failure of collective bargaining. His study surprisingly revealed that pre-strike media attention had the potential to actually determine strike duration. The media’s strategic love affair with work disputes is in part explained, according to Robert Coulson (1980), by the sensational, dramaturgical public appeal of direct human confrontation.

In the book *Inventing Reality* (1993), Michael Parenti points out that mainstream newspaper journalists typically approach organized labor in one of the following conflict-laden ways: (1) they will seek out strike stories instead of peaceful resolution stories, (2) finds rifts within organized labor as indicative of internal weakness, rather than a democratic impulse, and (3) will see a pugnacious and recalcitrant destruction in labor while overlooking the conditions

that management has created for workers to overcome. Typically labor is characterized as a negative agency confronting ambiguous forces that act without responsibility. As Parenti notes, viewing organized labor through this obstructed lens reflects biases and not examples of objective reporting that consistently describes reality.

Central to many media-labor studies is the question of when organized labor becomes a news event. Richard Meister (2002) concluded that, “labor is news” only when labor is doing something “that’s highly visible and easily explained in the simplistic, violent and melodramatic terms of labor versus management.” Once labor is considered newsworthy because of its actions, the question of how that behavior is characterized has also been the focus of media critiques. Paul Hartmann’s (1975) study of British news coverage of industrial relations found that the media accords less legitimacy and less desirable consequences to the actions of workers and their unions. Hartman found that workers were regularly described as “low-paid,” “angry,” “militant,” and “divided,” while management was labeled “confident,” “determined,” “firm,” and “tough.” He refers to the above characterizations as a form of “differential legitimacy” and stresses that it is the principle bias in covering labor related stories. A content analysis of two years of newspaper industrial relations coverage by Oshagan and Martin (1999) supported the “legitimacy” thesis and concluded that management’s perspective was more positively framed than the workers’ or unions’ position.

The issue of framing stories is also influenced by the corporate ownership structure and stock value obsession of media companies. Jo Ann Mort concluded in *Dissent* (1992) “competition for scarce advertising revenue has newspapers framing their coverage for an elite buying public.” And according to Mott, in many cases, “labor issues tend to be seen in terms of the bottom line.” Labor settlements, for example, are “covered with attention paid to the market

share effect it will have on the company, rather than benefits or hardships for the workers” (83). At a Committee of Concerned Journalists forum, *New York Daily News* columnist Juan Gonzalez noted that there is a “class divide between those who produce news and information and those who receive it,” and that a “class bias” in news coverage treats working class Americans as if they are “less important in society” (2002, 5). Gonzalez was adamant that “there’s a class unconscious and sometimes conscious bias toward working Americans in the mass media” (6).

The focus on up scale tastes and consumption practices has resulted in a handful of surviving labor beats at major metropolitan newspapers.⁶ Nor do most papers regularly dedicate space to on going labor relations, although *The Wall Street Journal* has offered a “labor letter” feature and a weekly “workplace” column.⁷ Moreover, many big-city metropolitan papers like *The New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* are written and packaged for upper middle class suburbanites, not working class urban residents, farmers or rural laborers. It then becomes increasingly difficult for a paper to cultivate good labor sources when the labor beat either does not exist or falls to whoever is available to cover a random labor news event.

⁶ . A random phone and Internet check of major metropolitan papers revealed that only the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *St. Louis Post Dispatch* and *Wall Street Journal* officially list a person as a “labor reporter” (as opposed to “business reporter”).

⁷ . In the media analysis magazine *Extra!* (www.fair.org/extra, 6 September 2002), Janine Jackson has dismissively characterized the “labor letter” piece as a “model of fluff reporting” that “describes the problems workers face as lifestyle issues, not as economic disputes” (November/December 1994).

Labor reporting in the last three or four decades has also been influenced by the changing demographics of who is writing the stories. Increasingly, reporters come from and live within a middle-class, well-educated social milieu. This is in contrast to the “high working class activity” that James Fallows (1996, 75) claims defined journalism until about the middle 1960s. Big city reporters were not typically college educated and made about as much money as policeman walking a beat. Fallows quotes longtime *Washington Post* correspondent, Richard Harwood explaining that before the mass consumption of television programming “Reporters regarded themselves as working class” (76).

But by 1980, according to Fallows, journalism had undergone a “status revolution” bringing higher pay and celebrity credentials to newspaper and television press corps. Under these conditions, many of the articles that mainstream papers now end up publishing will often reflect an internalized and unexamined class bias. Juan Gonzalez associates this tendency with the efforts of editors “to create people [reporters] in their own image” (2002, 10). According to Noam Chomsky, “You don’t even make it into those circles [media press corps] unless you’re already so deeply overwhelmed by doctrine and propaganda that you can’t even think in other terms” (1998, 187). Fallows adds that the end result of the “status revolution” is that “many reporters [develop] a strong if unconscious bias in favor of ‘haves’ rather than ‘have nots’ (1996, 83).

For the purposes of constructing the *Tribune* study, the most influential previous scholarship was John T. Woolley’s (2000) article, titled “Using Media-Based Data in Studies of Politics.” Woolley’s work summarized earlier media studies and the contexts in which that research was undertaken. He noted that a “new cynicism” might explain the focus on the negative reporting aspects of organized labor. While this cynicism has many sources, it has in

part fostered and then reinforced persistently poor labor coverage. But Woolley's principal finding is that "In studies of media focus, the variable of interest is media attention per unit of time - number of stories, number of column inches, amount of television time - per month or year"(161). In the study described below Woolley's basic elemental structure was utilized to construct a field of quantifiable variables.

Study Methodology

In the summer of 2001 the authors conducted an independent media analysis of the *Chicago Tribune's* coverage of organized labor. The study was designed and implemented by the authors, and we were responsible for all interpretations and findings. Using the *Chicago Tribune's* electronic archival database, we conducted a ten-year retrospective search from July 1st, 1991 to June 31st, 2001 of *Tribune* newspaper articles. Full articles deploying the word "labor" or "union" in the title, or that included the key word phrases "labor union," "organized labor," "labor organization," "labor movement," and "union" in the body of the story were downloaded and initially examined. A preliminary word search identified 520 possible labor articles. After a close reading of each article by the authors, 134 were rejected as inappropriate, leaving a useable database of 386 news stories. Items were excluded from the study if they were not about or made no reference to American unions, union members and union leaders or made no actual reference to union activity within the context of labor relations. In addition, while they were calculated, obituaries (n = 22), book and movie reviews (n = 6), reader letters (n = 15), and editorial and op-ed pieces (n = 14) about labor related subjects were not included in the study. Editorial and op-ed pieces, however, along with book reviews were subjectively assessed as "positive" or "negative."

Variables and Scoring

For each of the articles the following six (6) demographic variables were recorded; *date*, *author*, *title*, *section*, *page number*, and *word count*. While these items reflected editing decisions that defined the importance of the respective article in the minds of the editors, they were not considered appropriate variables to include in determining whether the stories' were "positive," "negative," or "neutral." However, the authors did subject each of these variables to a separate analysis. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of collecting the data from an electronic news service, section (with a couple of exceptions) and page number proved impossible to accurately discern.

In addition to the above items, seven (7) substantive variables were also selected to measure the character of each news story. These variables included the *story lead*, *content type*, *content frame*, *labor signifiers*, *information sources*, *internal agency* and *external agency*. A brief description of each variable follows.

The story lead is customarily presented within the first two paragraphs of the piece but often appears in the first sentence. It typically signifies the thesis or most important point of the article, and provides a guidepost to the reader for what is to follow. The lead was assessed according to how it appeared to characterize labor's activity in the story. A positive, negative or neutral score was then assigned to this variable.

Content type identifies the subject of the story and informs the reader what the article is literally about (i.e., a union election, a labor personality, a strike...etc). Study examiners assigned values to articles based on a pre-determined understanding of what constituted positive, negative and neutral content. For example, labor agreements were defined as positive, while strikes and union corruption were viewed as negative. Personality stories about individual labor leaders were treated as neutral content type. While the mere identification of a story's content

does not suggest a bias, after the researchers read the articles they assigned positive, negative or neutral scores to each piece based on a subjective interpretation of the way the writer framed the content. For example, if an ostensibly negative story line about union corruption is presented from the perspective of how rare actual criminal behavior is within the labor movement, then a positive score is assigned to the content frame variable.

Labor signifiers are adjectives used to describe labor unions, labor activity or labor leaders. Common examples of such signifiers appearing in news coverage of union activity are “labor bosses,” “Big Labor,” “militant,” “inclusive,” “responsible,” “featherbedding,” “weak,” and “protecting workers.” Each article was screened for the use of descriptive words or phrases and the identified signifiers were determined to be positive or negative. The signifiers were then separately added up into positive and negative categories. Based on the cumulative totals a positive or negative score was assigned. If, however, no signifiers appeared in the story, or if the positive and negative ones were equal, a neutral score was awarded.

Information sources refer to citations within the story from “labor,” “business,” and/or “other” individuals. Article sources were simply scored numerically and the variable was evaluated as positive or negative depending on the number of labor versus other sources that were used. More union sources than other sources generated a positive score, an equal number of union and non-union sources would be scored as neutral, and fewer or no union sources would produce a negative score.

Internal and external agency, are both variables intended to account for the use of “active” and “passive voice” within the article. The study assessed whether journalists referred to labor events as simply happening, or to conditions faced by workers without describing what created those events or conditions. Internal agency measured whether the newspaper story

credited organized labor for a particular outcome (good or bad). If for example, the article credited labor with a positive outcome then internal agency was recorded as positive.

External agency, on the other hand, referred to an agent (i.e., the employer or government) outside of the labor movement responsible for a reported condition or event (good or bad). The authors' contend that external agency is an important item because it provides the reader with additional information about the article's course of events. Thus, if no external agent was identified the variable was scored negatively. If, however, an external agent was identified, a positive or negative score was assigned on the bases of how the agent's actions were described. For example, if an employer's actions in a strike story were described as purely defensive, the variable would be scored negatively for overlooking the conditions that management has created for workers to overcome.

As previously noted the authors separately read all of the articles in the data set and independently measured each variable. For each article a qualitative and quantitative analysis was used to measure every variable. Quantitatively, positive (+), negative (-), or neutral (0) values were assigned to each of the six (7) assessment variables. Each article was then assigned a final cumulative "tone quotient" by adding the negative and positive scores and multiplying that sign (i.e., + or -) by a "weight" (i.e., points) given to each article. It was the examiners' judgment that longer articles would amplify and shorter articles would diminish any of the issues that the journalist focused on. Articles were weighted according to the following word scale:

Over 1500	= 6 points
1499-1000	= 5 points
999 – 500	= 4 points
499 – 250	= 3 points
249 – 100	= 2 points
99 – 1	= 1 point

Where differences occurred in the evaluation, the readers discussed the divergent interpretations and attempted to reach consensus. In cases where dissonance on a particular variable could not be harmonized, the variable was assigned a neutral score. Final weighted tone quotients ranged on a duo axis-scale from -36 to +36 and reflected both the article's direction and strength of direction. While interpretive judgment cannot be avoided, the authors added this numeric dimension to the methodology in order to determine whether a particular story has a "positive," "negative" or "neutral" tone. Together, of course, the sign and numerical score did not elucidate any information about the article's specific biases. However, the individual variables and cumulative scores of the examined articles did make it possible for the research team to genuinely report a quantitative trend in the *Tribune's* overall labor coverage.

One final important note about the *Tribune* study is that it diverges from conventional media analysis in not limiting its focus to one or more major labor relations' cases. Past studies have privileged stories with a national audience (Christen, Kannaovakun and Gunther, 2002). These events usually lasted for long periods of time, had an impact on people throughout the country and received broad coverage from print and electronic media. While the high visibility of certain labor relations events made them obvious targets for media analysis, too often midsize, small and unexceptional stories flew under the analysis radar. Structuring a study around only major stories not only limits the cases that can be measured, but very likely will exclude labor relations events in a wide array of industries. In order then to do a comprehensive analysis of how a particular media source covers the subject of organized labor this study created and examined a database of published local and national stories.

Study Findings

No News is Bad News

An analysis of *Tribune* news coverage of organized labor from July 1st, 1991 to June 31st, 2001 reveals that there is surprisingly little of it to analyze. For the time period studied the electronic archives produced only 386 labor union related cases, for a paltry 38.6 stories per year. At first impression, the number of stories raised the question of the reliability of the electronic database. A discussion with reporters from the *Tribune* suggested that they had filed many more stories on the workplace than indicated in this study. The discrepancy however is best explained by distinguishing workplace stories from union or industrial relations articles. While an undetermined number of “working” articles may have been written, only pieces with a clearly defined union or labor-management focus were included in the study. Additionally, assuming that the *Tribune* did not publish more than one union story per week (a fair assumption according to Chicago observers) for the time assessed, the average of approximately 39 stories is not too far off from the forty-eight cases that might be expected.

It is of course possible that the word search was not inclusive enough to pick up all available stories. But as Miller and Riechart (1994) have pointed out, only when addressing complex issues that embody diverse viewpoints is an a prior decision problematic as to what themes might be identified by the news media and how they might be covered. While the *Tribune* may have chosen to cover a multitude of labor related stories, content analysis on union activity is very likely to pivot around a relatively small number of key words. Also, even if the database and word search were faulty, there is no reason to assume or any evidence that it was faulty in a way that undercounts "positive" stories.

Allowing, therefore, for a degree of inefficiencies in the database, the unexpectedly low number of labor relations and union stories raises questions of journalistic judgment. While the *Tribune* assessment did not compare labor relations accounts with other types of news coverage (i.e., human interest, political events, economic conditions, and scandals), the sheer volume of unionized economic, political and community activity in the city of Chicago alone should have garnered considerably more labor press coverage than occurred. Thus, an initial study finding is that the *Tribune* has largely ignored organized labor.

However, disregard for labor relations is not without consequence. The *Tribune's* meager attention to workplace relations places added value on the substance of those stories that do get written. An examination of the cases reported revealed that 55.2 percent of the stories were negative, while slightly more than a third (34.9 percent) were positive (see Table 1). Negative stories outpaced positive ones for every year of the study with two significant exceptions.⁸ In 1996 and 2000 there were more positive stories than negative articles (see Table 2). The years 1996 and 2000 are note worthy because they occur in the post-AFL-CIO national leadership change period.⁹ After the election of John Sweeney to the AFL-CIO's presidency in October of 1995 the *Tribune's* press coverage undergoes a discernable shift. In the pre-Sweeney period (August 1991–September 1995) covering forty-nine months, only 28.2 percent of the

⁸. Positive stories were also higher in 1991 but that was an abbreviated year with only twelve cases, covering the months from August to December.

⁹. In October of 1995 Service Employees International President John Sweeney successfully put together a “New Voice” reform slate to defeat the incumbent head Tom Donohue for the AFL-CIO's leadership. It was the first contested election at the AFL-CIO in over fifty years.

stories were positive. But in the seventy-one months covered after Sweeney’s election (October 1995-August 2001) there were 39.3 percent positive articles printed. The more affirming reporting has not however, increased labor’s visibility. Prior to the AFL-CIO’s leadership transition the *Tribune* printed 7.8 labor union related stories per month. But in the period that followed the number of articles actually decreased to 3.2 a month. It seems that as the *Tribune*’s labor reporting became slightly more positive its coverage of industrial relations activity also occurred less often.

Table 1. Cumulative Breakdown of *Chicago Tribune* Labor Coverage (N=386), 1991-2001

Direction	Number	Percent
Negative	213	55.3%
Positive	135	34.9%
Neutral	38	9.8%
Total	386	100.0%

Table 2. Comparison of Labor Stories pre and post Sweeney Election

Time Period	No. of Months	Number of Stories	Stories per Month	Percent Positive	Percent Negative
August 8 – September 1995	49	152	7.87	28.2%	62.5%
October 1995 – August 2001	71	234	3.29	39.3%	50.4%

The curious question is why *Tribune* coverage became more positive after 1995. A speculative answer may lie in the general attitude that the media had expressed towards the pre-Sweeney AFL-CIO’s leadership. With rare exception, media coverage of Sweeney’s contemporary predecessors and their leadership of the labor movement were extremely critical. Even allowing for a fair amount pro-business bias, the media found considerable fault with how the AFL-CIO was operating. Much of the criticism was legitimized when in 1995 the House of Labor underwent a vibrant debate over strategies, issues and leadership. But Sweeney’s election signified in appearance, if not always substance, a radical and necessary break with the past.

And the media reacted warmly to the transformation. The initial media reviews of Sweeney and his leadership team were generally positive. Perhaps than the *Tribune's* slightly less negative industrial relations reporting since 1995 is derivative of a friendlier attitude towards the AFL-CIO leadership. Notwithstanding the minor differences in press coverage in the two periods, the wide separation between positive and negative stories reinforces a near unanimous, if largely anecdotal opinion among Illinois union leaders that the *Tribune's* news coverage of organized labor is mostly antagonistic towards unions.

Story Leads and Content Frames

Despite the paper's unmistakable negative *en Toto* reporting tendencies, readers were not often aware of the nature of the coverage until they read beyond the lead paragraph. While most "story leads" were negative (50.4 percent), there were enough positive (41.1 percent) and neutral (8.5 percent) opening sentences to suggest a more balanced overall record. However, the same cannot be said for how the paper "framed" the content. In 63 percent of the cases the author was determined to have framed the subject in a negative light, as opposed to 28 percent in a positive way.

This discrepancy between "story leads" and "framing" may come as a surprise to most observers. It would be normal to expect that a story which begins on a positive note would likely finish on one. However, in a small number of cases the opposite happened. Approximately twenty-four *Tribune* stories began with either a neutral or positive reference to some labor activity and then sharply shifted to a more critical approach. This contrary effect also occurred in the opposite direction (i.e., negative to positive) but only fourteen times. While the number of these cases (9.8 percent) is minor, they do suggest that the *Tribune's* opening paragraphs were not a perfect barometer of a story's tone.

Contrary expectations aside, news reporting, which cumulatively portrayed union behavior in an unattractive fashion is actually more balanced than the paper's editorializing. During the time frame studied there were seven editorials and seven opinion pieces published in the first section of the paper about a labor related issue. Astonishingly, in all but one case the editors and authors' point of view was strongly critical (i.e., negative) of union behavior. It is rather incredible that for a major daily operating in a city with such a sizeable organized workforce that in ten years only one favorable union opinion could be found in the electronic archives.

Content Type

Deconstructing the data set by content type demonstrated a preponderance of stories dealing with work disputes. Consistent with other media studies of labor relations' coverage, our analysis reveals that the *Tribune* prioritized conflict as a subject over other content types. Nearly a third (32.0 percent) of all cases were about strikes, lockouts and assorted "labor disputes" (see Table 3).

Content Type	Number	Percent
Labor Disputes	122	32.0%
Labor and Politics	62	16.0%
Labor Agreements	44	11.4%
State of Labor (overview)	26	6.7%
Labor and Legal Affairs	24	6.2%
Union Corruption	18	4.7%
Union Organizing	16	4.1%
Labor and Trade Issues	14	3.6%
Labor Leader Profiles	13	3.4%
Labor's Economic Impact	10	2.6%
Working Conditions	6	1.6%
Labor and Community Coalitions	6	1.6%
Labor Day History	5	1.3%
Unions, Gender and Race	5	1.3%
Rank-and-File Profiles	4	1.0%
Labor and Immigration	4	1.0%
Labor-Management Partnership	3	0.7%
Total	386	100.0%

By comparison, stories about productive negotiations and the settlement of labor relations' disputes accounted for only 11.4 percent of all cases. A further breakdown of the data reveals that labor dispute cases alone accounted for more negative stories than all other negative types combined (see Table 4).

Content Type	Number	Percent
Labor Disputes	112	52.6%
Labor and Politics	35	16.4%
State of Labor	23	10.7%
Union Corruption	17	8.0%
Economic Impact	9	4.2%
Labor and Legal Affairs	8	3.8%
Labor and Trade Issues	5	2.3
Unions, Gender and Race	4	1.9
Total	213	100.0%

Despite the significantly higher number of negative stories, the average positive article was slightly more positive than the average negative one was negative. The mean value for a positive case was +12.1, while a negative case earned a -10.4. This score differential is in part explained by a higher percentage of positive cases receiving 20 or above points (see Table 5).

Score	Positive (Percent)	Negative (Percent)
1-5	27.0%	27.5%
6-10	24.8%	31.1%
11-15	15.3%	18.3%
16-20	19.7%	19.8%
21-25	10.9%	3.0%
26-30	2.3%	0.3%
Average	12.1%	10.4%

It is a seemingly oddity of the *Tribune*'s labor coverage that although the paper published much fewer positive stories than negative, when their accounts were positive the mean value was slightly higher. However, a closer examination of the types of positive stories suggests that the higher values are not an anomaly and ironically may further support labor's bias charge (see Table 6). By a wide margin, positive ratings occur most often for "labor agreements." Stories about how collective bargaining worked successfully accounted for 31.1 percent of all positive stories. No other positive content type amounted to even half as many cases. By prioritizing labor agreements the Chicago paper implies that when labor is acting affirmatively it is reasonable, compromising, statesmen-like and most importantly, not uncooperative or militant.

Content Type	Number	Percent	Mean Value
Labor Agreements	42	31.1%	8.0
Labor and Politics	17	12.6%	15.4
Union Organizing	16	11.8%	12.6
Labor and Legal Affairs	14	10.4%	9.2
Labor Leader Profiles	11	8.1%	19.7
Labor and Trade Issues	8	5.9%	13.0
Working Conditions	6	4.4%	4.5
Labor Day History	5	3.7%	13.6
Labor and Coalitions	5	3.7%	16.0
Labor Disputes	3	2.2%	18.8
Labor and Immigration	3	2.2%	13.6
Rank-and-File Profiles	3	2.2%	16.3
Labor-Management Partnerships	2	1.4%	14.8
Total	135	100.0%	12.1

It is unquestionably in the interest of the labor movement to publicize the far more common occasions in which workplace agreements are peacefully reached. However, the effect of the *Tribune*'s decision to give wider positive coverage to contract settlements than other story content is not benign. As indicated in Table 6, there were only 17 and 16 positive cases respectively of union "political behavior" and union "organizing," and less than one story a year

on the role of unions in “improving working conditions.” Now imagine the characterization of the labor movement proffered by the *Tribune* if it had given wider coverage to successful organizing drives or to the effectiveness of unions to act on behalf of their members’ political interests. How would labor’s public image be altered if readers were reminded of the healthier and safer workplaces brought to the community by the labor movement? Instead the paper chose to print a combined anemic annual average of 3.9 positive political, organizing and working conditions stories that referenced unions.

In addition, there was a much larger range of positive content types than negative. Positive stories were divided among thirteen different content types and negative cases were categorized into eight separate types. While identifying more positive content subjects than negative appears to portray the many sided goodness of the union movement, the parse number of articles within this content range has troubling implications for how labor’s public image is shaped. The *Tribune*’s “bundling” of negative stories has the effect of raising the profile of the most dominant negative story (i.e., disputes) and also consistently defines a set of union “negatives” for the reader. The message to the reader is that labor is definitively flawed for the reasons consistently addressed. Positive content, however, has a much more random, occasional and uncharacteristic quality. The reader is left with the impression that while there are good things about some unions, there are few positive elements that are institutional, broadly shared or genuinely characteristic of the labor movement. In the end, the media message is that labor’s more positive aspects are at best ephemeral and at worst, unexplainable phenomena.

An examination of story content also included delineation by industry. And no industry received more prominent coverage by the *Tribune* than professional sports. The “Sports” section offered up forty-two cases, with a large majority focused on work stoppages in major league

baseball (60 percent) and a smaller proportion (26.1 percent) on labor disputes in professional basketball (see Table 7).

Table 7. Listing of Sports Stories in Chicago Tribune Labor Coverage, 1991-2001		
Sports (by Professional League)	<i>Number</i>	Percent
Major League Baseball	25	60.0%
National Basketball Association	11	26.0%
National Football League	3	7.0%
Other	3	7.0%
Total	42	100.0%

Articles about player unions and labor-management relations appearing in the Sports pages, accounted for a significant 16.6 percent of all content type by industry. No other field of work attracted as much coverage as professional athletics (see Table 8). Even the tumultuous multi-year troika of manufacturing disputes that rocked Illinois' farm equipment (Caterpillar), rubber (Bridgestone-Firestone) and corn sweetener (A.E. Staley) industries during the time frame of this study garnered fewer stories (n = 23). In addition, it is surprising that in light of Illinois' large manufacturing base, that in the period being analyzed the *Tribune* ran only four more manufacturing industrial relations stories (n = 46) than sports accounts.

The time frame of this study also included the very public and contentious debate over Congress' consideration of NAFTA and fast-track trade authority legislation. Public discussion about "free" trade legislation typically focused on what the net effect would be on the nation's manufacturing job base. Prior to the 1993 Congressional vote on NAFTA the issue had particular salience in Illinois and once the trade bill was implemented local complaints about job loss escalated. According to estimates based on applications for government trade assistance, as

of April 2002 approximately 11,734 Illinois jobs have been permanently lost as a direct result of NAFTA.¹⁰

Industry	Number	Percent
Sports	42	16.6%
Municipal/County/State	32	12.6%
Airline	24	9.4%
Transportation	16	6.3%
Tourism	16	6.3%
Auto	16	6.3%
Farm Equipment	16	6.3%
Teaching	13	5.1%
Health Care	13	5.1%
Entertainment	8	3.1%
Utilities	7	2.7%
Textiles	7	2.7%
Rubber	6	2.3%
Newspaper	6	2.3%
Communications	6	2.3%
Construction Trades	5	1.9%
Steel	4	1.5%
Service	4	1.5%
Miscellaneous Manufacturing	4	1.5%
Broadcast	3	1.1%
Agriculture	2	0.7%
Food and Restaurant	2	0.7%
Brokerage	1	0.3%
Total	253	100.0%

Now prior to and shortly after the vote the paper ran five stories about the NAFTA debate, including three under the following critical headlines: “Labor Plain Wrong on NAFTA,” “Clinton Attacks Labor on NAFTA,” and “Labor Lost But Showed Muscle.”¹¹ The volume of job loss should have provided the *Tribune* with plenty of additional manufacturing storylines to

¹⁰ . Estimates are from the applications filed with the NAFTA Trade Assistance Authority Database. Reports are accessible at Public Citizen’s Global Trade Watch website, www.citizen.org/trade_watch.

¹¹ . The dates of these were July 14, 1993, November 11, 1993 and November 18, 1993.

pursue. However, despite the importance of NAFTA on Illinois' economy, from 1993 until July 2001, the paper published only a single story about the bill's devastating economic impact on the state's manufacturing base.¹² Coincidentally, it is during the same period that all of the *Tribune's* stories about labor relations in professional sports were published.

Despite being more widely covered however, union athletes fared considerably worse in the *Tribune's* portrayal than their union brothers and sisters toiling in less glamorous occupational fields. While no industry's labor organization fared well, a whopping 79 percent of labor-sports stories generated a negative tone. The significance of the paper's relative intensive and unflattering sports-based labor coverage is multidimensional. First, the Tribune Company is an owner of a professional sports franchise, the hometown Chicago Cubs. As a consequence the paper has an employment relationship with the unionized sports workers they cover. And in the case of the Cubs, the Tribune Company is confronted with arguably the country's strongest union, the professional Baseball Players Association that staged two work stoppages during the time period of the study. The relative weight of the employment relationship to the study's findings would of course be strengthened by comparisons of sports-based coverage in other non-sports franchise holding newspapers.

Second, the paper has dedicated an increasing number of staff and resources to their sport section in an effort to compete with city newspaper rival the *Sun-Times*. The *Tribune* maintains an editorial sport staff of more than 60 people compared to no more than 40 at the *Sun-Times* and like most papers, nearly a quarter of the *Tribune's* editorial space is dedicated to sports coverage (McCormick 2002). Committing sizeable resources to "pumping up their sports sections" has become a common newspaper practice, and seems to confirm the belief that "a paper can never

¹² . That story was titled "Vision Unfulfilled: NAFTA at 5" (October 29, 1998).

have enough sports coverage” (Reilly 1991b, B1).¹³ A study done in 1997 by the Committee of Concerned Journalists indicated that newspapers were dedicating a smaller proportion of resources to straight news stories. The expansion of sports coverage without a corresponding increase in the amount of column inches dedicated to conventional news means that athletics has become relatively more important in attracting advertisers and readers. It also means that the sports section serves as the principal vehicle for educating the public about organized labor and industrial relations.

Third, the very high profile and labor market uniqueness of professional athletes makes them particularly unrepresentative examples of how unionism works for the vast majority of working men and women. For example, it is relatively easy to persuade a newspaper reading public consisting of commercial janitors or high school teachers that workers/athletes earning millions of dollars a year playing a game are greedy when they threaten to strike for higher pay. Finally, despite the *Tribune*'s daily (i.e., Tempo) and end-of-week supplemental (i.e., Friday) homage to stars within the national entertainment and local sports field, when it comes to covering sports personalities as workers, the *Tribune* demonstrates little fan support. It would appear then that the *Tribune*'s widening labor related sports coverage has only served to further characterize organized labor in negative tones.

The only exception to the paper's negative labor coverage of particular industries was reserved for public sector workers. An amazing 53.1 percent (n = 17) of stories about municipal,

¹³ . As evidence of this trend towards added sports coverage, Reilly indicates that in 1991 the *New York Times* added two full pages of sports stories, including “bold graphics and photographs, more room for sports score tabulations and a gang of new reporters and columnists” (B1).

county and state labor relations were positive. This anomaly is perhaps best explained by noting the preponderance of short pieces focusing on police and fire unions and their respective public employers. Many of the uniformed personnel stories were characterized by straightforward reporting of moments of employer-employee cooperation (i.e., contract signed) or incidents of labor success (i.e., new unit organized or a positive state labor relations board ruling). However, most of the coverage of county and state office employees accentuated points of disagreement (i.e., contract demands) with their public sector heads. In biasing their public sector labor relations reporting by occupational type, the paper subtly advanced a segmented anti-union message. Police and firefighters, for instance, are portrayed as good workers and reasonable union members. But clerical employees, for example, at the Cook County Courthouse are characterized as unworthy employees and irresponsible union members. Covering labor in this bi-polar manner only feeds the public's well-chronicled general unhappiness with public bureaucracy and those workers supported by tax dollars.

A review of positive story content also highlights the important absence of any productive role for organized labor in the city of Chicago's economy. The study did not reveal a single story, which acknowledged the labor movement's contribution to the city's well-publicized 1990's economic prosperity. A reader of *Tribune* industrial relations and business news would be unable to identify, for example, the Chicago Federation of Labor as a major partner with the city's Chamber of Commerce and municipal leadership in creating economic opportunity. Labor's efforts as an economic engine are a notable exception to the *Tribune's* otherwise positive coverage of labor-management cooperation events.

Word Length

Examining the average word length applied to stories further elucidates the *Tribune's* tepid acknowledgement of positive labor events. A comparison of the top positive (i.e., labor negotiations and agreements) and negative (i.e., labor disputes) stories reveals that the average negative story is nearly one and half times longer. Articles about labor disputes weighed in at an average of 859 words, while labor agreement pieces tipped the scale on average at a much leaner 472 words. In addition, there were only eleven positive stories over 600 words, while there was thirteen negative stories over 1,000 words alone (see Table 9).

<i>Word Length</i>	Number (Agreements)	Number (Disputes)
<i>Over 1,000</i>	0	13
999-900	1	17
899-800	2	24
799-700	2	32
699-600	6	11
599 and less	124	116
Percent Above 600	8.1%	46.0%
	Mean = 472	Mean = 859

The spatial imbalance is further realized by noting that a hefty 92.0 percent of all labor agreements stories were written with less than 600 words, but 46.0 percent of labor disputes exceeded 600 words. Story length of course is not inherently predictive of how the author has framed the coverage. But to the degree that it is reasonable to interpret column inches and the number of characters as a sign of the story's importance to the editors, then the far larger negative stories are clearly more important to the *Tribune's* coverage of organized labor than union-image building, positive cases.

Labor Signifiers

Along with article size the tone of *Tribune* labor reporting can also be deduced from an analysis of the labor signifiers (i.e., descriptive language) used to characterize labor leaders, the labor movement, unions and union activity. Here the *Tribune*'s reporting is as unambiguous as it is resoundingly negative. A numerical accounting of the words used to signify labor identified a 77 percent (n = 377) as negative descriptors. Remarkably, out of 386 stories examined only 113 positive adjectives could be found about labor leaders, the labor movement, unions and union activity (See Table 10a). Given the overwhelming disparity in descriptive language, it is not surprising that even in positive stories a fair number of negative signifying occurred. For instance, in positive stories about labor agreements roughly 41 percent of the descriptive language about organized labor was negative. The *Tribune*, however, was not as "balanced" in the cases of negative stories. In articles dealing with labor disputes, 95.3 percent of all signifying language was negative.

*Type	Number	Percent
Negative	377	77.0%
Positive	113	23.0%
Total	490	100.0%

* Signifiers appeared in 234 stories (60.6% of 386)

Overall, 60.6 percent of all stories (n = 234) included a discernable labor signifier and in 89.7 percent (n = 210) of these pieces a negative descriptor was used. By comparison, positive descriptors only occurred in 46 percent (n = 107) of the cases. While the overwhelming number of pieces included only one type of signifier, in a small number of articles (n = 35) a positive and negative signifier both appeared. When this occurred, however, negative language examples (n

= 17) far exceeded positive (n = 1) references (see Table 10b). The *Tribune's* dearth of good things to say about organized labor inevitably describes the subject in only the most unflattering and objectionable ways. While a review of managerial signifiers was not undertaken, our study findings likely confirm Paul Hartmann's (1975) belief that a "deferential legitimacy" handicaps organized labor in the mass media.

Stories with Signifiers	Number	Percent of All Stories
W/@ least one Positive	107	46.0%
W/@ least one Negative	210	89.7%
W/@ least one Positive & Negative	35	14.9%
	Number	Percent of Stories with Positive and Negative
Negative > Positive	17	48.5%
Positive > Negative	1	3.0%
Positive = Negative	17	48.5%

Story Sources and Authors

Consistent with other media studies of labor coverage, our analysis included a record of the use of identifiable sources in individual stories. At first glance the *Tribune* appears to be only slightly biased in favor of non-labor sources (i.e., management, company representatives, government officials, industry experts). A little more than half (53 percent) of all sources were of the non-labor variety (Table 11a).

Sources	Number	Percent
Non-Union Sources	470	53.0%
Union Sources	418	47.0%
Total	889	100.0%

This small advantage for non-labor sources is somewhat mitigated by the fact that a majority of the stories (57 percent) did have at least one labor person cited. However, on closer examination the paper’s preferred reliance on non-labor “voices” becomes more dramatic. For instance, in only 17.1 percent of the cases were there more union sources identified than non-labor. This compares unfavorably to the 39.7 percent of stories, which included more non-union than labor sources (see Table 11b). To be sure, not every non-union source “spoke” negatively of labor. However, the *Tribune*’s decision to provide non-labor sources with a marginally larger stage in which to pronounce judgment and offer clarification on a particular matter restricts labor’s ability to get its perspective into the public realm. The end result is that labor’s important role as a public educator on industrial relation’s subjects becomes minimized while managerial opinions and expertise are elevated.

Table 11b. Stories and Sources in *Chicago Tribune* Labor Coverage, 1991-2001

Stories	Number	Percent
With Union Sources	220	57.0%
Without Union Sources	166	43.0%
With Union & Non-Union Sources	146	37.8%
	Number	Percent of Stories with Union and Non-Union
Union > than Non-Union	25	17.1%
Non-Union > Union	58	39.7%
Union = Non-Union	63	43.2%

The tone of the *Tribune*’s labor coverage is also apparently not affected by the institutional affiliation of the person actually writing the story. A breakdown of the cases by authorship reveals that the Chicago daily’s reporters are only slightly more likely to file a negative story than non-*Tribune* writers. Staff at the paper wrote 269 of the analyzed articles, of which 245 earned a positive or negative (24 neutral cases) rating. Examining those pieces reveals that 54.6 percent of entries carrying a *Tribune* staff bi-line were negative and only 36.4

percent were positive. By comparison, stories taken from the wire services (n = 62), written by identified journalists from other papers (n = 9) or published without an identified author (n = 46) were cumulatively, nearly as negative at 50.4 percent (see Table 12). It would appear from the paper's draw on stories from outside sources that the editorial board's selection process is biased towards its own unenthusiastic coverage of organized labor.

Author from	Positive (Percent)	Negative (Percent)	Neutral (Percent)	Total (Percent)
Chicago Tribune	98 (36.4%)	147 (54.6%)	24 (9.0%)	269 (100.0%)
Wires	27 (43.5%)	32 (51.6%)	3 (4.8%)	62 (100.0%)
Other (NY Times, WSJ, free lance ...etc)	3 (33.3%)	5 (55.5%)	1 (11.1%)	9 (100.0%)
None	23 (50.0%)	22 (47.8%)	1 (2.2%)	46 (100.0%)

There was however, one exception to this trend. Stories that appeared on the second and third pages in the Business section (n = 46) were unauthored and cumulatively provided slightly more positive (51 percent) than negative perspectives. These articles in the past were labeled under “Business briefs” and in contemporary years were placed under the boxed heading “The Ticker,” or “Midwest Briefs.” Articles presented here were often picked up from the Associated Press and Reuters news services. Pieces were typically very brief (e.g., under 200 words) and free of any labor signifiers. Ironically and likely unintentionally, while these “McNews” bites provide little background, context, analysis or staff perspective, they do offer *Tribune* readers the most straight-ahead positive labor coverage. The news briefings that accompany the main reporting on the Business pages also suggest a possible relationship between labor's coverage and the textual location of the stories. Unfortunately, the *Tribune's* electronic archives did not

clearly delineate in all cases where stories appeared. The only exception to this problem was in the entrees for sports.

Internal and External Agency

The study also assessed how *Tribune* stories credited organized labor for a particular outcome or condition (internal agency), and whether any other entity was acknowledged as contributing to the occurrence of that condition (external agency). Before assessing labor's role in the events reported, it is worth noting that unions appear in all of these cases as having significant responsibility for the events under consideration. Labor is never characterized as a passive or inactive recipient of fortune. In other words, labor is nearly always causing something to happen. Unfortunately for the labor movement, according to the *Tribune*, more often than not, that happening thing is not good.

In those stories where labor's actions can be clearly assessed, we found a negative internal agency in 54.3 percent of the cases and a positive one in 45.6 percent. Cases scored as negative typically characterized union behavior as being responsible for the following conditions: (1) an outbreak of labor-management conflict, (2) inflationary pressure on the economy, (3) disregard for consumers and/or taxpayers, (4) failed efforts to win bargaining objectives, (5) inability to organize new members, (6) lack of political influence and (7) corruption. Positive outcomes were sometimes sighted where labor agreements were signed, but were more common in stories about union initiated legal action against an employer. For instance, a number of articles about union filed National and State Labor Relations Board charges, and court rulings concluded with a successful outcome for the workers represented.¹⁴ It

¹⁴ . For example, see "Judge Rules Drug Firm Violated Labor Laws" (March 20, 1992),

appears then from a comparison of cases that the *Tribune* attributes little positive agency to union activity that occurs outside of a legalistic dispute resolution machinery. Union action that involves organizing, politically mobilizing or striking is, on the other hand, likely to produce negative consequences.

While in *Tribune* labor relation's articles union action is always identified and mostly portrayed as producing negative conditions, the identity of any second acting party (external agency) is not so ubiquitous. In only 55 percent of the cases is an external agent (most often an employer) identified as contributing to a labor related situation. A contributing party is to be distinguished from one that is simply a passive target or observer of union action, free of any responsibility for what is unfolding. Thus, the *Tribune*'s failure in 45 percent of the cases to name a contributing party for the situation reported is hard to explain (see Table 13).

Whether the story content was about labor organizing, bargaining, voting, striking or even corruption, the union's behavior was always certainly conducted in *relations to* employer or governmental action.¹⁵ But as this study reveals, too often the *Tribune* failed to make clear that labor was responding to conditions at least equally the responsibility of the employer's actions. Instead of providing an historical context for the activity, union behavior is portrayed as willful, premeditated and lacking any cause-effect relationship. In brief, labor appears to be acting

“Unfair Labor Charge Filed by State Union” (May 13, 1992), “ Kroger Strikers Charge Unfair Labor Practices” (May 19, 1992), and “Sheriff's Officers Union Files Unfair Labor Charge” (June 2, 1993).

¹⁵ . Even union mob ties, as revealed by the McClellan Senate Committee hearings, did not happen - in fact could not happen - without employer cooperation (See, Robert Kennedy's *Enemy Within*, Da Capo Press, New York 1994).

without provocation. The *Tribune's* reductionist approach to union and labor relation stories not only elides over the historical record but inadequately informs the reader. It also has the likely effect of contributing to a less union-friendly public opinion.

Table 13. *Identification of Union and Non-Union Agency in <i>Tribune</i> Stories				
	Internal		External	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Positive	146	45.6%		
Negative	174	54.4%		
Total	320	100.0%		
Yes			187	55.0%
No			153	45.0%
Total			340	100.0%

* Based on the cases where agency was discernable

The *Tribune's* “class anxiety”

Further analysis of the labor signifiers present in the *Tribune* articles helps reveal some of the underlying motives that influence the paper’s representation of labor unions. The *Tribune's* coverage appears to reveal a working-class anxiety, which is primarily provoked by both the strength and the structure of labor unions. On a basic level, this anxiety is induced by the way that unions put power in the hands of the non-elite. Class anxiety is generated by unions’ emphasis on rank and file activism, which threatens to undermine the assumption that the hierarchical structures forming the basis of middle-class power are natural and necessary.

In general, the *Tribune* coverage represented union activity either as conforming to the same organizational structures that govern corporate activity or as challenging those top-down, governing structures. In a corporate hierarchy, a small number of supervisors control the actions of a large number of workers. This structure is assumed to be apolitical, and also to promote order and efficiency. When an individual labor union is characterized as “protecting” its members, the leadership of that union is represented as having a supervisory relationship to those

members. Thus, virtually all of the articles that contain the labor signifier “protecting workers” refer to individual unions acting on behalf of their members in a particular situation. Seen from another perspective, when the union activity being represented could be understood as upholding hierarchical structures, the *Tribune* article about that activity was more likely to contain positive labor signifiers. In these instances, the unions are implicitly lauded for exhibiting a compassionately custodial attitude toward their members and appear to be acting as benevolent employers “taking care of” and making decisions for their employees. This understanding of unionism, by *Tribune* standards, is non-threatening and does not need to be delegitimated.

However, what happens to *Tribune* reporting when rank and file union members work collectively or when the larger labor movement steps beyond the bounds of narrow self-interest in order to promote political change? In the above case the actions of labor unions run counter to the hierarchical, allegedly apolitical corporate model. Consequently, union activity that challenges a corporate ethos is much more likely to generate *Tribune* coverage that contains negative labor signifiers.

It is easy to assume that the corporate hierarchical model, with its division between “managers” and “workers,” offers the most natural structure with which to organize the workforce. However, the historical development of hierarchical “command and control” workplace structures has served very specific class interests. This organizational system, in which knowledge and decision-making power are concentrated in the hands of management, has been so widely adopted in the workplace that it now seems natural. However, from its inception, hierarchical workplace organization has functioned to reinforce middle class interests at the expense of the working class.

The *Tribune*'s implicit valorization of this organizational system, even within non-profit organizations such as labor unions, helps to promote and naturalize this form of hierarchy. As a result, the belief that a middle or business class should regulate the actions of the working class is also naturalized. This does not, however, suggest that the *Tribune* reporters themselves explicitly desire to promote such an agenda; the factors at work are much more subtle than simple intention on the part of individuals.¹⁶ Rather, the *Tribune*'s propensities are influenced by larger political and economic structural conditions, of which the media is only one component. As Edward S. Herman suggests, the "corporate community . . . influences the media through its power as owner, as dominant funder (advertising), and as a major news source" (1998, 199). The result is a journalism profession structurally predisposed to favor one social class (i.e., the elite) and ideology (i.e., ruling) over all others. Media analyst Robert W. McChesney has noted that "far from being political neutral, it (i.e., journalism) smuggles in values conducive to the commercial aims of the owners and advertisers as well as the political aims of the owning class" (2000, 6). Thus, the *Tribune*'s valorization of a hierarchical model does not indicate a conspiracy or even a conscious strategy, but instead, indicates the tenacious hold that certain assumptions about class relations and power have on the newspaper industry.

¹⁶ . In fact, while opinions vary, the Illinois State Labor Press Association generally recognizes *Tribune* reporter Steve Franklin as a competent and comprehensive reporter of labor events. Franklin's by-line appeared more often in the study than any other *Tribune* writer. Unfortunately, Franklin is also the paper's chief Middle East reporter and seems to spend more time covering Israeli-Palestinian stories from Israel than he does reporting from Chicago on domestic labor events.

The *Tribune*'s implicit endorsement of hierarchical structures of power reveals a deep-seated anxiety about the working class that consistently manifests itself in the paper's reporting. The *Tribune* is able to publish positive articles about the actions of a particular labor union to protect its member's self-interest, because a union leadership is assumed to be in control of a group of workers. However, the *Tribune* responds negatively to situations in which unionized workers appear to be exerting autonomous agency. For example, the *Tribune*'s representation of mobilized unionized workers tends to abound with negative labor signifiers. They receive "exorbitant overtime rates"¹⁷; they are "out of control"¹⁸; they have "petty issues."¹⁹ Additionally, they have a "poor work ethic."²⁰ The unspoken assumption is that when union workers assert a collective identity they are unreasonable and unworthy. Thus, any suggestion that workers might themselves achieve power and use it wisely in solidarity with their fellow union members is implicitly erased.

This negative response is provoked by the way that union mobilization undermines the industry's belief that corporate models of control are the "natural" way to deal with workers. Situations characterized by a "movement" of particular workers (e.g., organizing drives, political activism, strikes and contract struggles) suggest that workers are perfectly capable of self-governance. Similarly, articles assessing the condition, purpose and performance of the AFL-CIO also tend to provoke a negative response because the existence of a labor movement

¹⁷. "Link McDome with Labor Reform" (March 20, 1997)

¹⁸. "Sprewell Ruling Could Spark Labor Crisis" (March 5, 1998)

¹⁹. "Medical Residents Organize Labor Group" (July 14, 2000)

²⁰. "Labor Pains" (September 6, 1996)

suggests that self-interest and individualism are not necessarily accepted social responses to injustice.

The larger labor movement is almost never characterized as “protecting” workers; because a movement cannot be as easily re-cast into the form of a business-like hierarchy. The few notable exceptions actually help to confirm this analysis. For example, the labor movement is positively characterized as protecting the “rights of immigrants,”²¹ as “protecting immigrant workers,”²² as “working hard for immigrants,”²³ and as “reaching out to immigrants.”²⁴ Similarly, labor recruiting is sometimes portrayed as being “good for women.”²⁵ These instances appear to suggest that the labor movement can be journalistically characterized as acting protectively toward groups who occupy a marginalized position within the larger social hierarchy. It is important to note however, that the immigrants for whom labor is “working hard” are not, at the time of the writing, an active or crucial force *within* the labor movement. These immigrants are represented as passive recipients of protection, and consequently, labor can be described as a non-threatening, or even positive, force.

Privileging an aristocratic nobles oblige approach to “needy” workers helps explain contrarily, why articles about both clergy and student involvement in the labor movement are overwhelmingly positive in tone. In general, in this culture, the clergy are perceived to have a relationship of benign paternalism to those in need and students are understood to be members of

²¹. “Hidden Workers” (July 30, 2000)

²². “No Closure in Labor Fight” (February 25, 1996)

²³. “Honor Immigrants on Labor Day” (September 4, 1995)

²⁴. “Labor Movement Woos Latino Immigrants” (July 13, 1992)

²⁵. “Caution: Work Zone Gender Barriers” (August 27, 1995)

the middle class who are idealistically “helping” those less fortunate. Thus, labor activity involving students - such as the WTO protests in Seattle, and labor’s resistance to multi-national trade agreements like NAFTA or fast-track - tend to be represented more positively than actions solely involving rank and file union activists. In all of these representations, union activity can be characterized as positive because the power to reform social inequity is understood to be limited to those who occupy an elite hierarchical, or class position. Those being “helped” do not exert significant autonomy in the reform process, any more than employees exert significant autonomy in a corporation.

But the labor *movement* acting on behalf of millions of organized workers is almost regularly represented using negative labor signifiers. This helps explain why articles about the AFL-CIO’s political involvement are rarely positive in tone. In these articles, labor (i.e., the national or state federation) is typically represented as being either “duped by the Democrats”²⁶ or as “cartels.”²⁷ In the first instance, the labor signifier suggest that the labor movement does not have the political savvy to hold its own with those who hold legitimate power. In the second instance, the political power which labor is able to achieve is depicted as racketeering and heavy handed. The labor signifier “divided” is also frequently invoked to characterize labor’s political activity, as democratic dissent is re-cast as chaotic feuding. In effect, the *Tribune*’s representation of labor’s political activities functions as a synopsis of the negative aspects of its representation of the labor movement as a whole: its leadership is either incompetent or criminal, and its efforts toward decentralized political processes are disorganized and inefficient.

²⁶. “Labor Hope Dims” (August 17, 1993)

²⁷. “Kill this ‘Favor’ for Big Labor” (May 21, 1994)

This characterization serves an additional important ideological function. By discrediting labor *as a movement*, the *Tribune* encourages its readers to believe that hierarchical, corporate-like structures are necessary to reign in a human tendency toward selfish opportunism. In turn, this belief supports the assumption that structures, which place social power in the hands of the middle class, are themselves merely natural, and not political. Thus, the *Tribune*'s coverage of labor unions helps assuage the class anxiety that the labor movement gives rise to: the anxiety provoked by the labor movement's demonstration that the concentration of power in the hands of the middle class is not the result of inherent human tendencies, but rather the result of the exploitation of one class of human being for the benefit of another class.

In the *Chicago Tribune*, labor unions are most likely to be represented positively when they explicitly work in alliance with management. Thus, articles in which labor was signified as "cooperative" were overwhelmingly likely to be positive in tone. However, an article in which labor is positively represented for "making concessions"²⁸ reveals in part the *Tribune*'s understanding of what it means to be "cooperative." To "cooperate" is to make compromises, which enable business to proceed smoothly. These articles assume that the model of the business negotiation (with its abstract assessment of the "bottom line") is the exemplar that labor negotiations should emulate.

Unsurprisingly, then, union activity that was deemed to interrupt business interests was given negative coverage. For example, the vast majority of articles about job actions, such as strikes, were negative in overall tone. Labor is consistently accused of "holding up production"²⁹

²⁸. "Unions Urge Contractors to Adopt Plan" (May 1, 1998)

²⁹. "GM Again Suffering Labor Pains" (January 22, 1995)

and “hurting consumers.”³⁰ Culpability for this type of disruption of business is ascribed to the unions. Although management occasionally might be represented negatively for its failure to negotiate, it is not blamed for interfering with production or inconveniencing consumers.

Labor signifiers, which characterize labor as detrimental to business interest, frequently appear in *Tribune* articles, even in the absence of job actions. Unions are described as being “against owners making money,”³¹ “costly to taxpayers,”³² “anti-competitive,”³³ and an impediment to “trade business.”³⁴ Additionally, in accordance with the business model, labor signifiers are also used in *Tribune* articles to suggest that unions can be an impediment to workers’ “individual career development.”³⁵ Thus, in fairly obvious ways, the labor signifiers present in *Tribune* articles often function to prioritize individualistic business interests over the collective interests of workers.

The same corporate logic, which determines the *Tribune*’s representation of unionized workers, is also applied to its representation of labor leaders. This might seem paradoxical, since the *Tribune* often responds favorably when union leadership assumes a hierarchical relation toward unionized workers. However, articles which focus on union leadership imply, as Jonathan Tasini has written, that these leaders, “because they do not come from the educated/cultured (privileged) classes, are more likely to be corrupted by the power they achieve than are

³⁰. “Apparent Labor Protest by Pilots” May 12, 2000

³¹. “NBA Feeling Labor Pains” (September 9, 1993)

³². “Daley Not Closing Tax Hike Door” (June 21, 1995)

³³. “Study: GM Labor Under Parts Costs” (July 7, 1996)

³⁴. “Labor Coalition Falls Apart” (January 9, 1998)

³⁵. “Ch 7’s Choice of Fill-Ins Labor Matter” (May 10, 2000)

business or political leaders” (1990, 4). While union institutional structures can be applauded, the paper is almost invariably critical in its representation of the persons leading those institutions.

Consequently, the *Tribune* critiques labor leaders for not being responsive to union membership. In multiple articles, the employed labor signifiers highlighted rank and file dissatisfaction with union leadership. Now, this might appear to contradict the *Tribune*’s upholding of traditional hierarchies and power. However, in these instances, the leaders are being critiqued not for being inegalitarian, but for being bad managers who are “incompetent.”³⁶ In other words, these articles suggest that union leaders fail to execute leadership well.

Additionally, the *Tribune* does not simply critique these leaders for failing to be appropriately managerial in stature. In accord with Tasini’s assertion, the signifiers which the *Tribune* uses to characterize these people are clearly intended to mark them as belonging to a lower class, and therefore, as being unfit for power. In one article, for example, the actions of “labor brass” are described as a “blue collar soap opera,”³⁷ and thus characterized not only as working class, but also as histrionic. Labor leaders are, in other articles, characterized as “sunburned”³⁸ and as drinking at a “poolside party.”³⁹ This representation of their behavior marks union leadership as unprofessional, making it easy for the *Tribune* to characterize their political activity as “rabble-rousing.”⁴⁰

³⁶. “Despite Odds, Holiday Brings NHL Together” (December 23, 1994)

³⁷. “McCormick Place Saga” (December 3, 1997)

³⁸. “Cook County Blame on Labor Pacts” (May 25, 1995)

³⁹. “Labor May Learn Who Its Fair-Weather Friends Are” (February 20, 1996)

⁴⁰. “In Labor Debate, Ownership Presents Points” (August 21, 1996)

The *Tribune* articles, actually go beyond characterizing union leaders as unqualified, working class oafs. An even more disturbing set of underlying assumptions is revealed in the *Tribune*'s frequent representation of labor leaders in the context of criminal activity. Obviously, the vast majority of labor leaders have no criminal history. Nonetheless, a disproportionately high percentage of articles reference criminal behavior on the part of labor leaders, with labor signifiers such as "fraud," "corruption," and "kickbacks" strategically deployed. Additionally, even when they are not explicitly linked to specific illegal actions, labor leaders are characterized with signifiers invoking images of "mobsters," such as the frequently repeated signifier "union boss." This evocation of gangsterism in conjunction with labor is not unique to the *Tribune*. In his analysis of the media's coverage of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters in 1989, Jonathan Tasini notes that most articles about the IBT "highlighted organized crime and corruption" (1990, 8). This emphasis on the criminality of union leadership further underscores the assumption that authority should be left to the middle or "better" class.

In one striking article, which employs a set of labor signifiers similar to those previously discussed, the speech of the “labor giants” is characterized as consisting of “dese-dem-dose.”⁴¹ This caricature of Italian-American speech patterns additionally functions to summon forth the image of organized crime. The acceptability of this racist parody of an Italian-American accent reveals the depths to which the *Tribune* is willing to go in order to discredit the legitimacy of the power held by persons who do not represent middle class dominance. Thus, although it is a matter of concern that labor leaders are implicitly delegitimized by signifiers that mark them as working class, it seems even more disconcerting that they are regularly criminalized, for in this manner the articles insinuate that working class power is itself criminally suspect.

Conclusion

Applying a multi-variable, quantitative content analysis of labor reporting in the *Chicago Tribune* strongly confirmed organized labor’s anecdotal complaints about the paper. The study demonstrated that the paper largely establishes a negative tone in covering the labor movement and union involvement in industrial relations events. It is important to recall that most media analysis of labor reporting has taken one or two journalistic elements and conflated them into an overarching measure of story tone. Our analysis, however, identified seven variables (story lead, content type, content frame, labor signifiers, information sources, internal agency, and external agency) per case and independently measured each item to arrive at an overall single story tone score. While this study put forward a unique model for objectively assessing how unions are covered in mass circulation newspapers, there are a number of ways in which this study’s methodology could be improved in order to make a larger contribution to the field of media analysis.

⁴¹. “Labor’s Little Guys Win Big” (November 18, 1997)

First, further work should be done to determine how each variable is measured. In the above study, on most items, a dichotomous score (e.g., 0 or 1 to determine if more labor sources than non-labor sources were identified) was used, but a ratio scale (e.g., granting a value beginning with 1 and going up for each additional labor source cited) might be used on some variables to better reflect their impact on the story. Follow up studies could also refine the way labor signifiers are identified by limiting the variable to the actual words used immediately preceding and following an appropriate noun (i.e., organized labor, union, union leader). The study could further expand by addressing additional variables, like the substance of a story's final sentences, when determining case tone.

A fourth notion that may enlarge the number of cases available to measure and also make possible the addition of a story placement item, would be to utilize a microfiche or hard-copy data base, instead of an electronic archive. If the above were done then another idea would be to examine only section one and business section front pages. This would be done on the assumption that the most important items are reported on page one and are the stories most often read. An additional consideration is to weight the editorials and op-ed pieces more heavily, given their obvious partisan nature. A sixth methodological change would be to key the assessment around the reporting of "Big" events, instead of on any labor related item. For example, the passage of a trade bill would generate a data set of stories before, during and after the vote. It is also worth noting that the broader community, including the business class, shares labor's justified claim about the press' fascination with internal and external conflict. It may very well be that the *Tribune's* coverage of labor is qualitatively similar to other new subjects. Thus, a seventh suggestion would ground any future study of labor's coverage in a comparison with business, public schools or race-based organizations reporting. An eighth idea is to apply the

model to additional newspapers and to fix a reference point that would expand the comparative potential of the study and lend greater reliability to the model. Finally, statistical test of regression in some cases may shed light on the relative importance of each variable on the story's final tone.

While the focus of this analysis is on the *Tribune's* coverage of organized labor, it is an open question whether unions are doing an adequate job in communicating their message to the press. An anecdotal and informal survey of communication efforts in the Chicago area suggests that very few unions maintain a constant informational relationship with the commercial media. Organized labor is also only marginally visible or audible as an alternative to commercial media streams. Unlike the 1930 to early-Post War period, the labor movement is not challenging what Elizabeth Fones-Wolf has referred to as the commercial and "class nature of mass communications" (2000, 285). As a natural and necessary extension of this study, any discussion of how media reporting of organized labor can be improved will require examining the present state of union communications.

The labor movements' communication efforts notwithstanding, the present study found the *Chicago Tribune's* labor reporting to be, as many labor leaders claimed, anti-union. *Tribune* privileging of the corporate ethos goes far beyond the valorization of business interests over labor interests. The set of assumptions, which govern most of the *Tribune's* reporting, reinforce the belief that hierarchical structures controlled by the middle class are the only appropriate tools for "managing" workers. In unintentionally revealing its own assumptions, the *Tribune's* reporting suggests that worker-based resistance emerges out of greed and laziness; that democratic dissent within the ranks indicates disorder and division; and that organizations run by leaders with working-class characteristics are ineffective at best, and criminal at worst.

The study findings also point to a serious story "mix" problem. Consider, for example, that there are 300 affiliates of the CFL. Each of them negotiates contracts on average every three years. During the study time period that means approximately 900 contracts were negotiated in the Chicago-area - the overwhelming number peacefully concluded - providing bread and butter benefits for over 500,000 Chicago-area workers. But a reader of the *Tribune* would have a much different perception - to the detriment of the unions - of union activity and labor-management relations' outcomes. If, therefore, the *Tribune* was interested in fairly and objectively reporting industrial relations activity it would be reasonable by any standard to predict three outcomes from the nature of their reporting: (1) many more industrial relations stories, (2) many more positive collective bargaining stories and (3) a dramatic shift from "dispute" stories as the dominant type of content, to productive unionism producing real results for real workers.

The *Tribune's* coverage of labor unions reflects unsurprising trends in a media industry owned by large corporations and funded by advertising. As Martin A. Lee and Norman Solomon suggest, "with so many advertisers preferring a well-heeled audience, composed of people less interested in lower-income communities than their own pursuits, the news media drift is toward upper-class concerns" (2002, 176). Through these representations, the *Chicago Tribune* creates for its readership a worldview that justifies the power that many of its middle-class and professional readers enjoy. As reflected in this study, the *Tribune's* pro-business partisanship in an era of only two major city newspapers and media outlet consolidations seriously challenges the informational needs of a democratic society.

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