

## **Longitudinal Modeling of Frame Changing and Media Salience: Coverage of Worker Displacement, 1980–2007**

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This article presents the results of a longitudinal analysis of media framing of worker displacement in the United States. To identify the frame-changing dynamic occurring over time, a content analysis was performed on 1,128 articles covering layoffs in *The New York Times* between 1980 and 2007. The article identifies both frame changing along the time and space dimensions, and changes in core frames of coverage. It also examines the relationship between these framing dynamics and the portrayal of layoffs as either problematic or non-problematic. Ultimately, the article contributes to the potential for convergence between social problems agenda tracking in communication and sociological research, and to the study of media framing of worker displacement, specifically layoffs.

### **Introduction**

Scholars in media studies and sociology have noticed that the attention to issues of public concern waxes and wanes over time. This dynamic is related to journalistic decisions about what to cover (or ignore) in reports, and to the public's awareness and understanding of public issues such as social problems. The frame-changing approach to understanding news discourse focuses on journalists' tendency to adjust the focus of their reportage to maintain or build salience. Indeed, a number of recent studies have examined these tendencies (e.g., Aday, 2009; Bichard, 2006; Chyi & McCombs, 2004; & Muschert & Carr, 2006, 2006; Schwartz & Andsager, 2008). What has rarely been studied is the frame-changing

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tendency in an issue whose presence persists over years, even decades, of news coverage. To allay this dearth, this study examines 28 years of news coverage of employee layoffs.

Given the breadth of its study period, this research helps to clarify some issues in the longitudinal analysis of news media coverage of social issues, particularly social problems. Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) envision public attention to social problems as an arena in which various issues compete for ascendancy, most having a relatively short life as putative social problems. The few issues that seem to persist over long periods tend to be rather broad issues such as social welfare (Misra, Moller, & Karides, 2003), illegal drugs (Gonzenbach, 1996), or climate change (Trumbo, 1995). The framing of issues of public concern helps organize and give meaning to the issues themselves (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992) and reflects the dominant cultural themes in which those frames are situated (Gamson, 1988). Of course, within the social constructionist framework, news discourse is a form of claims making (Best, 1990) that serves to define the very nature of the problems themselves. In advancing the longitudinal study of media discourse about public issues, this study is the most extensive application of a newly emerging scheme (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006).

Given the continuing public attention to issues of employment and joblessness, this study helps clarify how the discourse of layoffs has changed during the last three decades. A long-standing issue in the news, though controversial in past decades, discourse about layoffs has become commonly acknowledged as a routine part of economic relations. In examining the news media's treatment of layoffs, this study shows how the discourse has changed over the last three decades and also helps clarify important aspects of longitudinal framing of social problems, namely how news tends to reflect commonsense thinking about the issue, and how the themes may at times represent the interests of powerful groups that would benefit from the displacement of workers.

### **Literature**

This study builds on the body of literature in mass media studies focusing on frame changing and issue salience. These studies comprise three groups addressing issue attention, agenda setting, and framing. In recent years, researchers have made substantive connections between the latter two literatures, particularly when examining longitudinal framing of public issues within the media agenda. Such studies can be important in social science research examining controversial issues such as social problems.

An early study of media salience conducted by Downs (1972) used the term "issue attention cycle" to indicate issues' tendency to emerge, gain public interest, and then fade away. As one fades, another usually arises to capture the public imagination. This study was among the first to examine the temporal quality of issue salience in media, as indicated by public interest. In a similar approach, Winter and Eyal (1981) measured object salience, or the amount of attention an issue received in media discourse.

Around the time Downs' study appeared, another literature began to emerge as McCombs and Shaw (1972) coined the term "agenda setting," which refers to the process through which journalists

select and highlight issues. Their study examined journalists' influence on setting the issue agenda for elections. Later studies, rather than examining a specific object like an election campaign (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), shifted to examine the attributes of the object (Ghanem, 1997; McCombs & Bell, 1996). In an exemplary study, Manheim (1987) described three dimensions of the media agenda: visibility, audience salience, and valence. Visibility and audience salience are determined by the *attention* an object receives and its *prominence* (Kiousis, 2004). *Attention* involves the number of news stories about a given issue (Rogers & Dearing, 1996; Trumbo, 1995), while *prominence* refers to a news story's placement, size, images, and other dimensions (Kiousis, 2004). Although scholars sometimes disagree about attributes' importance for study or appropriateness of methodology, they have recently made conceptual connections between the attribute agenda-setting literature and the framing literature (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001).

Researchers have defined framing differentially. According to Entman (1993), to frame is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52). Tankard (2001) defined a media frame as "a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration" (pp. 100–101). Still elsewhere, framing has been described as "the construction of an agenda with a restricted number of thematically related attributes in order to create a coherent picture of a particular object" (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001, p. 70). These definitions differ, but each points out that through the selection and manipulation of frames in their coverage of news events, journalists can influence the nature of the message conveyed to the consumers. Convergence between the framing and agenda-setting literatures is perhaps most pronounced when scholars examine the frame-changing process as it is used to increase or maintain issue salience (Chyi & McCombs, 2004). In this approach, media frames measure attribute salience, conceptually linking the two approaches.

Scholars are increasingly recognizing the convergence of the agenda-setting and framing approaches (e.g., Aday, 2009; Entman 2007), but only a limited number of longitudinal studies examine the frame-changing dynamic across incidents. These include Iyengar's (1991) study of television framing of political issues and Winter and Eyal's (1981) study of civil rights issues in *The New York Times*. Chyi and McCombs (2004) proposed a coding scheme for the study of frame changing across incidents, which Muschert and Carr (2006) successfully applied in their study of school shootings to demonstrate frame changing across incidents and serve as a basis of comparison between news events at varying levels of salience. Other applications of the Chyi and McCombs coding scheme that connect the frame-changing and agenda-setting approaches include an analysis of gay men's use of methamphetamines (Schwartz & Andsager, 2008) and an examination of framing on candidates' blogs during the 2004 U.S. presidential campaigns (Richard, 2006).

Mass media studies in agenda tracking may at times converge with sociological research examining the rise and fall of social problems in the news. For example, sociologists of social problems have shown that social problems can emerge via a process of collective definition in the public (Blumer, 1971). Indeed, many sociologists have argued for the existence of a "natural history" of social problems,

one closely related to their discussion in the media (Blumer, 1971; Fuller & Myers, 1941; Kitsuse & Spector, 1973). In this vein, Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) suggested a "public arenas model" in which social issues compete for coverage and attention. Alternately, scholars of social movements have examined the relationship between framing and the mobilization of collective behavior (Benford & Snow, 2000). In selecting aspects of issues to cover (or ignore), journalists may influence media consumers' understanding of public issues such as social problems and threats. Critical scholars question the role of the media in the diagnosis of social problems (e.g., Herman & Chomsky 2002; McChesney 1997; Parenti 1993). This body of research argues that the media are owned by the powerful and act on their behalf to stifle dissent. For example, Parenti (1993) argues that media coverage of the economy is tilted in favor of the owners rather than unions or workers. In a recent study of media coverage of the economy, Kollmeyer (2004) found that the *Los Angeles Times* coverage of the economy between 1997 and 1998 was decidedly pro-business. From this perspective, potential social problems will not be presented as such. Given the media's influence, social scientists examining social problems (e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Kioussis, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Spencer & Triche, 1994; Trumbo, 1995) are likely to benefit from understanding the framing dynamic. Our study focuses on media framing of layoffs, a once controversial but now commonly recognized practice of worker displacement.

### **Worker Displacement in the News**

Research on media coverage of issues surrounding work and employment has focused somewhat narrowly on unions and labor relations. Overwhelmingly, research has found that the media portray unions in a negative light, if at all (Martin, 2004). As early as 1945, in an era when unionization rates in the United States were peaking, Sussmann (1945) found that in coverage of labor disputes, organized labor was more likely to be portrayed as in the wrong.

A more recent wave of research, spurred by the high-profile UPS strike of 1997, echoes this finding. Examining media coverage of the issue over the course of its relatively short life, Kumar (2001) found that early on in the strike, newspaper coverage focused largely on the inconvenience the strike caused to consumers and ignored the substantive issues at stake between UPS workers and management. For a short period, in response to overwhelming public support for the striking workers and the Teamsters Union's effective communications strategy, the focus shifted to more general considerations of job quality in the postindustrial economy (Ryan, 2004). However, the media quickly refocused on the strike's resolution, and these more general discussions evaporated (Kumar, 2001).

Carreiro (2005) examined the media coverage of anti-union firings<sup>1</sup> in 1999 and also found a pervasive anti-union bias. Overwhelmingly, the newspapers under investigation altogether ignored the anti-union firing cases (98 out of 100 filings) filed with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), as well as those that were adjudicated by the NLRB (62 of 71). In the news stories on the few cases that were

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<sup>1</sup> The database included all cases adjudicated (71) as well as a random sample of charges of anti-union firings filed ( $N = 100$ ) with the NLRB in 1999 and newspaper coverage of them in 121 local, regional, and national newspapers.

covered, the NLRB was typically the sole source; union representatives were given little opportunity to comment on the case or the situation.

Compared to the interest in unions and labor issues, scholarly attention to media coverage of the broader issue of job loss, layoffs, and worker displacement has been scant (an exception is Hollister, 2009). This is surprising and unfortunate, as layoffs, downsizing, and involuntary unemployment have become more common in recent decades, affecting workers across a growing variety of occupations, industries, and educational levels. Research on the issues themselves is voluminous, beginning with an examination of the causes of "deindustrialization" and its consequences for communities (Bluestone & Harrison, 1982).

Over the course of the 1990s, scholarly perspectives on economic change and the concomitant job losses became more varied. Some saw economic dislocation as the root of a variety of social problems, including urban poverty and persistent racial inequality (Wilson, 1996). Others (Rubin, 1996) argued that downsizing and displacement are an outcome of the dismantling of the "social contract" that once implicitly governed employment relations, under which employers and employees had long-term obligations to one another that typically resulted in lifetime employment. A growing body of literature in business and management during this time discussed ways for managers and employees to navigate the new, more flexible (unstable) labor market (Cappelli, 1999; Osterman, 1999; Osterman, Kochan, Locke, & Piore, 2001). Underlying these treatments were various assumptions about whether, and for whom, the changes in employment were good or bad.

More recently, researchers in economics have been debating the effects of labor market flexibility on unemployment rates. According to Freeman (2005), the "orthodox view" holds that inflexibility (e.g., protections for workers, unions) does more harm than good, while the opposing side contends that empirical support for this position is lacking. Notwithstanding divergences in perspectives and opinions in academic circles, we know little about how more public treatments of this phenomenon have changed over time. What we do know is largely based on case studies, which have revealed the same anti-union bias as the studies of strikes and union-busting tactics discussed above. Having examined the coverage in the early 1990s of the closing of the General Motors Willow Run assembly plant in Ypsilanti, Michigan, for example, Oshagan and Martin (1999) found that GM received more coverage and was framed more positively than the union.

We move beyond this largely event-based body of media research focused narrowly on labor and management conflict by examining media coverage of the issue of layoffs and worker displacement across a large number of cases and over a long period of time. Tracking media coverage of layoffs over time allows us to gauge how the meanings surrounding layoffs as a business practice have been constructed and changed. To further connect the agenda-setting research in communications and the framing literatures in sociological research on social problems and movements, we move beyond the incident-based approach to studying discourse, toward an issue-based approach. Thus our study of the framing of layoffs allows us to explore how this issue has been covered over a 28-year period.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Questions***

The study of layoffs in the news was guided by the following research questions:

- How many news stories appeared per quarter year, how were these distributed across the study period, and how did observed variations relate to changes in the economy?
- What was the distribution of time frames, how do they relate to problem frames, and was any frame changing evident over time?
- What was the distribution of space frames, how do they relate to problem frames, and was any frame changing evident over time?
- What was the relationship between the use of space and time frames in forming core frames, how do they relate to problem frames, and how did the use of these core frames change over time?

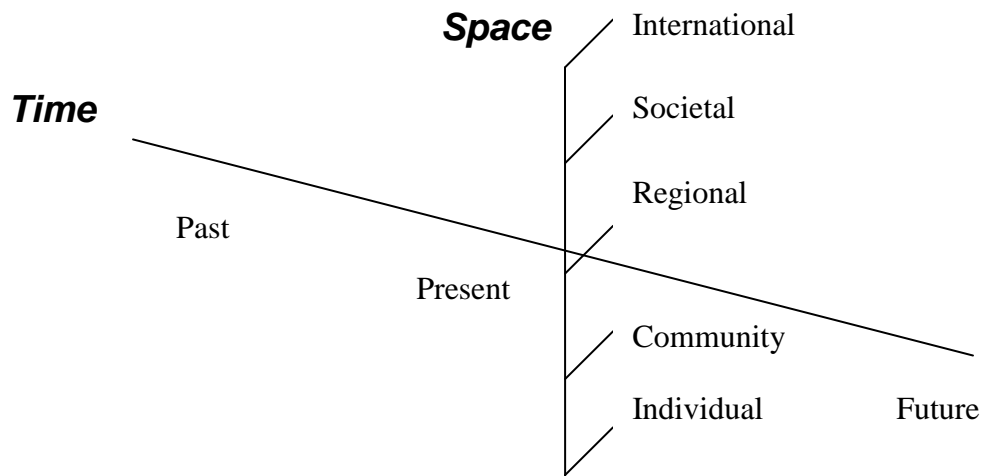
### ***Data***

To examine the longitudinal changes in the frames evoked in news reports on worker layoffs, this study examined 1,128 *New York Times* articles discussing layoffs published between January 1, 1980, and September 30, 2007. *The New York Times* was selected because it is recognized as an agenda-setting source in the United States (Gitlin, 1980). Data were collected using a keyword search of the Lexis-Nexis database for "layoff." A manageable data set was created by limiting articles included in the study to those using the term five or more times. Although this could have been done with a random sample, we wanted to ensure that layoffs were the central focus of the articles selected. In all, the search returned 1,133 articles, of which 1,128 were appropriate to the study and thus comprise the corpus of data used to study the discourse of layoffs. The large number of articles and nearly 28-year span of their publication make the present research one of the broadest longitudinal studies of media framing conducted to date.

Social scientists engaged in media studies (e.g., Downs, 1972) have shown that public attention changes somewhat rapidly, rarely (if ever) consistently focusing on a single issue for an extended period. However, variation in coverage of an issue is inevitable as it resurfaces on the public agenda over different decades. Although empirical analysis has demonstrated that the typical issue in the media has a life course of 18.5 months (McCombs & Zhu, 1995), an issue as basic as worker displacement can resurface consistently over decades. Indeed, our empirical analysis suggests the consistent salience of economic issues related to employment or the loss thereof.

### **Measurement Scheme**

This study utilizes the two-dimensional coding scheme proposed by Chyi and McCombs (2004), as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Two-dimensional measurement scheme table.**

Source. Chyi and McCombs (2004, p. 25).

The format allows for the examination of two fundamental aspects of news content, corresponding to the journalistic convention of including the “where” and the “when” in news stories. The coding scheme thus enables researchers to study news discourse on the space and time ranges. In their initial use of the coding schema, Chyi and McCombs (2004) acknowledged “that time and space alone may not account for everything contained in a news story, yet these two dimensions represent central organizing ideas in journalistic practice” (pp. 24–25).

The space dimension, which measures the spatial focus of discourse in news stories, ranges from the most narrow (individual) to the broadest (international) concern.<sup>2</sup> Here, the individual focus applied when layoffs were discussed in relation to their impact on individual workers and their families, while the international focus applied to discussions of a layoff's impact on an international scale. Between these extremes were three intermediate categories (from narrow to broad): community, regional, and societal.

Similarly, the time dimension measures the temporal focus of news stories.<sup>3</sup> Categories on this continuum include the *past* orientation, including discussions of past layoffs or events; discussion of *present* layoffs and events and their impacts; and predictions about *future* layoffs or effects, including future trends. Together, the spatial and temporal continua allow us to examine two aspects of frame changing over time in the news coverage of layoffs.

Because we are interested in the convergence of the agenda-tracking research in communications and social problems research in sociology, we also coded for the presence or absence of a problem frame. Problem frames address whether layoffs were depicted as problematic in themselves or as potentially leading to problems. This addition allows us to track changes in the problematizing of layoffs in relation to the temporal and spatial framing of the news coverage.

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<sup>2</sup> The space dimension includes five categories ranging from narrow to broad:

- Individual—the article focuses on individuals and small groups, including managers, displaced workers, or stakeholders.
- Community—the focus is on towns, cities, or larger groups, including the effects on towns where displacement occurs and the effect displacement has on businesses and other organizations, such as labor unions.
- Regional—the focus is on the concerns of a large metropolitan area or state, for instance the effect of worker displacement on a regional economy.
- Societal—the focus is on the national impact, concern, or public opinion surrounding worker displacement, possibly including citation of national-level labor statistics and trends.
- International—the focus is on the multinational impact of an issue such as international relations or changes in the international economy.

<sup>3</sup> The time dimension includes three categories:

- Past—the article discusses past trends or events in worker displacement that do not relate directly to present events or predictions about the future.
- Present—the focus is on key contemporary events, the immediate consequences, and the current social trend in worker displacement.
- Future—the article focuses on the longer-term effects of worker displacement and typically makes predictions or policy recommendations on ways to address worker displacement.



### **Coding**

Two coders, both social science postgraduates, performed the content analysis. Coding was discrete, and when a story contained multiple frames, the coders identified the article's dominant frame. To ensure reliability of coding between coders, pre- and post-tests of reliability were conducted using Scott's  $\kappa$  (Scott, 1955), a statistic for measuring inter-coder reliability while controlling for agreement likely to occur by chance. Along the space dimension, a pretest indicated 88% inter-coder agreement, with a  $\kappa$ -value of 0.83. After refinement of the coding schedule, a post-test revealed 96% inter-coder agreement, with a  $\kappa$ -value of 0.94. Along the time dimension, a pretest indicated 76% inter-coder agreement with a  $\kappa$ -value of 0.52. After refinement, a post-test revealed 98% inter-coder agreement with a  $\kappa$ -value of 0.96. This reliability testing ensured high inter-coder agreement and hence reliability in coding.

### **Findings**

To answer our research questions, we focus first on changes in the economy. From 1980 to 2007 the United States economy experienced several periods of expansion and contraction. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) (September 2010), "a recession is a period of falling economic activity spread across the economy, lasting more than a few months, normally visible in real GDP, real income, employment, industrial production, and wholesale-retail sales. The trough marks the end of the declining phase and the start of the rising phase of the business cycle. Economic activity is typically below normal in the early stages of an expansion, and it sometimes remains so well into the expansion." The NBER identifies eight business cycles of various lengths between 1980 and 2007. These four economic expansions and four recessions are inversely related to the volume of layoff coverage in *The New York Times*, though in several instances the volume of coverage remained high in the early quarters of an expansion, reflecting the continued low level of economic activity from a recession.

The first research question asked how many stories appeared per quarter year and how were they distributed. Table 1 shows the volume of layoff coverage in *The New York Times* during the study period. The first column in the table lists the quarter (Q) or a longer period consisting of several quarters. The quarters in boldface type indicate a recession according to the NBER. The individual quarters in plain type are periods of growth that maintained a high volume of layoff coverage. The quarters between the dotted lines are extended periods of economic growth in which coverage of layoffs was sparse. The table's second column shows the number of articles focusing on layoffs. Cells corresponding to extended growth periods have an average per quarter rounded to the nearest whole number, while the cells for individual quarters show the number of articles for the given quarter. The third column shows the Bureau of Labor Statistics unemployment rate from the first to the last month of a quarter (or longer period).

**Table 1. Volume of Layoff Coverage by Quarter.**

Time Period	<i>N</i>	Unemployment rate
<b>Q2 1980</b>	10	6.9–7.6
<b>Q3</b>	13	7.8–7.5
Q4 1980– Q2 1981	7	7.5–7.5
<b>Q3</b>	22	7.2–7.6
<b>Q4</b>	22	7.9–8.5
<b>Q1 1982</b>	15	8.6–9.0
<b>Q2</b>	11	9.3–9.6
<b>Q3</b>	16	9.8–10.1
<b>Q4</b>	24	10.4–10.8
Q1 1983	25	10.4–10.3
Q2 1983–1990	8	10.2–5.2
<b>Q3 1990</b>	10	5.5–5.9
<b>Q4</b>	31	5.9–6.3
<b>Q1 1991</b>	33	6.4–6.8
Q2	23	6.7–6.9
Q3	23	6.8–6.9
Q4	19	7.0–7.3
Q1 1992	18	7.3–7.4
Q2	12	7.4–7.8
Q3	20	7.7–7.6
Q4	17	7.3–7.4
Q1 1993	17	7.3–7.0
Q2 1993– Q3 2000	7	7.0–3.9
<b>Q4 2000</b>	6	3.9–3.9
<b>Q1 2001</b>	33	4.2–4.3
<b>Q2</b>	23	4.5–4.5
<b>Q3</b>	16	4.6–5.0
Q4	26	5.3–5.7
Q1 2002	16	5.7–5.7
Q2	7	5.9–5.8
Q3	10	5.8–5.7
Q4	19	5.7–6.0
Q1 2003	25	5.8–5.9
Q2	24	6.0–6.3
Q3 2003– Q3 2007	4	6.0–5.0

*Note: Bold type indicates NBER recession periods.*

Three points are worth noting in the volume of coverage of layoffs. First, the amount of coverage increases in recessionary periods. The number of articles averaged 11.5 per quarter in the first recession (Q2 1980 to Q3 1980), 19 in the second, 20 in the third, and 19 in the final recessionary period. Second, the increasing layoff coverage for the third and fourth recessions was delayed a quarter. That is, recessions began in Q3 1990 and Q4 2000, but the volume of coverage did not increase until the second quarter of the recessions. Third, a high volume of coverage followed the conclusions of the third and fourth recessions. In the first recession, however, coverage declined immediately at the end of the recession. The second recession saw a high level of coverage only into the first quarter of the economic recovery, whereas the volume of coverage of layoffs in the third and fourth recessions lasted for eight and seven quarters, respectively, after the official end of the recessions. This finding suggests that layoffs ended as the economy recovered after the first two recessions but continued after the second and third, despite the economic recovery.

The second research question asked about (a) the distribution of time frames, (b) their relation to problem frames, (c) and changes over time. Table 2 shows the distribution of time frames during expansionary and recessionary periods. It also shows the distribution of time frames across each of the recessionary periods. For each of the time frames (i.e., past, present, and, future) and periods (e.g., Expansion Total, Q2–Q3 1980), the percentage of articles at each temporal frame and the percent framed as problematic are noted.

**Table 2. Time and Problem Frames: Changes Across Time Periods**

Time (% total)	1		2		3		4		5		6	
	Non-Recession Total		Recession Total		Q2–Q3 1980		Q3 1983		1981–Q1 Q3 1993		1990–Q1 Q4 2000–Q2 2003	
	<i>N</i> (%)	% Problem	<i>N</i> (%)	% Problem	<i>N</i> (%)	% Problem	<i>N</i> (%)	% Problem	<i>N</i> (%)	% Problem	<i>N</i> (%)	% Problem
Past (8.6)	49 (9.2)	67.3	47 (8.0)	55.3	1 (4.3)	100	9 (6.7)	77.8	10 (4.5)	30.0	27 (13.0)	55.6
Present (66.3)	341 (63.9)	47.2	402 (68.5)	45.0	21 (91.3)	71.4	98 (72.6)	45.9	144 (64.9)	32.6	139 (67.1)	53.2
Future (25.5)	144 (27.0)	48.6	138 (23.5)	37.0	1 (4.3)	100	28 (20.7)	39.3	68 (30.6)	29.4	41 (19.8)	46.3
Total	534	49.4	587	43.9	23	73.9	135	46.3	222	31.5	201	52.2

Chi-square tests:

Time by Recessions

$$\chi^2 = 23.24^{***},$$

$$df = 6$$

Time by Problem by Recessions

$$\text{Past } \chi^2 = 5.24 \text{ } df = 3; \text{ Present } \chi^2 = 18.66^{***}; \text{ Future } \chi^2 = 4.98$$

+  $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < .001$

Columns 1 and 2 show the frequency of each temporal frame and the percent framed as problematic for the expansionary and recessionary periods. We first examined whether the distribution of temporal frames differed between expansionary and recessionary periods. We did not find statistically significant difference in the use of temporal frames between these two periods (e.g., past frame used in 9.2% of articles in expansionary periods and 8.0% in recessionary periods). Next we checked whether the coincidence of temporal frames and problem frames differed between recessionary and expansionary periods. We found that the future frame in expansionary periods was significantly ( $F = 3.93, p < .05$ ) more likely to accompany a problem frame (48.6%) than in recessionary periods (37.0%). Third, we tested for differences in the coincidence of temporal and problem frames in the recessionary articles. For the total recessions, there was no significant difference in the likelihood of past, present, or future frames appearing along with a problem frame.

The next set of tests examined the differences across the four economic recessions (Columns 3 through 6). We first tested for differences in the use of time frames across the recessions. A chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = 23.24, df = 6, p < .001$ ) indicated a significant difference in the use of time frames across the recessions. While the present frame was used most often in each of the recessions, the past and future frames increased in frequency over time. In the first recession, the past and future frames were each used only once, but by the final recession they constituted 13% and 19.8% respectively. Finally, we tested for a relationship between time and problem frames across the recessions. The percentage of articles with a problem frame declined at each temporal level from the first to the third recession before increasing in the fourth. A chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = 18.66, df = 3, p < .001$ ) indicated that this relationship was statistically significant only for the present frame. Seventy-one percent of articles using the present frame were framed as problematic in the first recession, 45.9% in the second, 32.6% in the third, and 53.2% in the final recession. The third research question asked about the distribution of space frames, their relation to problem frames, and changes over time. Table 3 shows the distribution of space frames during expansionary and recessionary periods. It also shows the distribution of space frames across each of the recessionary periods. For each of the space frames (e.g., individual, community) and periods (e.g., Expansion Total, Q2-Q3 1980), the percentage of articles using each spatial frame and the percent framed as problematic are noted.

Columns 1 and 2 show the frequency of each spatial frame and the percent framed as problematic for the expansionary and recessionary periods. We first examined whether the use of spatial frames differed between expansionary and recessionary periods. There was a significant difference in the use of the regional and societal frames. The regional frame was more likely to be used in the recessionary periods (41.8%) than in the expansionary periods (27.9%), while the societal frame was more likely to be used in expansionary (35.7%) than in recessionary (23.3%) periods. Next we examined whether the coincidence of spatial and problem frames differed between recessionary and expansionary periods. We found that the regional frame in expansionary periods was significantly ( $F = 6.44, p < .05$ ) more likely to accompany a problem frame (56.5%) than in recessionary periods (42.6%). Third, we tested for differences in the coincidence of spatial and problem frames in the recessionary articles. For the total recessions, there was not a statistically significant difference in the likelihood of different spatial frames appearing alongside a problem frame.

**Table 3. Space Frames and Problem Frames: Changes across Time Periods.**

Space (% total)	1		2		3		4		5		6	
	Non-Recession Total		Recession Total		Q2-Q3 1980		Q3 1981- Q1 1983		Q3 1990- Q1 1993		Q4 2000- Q2 2003	
	N (%)	% Problem	N (%)	% Problem	N (%)	% Problem	N (%)	% Problem	N (%)	% Problem	N (%)	% Problem
Individual (1.0)	2 (.4)	66.7	9 (1.5)	66.7	0 (0)	0	3 (2.2)	66.7	3 (1.4)	66.7	3 (1.5)	66.7
Community (29.4)	167 (31.7)	45.9	159 (27.2)	41.4	4 (17.4)	100	47 (34.8)	55.3	70 (31.5)	22.9	38 (18.6)	52.6
Regional (35.2)	147 (27.9)	56.5	244 (41.8)	42.6	6 (26.1)	50.0	50 (37.0)	40.0	103 (46.4)	36.9	85 (41.7)	50.6
Societal (29.2)	188 (35.7)	50.2	136 (23.3)	51.1	13 (56.5)	76.9	33 (24.4)	45.5	32 (14.4)	31.3	58 (28.4)	60.3
Int'l (5.2)	22 (4.2)	32.0	36 (6.2)	25.7	0 (0)	0	2 (1.5)	0.0	14 (6.3)	28.6	20 (9.8)	30.0
Total	526	49.5	584	43.7	23	73.9	135	46.3	222	31.5	204	52.0
Chi-Square tests:												
Space by Recessions			$\chi^2 = 46.18^{***}$ , $df = 12$									
Space by Problem by Recessions			Individual $\chi^2 = 0.00$ , $df = 3$ ; Community $\chi^2 = 21.26^{***}$ ; Regional $\chi^2 = 3.82$ ; Societal $\chi^2 = 10.60^*$ ; Int'l $\chi^2 = 0.76$									

+  $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

The next set of tests examined the differences across the four economic recessions (Columns 3 through 6). We first tested for differences in the distribution of spatial frames across the recessions. A chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = 46.18$ ,  $df = 12$ ,  $p < .001$ ) indicated a significant difference in the use of spatial frames across the recessions. The first recession was dominated by the societal frame (56.5%). The second (71.8%) and third (77.9%) were dominated by a combination of community and regional frames. The fourth recession brought a shift from the community level back to the societal level, with 70.1% of articles adopting the regional (41.7%) or societal (28.4%) frames. Finally, we tested for a relationship between spatial and problem frames across the recessions. The percentage of articles with a problem frame declined at the community, regional, and societal levels from the first to the third recession before increasing in the fourth. Chi-square tests indicated that this relationship was statistically significant for the both the community ( $\chi^2 = 21.26$ ;  $df = 3$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and societal frames ( $\chi^2 = 10.60$ ;  $df = 3$ ;  $p < .05$ ). One hundred percent of articles using the community frame were framed as problematic in the first recession, 55.3% in the second, 22.9% in the third, and 52.6% in the final recession. At the societal level, 76.9% were framed as problematic in the first recession, 45.5% in the second, 31.3% in the third, and 60.3% in the final recession.

The fourth research question asked about the distribution of core frames, their relation to problem frames, and changes over time. Core frames are created by combining time and space frames. Table 4 shows the distribution of core frames during expansionary and recessionary periods. Only the seven most frequently occurring core frames were included in the analysis. Table 4 also shows the distribution of core frames across each of the recessionary periods. For each of the core frames (e.g., past-society, present-community) and periods (e.g., Expansion Total, Q2–Q3 1980), the percentage of articles using each core frame and the percent framed as problematic are noted.

**Table 4. Core Frames and Problem Frames: Changes across Time Periods.**

Core (%total)	1 Non-Recession total		2 Recession Total		3 Q2 – Q3 1980		4 Q3 1981– Q1 1983		5 Q3 1990– Q1 1993		6 Q4 2000– Q2 2003	
	N (%)	% Problem	N (%)	% Problem	N (%)	% Problem	N (%)	% Problem	N (%)	% Problem	N (%)	% Problem
Past- societal (5.6)	30 (6.1)	73.3	26 (5.0)	69.2	0 (0)	0	5 (4.0)	80	5 (2.5)	60	16 (9.4)	68.8
Present- community (23.6)	119 (24.5)	47.1	118 (22.7)	44.8	3 (13.6)	100	40 (31.7)	52.5	46 (22.9)	23.9	29 (17.0)	62.1
Present- regional (23.9)	86 (17.7)	54.5	154 (29.6)	43.4	5 (22.7)	40.0	29 (23.0)	51.7	65 (32.3)	38.5	55 (32.2)	45.5
Present- societal (21.2)	118 (24.3)	46.2	95 (18.3)	46.8	13 (59.1)	76.9	24 (19.0)	29.2	21 (10.4)	28.6	37 (21.6)	59.5
Future- community (6.4)	35 (7.2)	37.1	29 (5.6)	34.5	0 (0)	0	4 (3.2)	75.0	20 (10.0)	25.0	5 (2.9)	40.0
Future- regional (13.9)	57 (11.8)	57.9	83 (16.0)	38.6	1 (4.5)	100	20 (15.9)	20.0	38 (18.9)	34.2	24 (14.0)	58.3
Future- societal (5.5)	40 (8.2)	52.5	15 (2.9)	46.7	0 (0)	0	4 (3.2)	100	6 (3.0)	16.7	5 (2.9)	40.0
Total	485	49.5	520	47.9	22	72.7	126	46.0	201	31.8	171	55.0
Chi-Square tests:												
Core by Recessions			$\chi^2 = 64.76^{***}$ , df = 18									
Core by Problem by Recessions			Past-Societal $\chi^2 = .47$ , df = 3; Present-Community $\chi^2 = 16.26^{***}$ ; Present-Regional $\chi^2 = 1.58$ ; Present-Societal $\chi^2 = 12.89^{**}$ ; Future-Community $\chi^2 = 3.77$ ; Future-Regional $\chi^2 = 8.77^*$ ; Future- Societal $\chi^2 = 6.83^*$ , df = 2									

+ p < .10; \*p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001

Columns 1 and 2 show the frequency of each core frame and the percent framed as problematic for the expansionary and recessionary periods. We first examined whether the use of core frames differed between expansionary and recessionary periods. The present-region frame was more likely to be used in recessionary periods (29.6%) than in expansionary periods (17.7%). Next we checked whether the coincidence of core and problem frames differed between recessionary and expansionary periods. We found that the future-region frame in expansionary periods was significantly ( $F = 5.20, p < .05$ ) more likely to accompany a problem frame (57.9%) than in recessionary periods (38.6%). Third, we tested for differences in the coincidence of core and problem frames in the recessionary articles. For the total recessions, there was not a statistically significant difference in the likelihood of different core frames appearing along with a problem frame.

The next set of tests looked at the differences across the four economic recessions (Columns 3 through 6). We first tested for differences in the distribution of core frames across the recessions. A chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = 64.76, df = 18, p < .001$ ) indicated significant difference in the use of core frames across the recessions. In the first recession, the present-society frame (59.1%) was the most frequently used. The second and third recessions saw the present-community and present-region frames used most frequently. In the final recession, the present-region frame was invoked most often, followed by the present-society frame. In the three later recessions the use of the future-region frame became more common at 15.9%, 18.9%, and 14.0% respectively. Finally, we tested for a relationship between core and problem frames across the recessions. Significant relationships were found for the present-community, present-society, future-region, and future-society frames. The problem frames in the present-community (100%, 52.5%, 23.9%, and 62.1%) and present-society frames (76.9%, 29.2%, 28.6%, and 59.5%) declined from the first to the third recessions before increasing in the final recession. The problem frames in the future-region frame increased from the second to the final recession (20.0%, 34.2%, and 58.3%). Finally, the problem frames in the future-society frames decreased from the second (100%) to third recession (16.7%) before increasing in the final recession (40.0%).

### Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine the changes in the news media's treatment of layoffs over a nearly 30-year period by analyzing both the changing volume of coverage and the changes in the framing of layoffs. The volume of news coverage followed changes in the economy. As layoffs became more prevalent, the media followed suit with increased coverage. The temporal, spatial, and problem framing of layoffs changed over the course of the period under study. While the present frame was the dominant time frame, both the future and past frames increased in a nearly monotonic fashion over the study period.

Interestingly, the articles adopting the future frame were least likely to be simultaneously framed as problematic (37.0%) during recessions. As the use of layoffs becomes more common, it is in employers' interests to forecast these organizational changes, and they often do so in ambiguous terms. Firms' announcements of layoffs often did not clarify how many workers would be laid off or when, as when one financial firm announced it would "eliminate as many as 12,000 jobs over the next three

months," or other companies indicated they were planning layoffs in "the coming months" (Dash, 2007). In a general sense, these announcements may prepare both workers and the general public for any future layoffs and reduce the backlash against layoffs that actually do occur. They may also act as "sticks" to frighten workers into increasing productivity, reduce liabilities (e.g., unemployment compensation) by prompting employees to seek new employment in anticipation of a layoff, or convince investors that management is acting on their behalf.

Spatial frames, like temporal frames, changed over the study period. While the societal frame was dominant in the initial recession, the modal frame in the following three recessions was the region. From the third to the fourth recession the community frame declined and the societal frame increased. Why did the regional frame dominate? Despite the rise of internationally oriented issues such as globalization, it may have remained the dominant frame because the effects of layoffs may be regionally centered in metropolitan areas, states, or regions. For example, the recession that began in 2008 has not had the same impact in all areas: Some areas remain untouched while others have been devastated. While macroeconomic understandings of layoffs may have changed, the reporting of the actual events still tends to focus on the area directly affected. In addition to the changes in space frames, the problematizing of these frames also changed. With the exceptions of the individual and international levels, the probability that the space frames would also be problematic changed across the recessions. Each of the three most common frames saw a decline in problem frames from the first to the third recession with an increase in the fourth.

Overall, the framing of layoff coverage as problematic or non-problematic revealed two significant trends, the first possibly obscured by the second. First, articles written during one of the recessions under examination were less likely than those written during growth periods to frame layoffs as problematic. This suggests the view that during the third recession in our time period, employers were justified in laying off workers, but when the economy is growing layoffs are harder to justify. Still, this larger trend does not hold across each of the recessions. The second important trend is the decline in the percent of articles framing layoffs as problematic from the first to third recessions followed by an increase in the fourth. The extremely low percentage of problem frames in the third recession is a definite anomaly. In general the articles were *more* likely to problematize layoffs during recessions, with the exception of the third recession. While seemingly justified, layoffs during recessions may exacerbate already deteriorating conditions, so journalists may simply have been reporting on increasingly manifest problems. This finding challenges the critical view of the media, but it is important to note that in only one of the full recessions did more than 50% of the articles use a problem frame. But layoff coverage in the Q3 1990 to Q4 1992 recession seems to be supportive of the critical view. Prior research has examined media coverage of the economy leading up to the 1992 election and argued that media portrayals of the economy were more negative than in prior election periods, playing a role in the eventual defeat of the first President Bush (Goidel & Langley, 1995). Further research should take up this issue to examine whether, how, and why this period differs from the others.

During the period under study, the U.S. witnessed significant shifts in the economy due to deindustrialization and the erosion of the social contract. Under the social contract, employers and employees often exercised a long-term informal reciprocity that commonly led to lifetime employment.



This long-term obligation also extended into the communities and regions where employers operated. Two patterns in the coverage help reveal the devolution of the social contract. First, the extended coverage of layoffs after the official end of the third and fourth recession suggests a decoupling of economic recovery (e.g., GDP growth) from improving economic circumstances for workers. Under Keynesian principles, low rates of worker displacement are closely linked to relative economic stability. The continuation of layoffs coinciding with economic growth suggests an end to this principle. The second pattern is the problem frame appearing alongside the future-region frame during economic expansions. Expansions should be accompanied by growing employment, indicating a shared sense of mutual benefits between the employer and the region. This combination of frames indicates that in more recent decades, expanding economies may no longer operate in line with these principles.

This research contributes to the longitudinal study of frame changing by providing a baseline for understanding discourse over time. The most apparent conclusion about framing is that journalists do indeed engage in frame changing and core frame changing over time, a behavior we presume reflects both their attempts to maintain issue salience and the evolving nature of public understanding of the issue of worker displacement over time. Overall changes in framing are not abrupt but gradual, perhaps related to a slow evolution in journalists' understandings of workplace flexibility (or stability) and the global economy over the broad study period of nearly three decades. Of course, such understandings evolve in relationship with the other varieties of public discourse about layoffs, and we assume that the news-making behaviors we studied evolved in relationship with other forms of discourse about the topic. We are careful, however, to avoid any statement that the media framing simply causes the public discourse to assume a certain shape (cf. Trumbo, 1995, p. 8). Rather, the media framing evolves as sensibilities about the issue evolve.

Although our findings suggest that space and time frames changed over the duration of our study, and thus were responsive to the history of the layoffs phenomenon in recent decades, several potential limitations to our study should be noted. First, although we use a longitudinal data set covering almost three decades of layoffs, it is impossible for us to generalize to other subjects. Further application of the time and space frames used here to other long-term, event-based social problems is necessary to determine the degree to which frames more generally change over time. Second, our exclusive focus on *The New York Times*, although a widely accepted practice, might bias the space frame toward wider-scale perspectives, such as the societal and international frames. However, local and regional news outlets in those areas most affected by layoffs—for example, the industrial Midwest in the 1980s—would likely focus attention on dramatically different aspects of worker displacement, and on local and regional issues, so using these local sources would likely bias the results toward the local and regional frames. Despite its limitations, *The New York Times* provides a national perspective that allows for conclusions about societal responses to the issue of mass layoffs and downsizing.

Alongside issues of bias and limited generalizability, any conclusions about a social problem or issue drawn from a series of somewhat discrete events must be interpreted with caution. Each event in the series, although perhaps similar to other events in many ways, may not be inherently connected to the other events. We caution that the details of each mass layoff included in our data cannot be considered in-depth and may be somewhat idiosyncratic. It may be, as Iyengar (1987) concluded in

studying television news, that coverage of layoffs became increasingly episodic over our observation period, which was characterized by an increasingly fragmented media landscape and, arguably, shorter memories and attention spans.

We do find, however, that our longitudinal study of the discourse about layoffs reveals some interesting dynamics that help to clarify the study of framing. The framing of public issues often reflects powerful interests (Misra et al., 2003), and in the case of layoffs, such a framing would likely bias the discussion in favor of business interests, especially the ones choosing to displace workers. Discourse about public problems also tends to reflect dominant cultural themes. In the United States, individualism and self-reliance are held as quasi-sacred ideals, as is the role of efficiency in economic relations. Successes and failures, regardless of their source, are often perceived as individual triumphs or failures, and this form of commonsense thinking often applies in the realm of economic relations as well. Thus, the narrow space framing of layoffs (as community or regional issues versus societal or international issues) tends to reinforce the positioning of layoffs as primarily on the level of the community or region.

Interestingly, however, journalists rarely evoked the individual frame, a choice that might have literally blamed individuals for their own joblessness. This is in direct contrast to Iyengar's (1987) findings on television coverage of political issues in the 1980s. While the contradiction may be due to our exclusive reliance on *The New York Times*, it may also be the individual-level frame may have been interpreted as an insensitive choice, and therefore journalists tended to relate layoffs to more meso-level space frames. But as long as coverage does not extend to the smallest, individual level of framing, the community and regional framing of the problem of worker displacement may in fact squelch the type of discourse needed to effect larger-scale social policies that might address some structural issues related to job loss. Such framing still allows many people in the country to disassociate themselves from the issue, seeing it as a localized event (some job loss in some community somewhere) or a regional event (such as the implosion of the economy in another region of the country), not a wider social problem or an individual problem (but if anything a "challenge" to surmount). Perceived through community and regional frames, the issue of layoffs fits somewhere in the middle and therefore does not require much action, especially not external support. Thus, people detach psychologically, and though the issue of layoffs is sorry news, it does not require action or perhaps even attention in view of all the possible social problems facing them. Meanwhile, journalists also avoided the macro-level frames that may underlie labor relations on national or international scales. Unfortunately, communities and regions struggling with job losses (e.g., Detroit and the postindustrial Midwest) were mostly described as having to retool and fall back on their own resources, leaving the rest of the nation—and the multinational corporations that moved jobs out of the region—discursively able to avoid association with a problem framed as belonging to a more proximately defined geographic area.

Similarly, having observed an evolution in the time framing of layoffs coverage over the study period, we argue that it reflects an underlying commonsense-type cultural theme of efficiency. To be sure, the present time-framing of many stories about layoffs remained dominant throughout and in fact reflected the tendency in many stories on worker displacement to concentrate on the immediate details, causes, and aftereffects of layoff announcements. The cultural presumption is that since the employment cycle works over time in ebbs and flows, concentration on the past or the future is not worthwhile because

layoffs come and go as part of the normal economic cycle. This may be somewhat true, but we also observed in places like Detroit that many jobs simply dried up and never returned. In this regard, the present time-framing of layoffs can obfuscate discussion of the deeper, systematic workings (some possibly cyclical, but others idiosyncratic and unalterable) of the employment (and hence displacement) of labor in the contemporary United States. However, we also note that future time-framing of reportage of worker layoffs increased noticeably during the second half of the study period. Often, the explicit or implied rationale behind layoffs is that although the displacement may be unfortunate for individual workers and their communities, such layoffs are necessary to maintain the overall efficiency and profitability of the business interests involved. In other words, while layoffs are bad luck for those receiving pink slips, they are a necessary part of business relations that ultimately leads to a larger utilitarian good by maintaining the longer-term viability of the businesses themselves (cf. Uchitelle, 2006). We argue that the increasingly future-focused framing of news stories about layoffs reflects this underlying commonsense logic. In effect, the dominance of the present and the future framing of layoffs implies a message suggesting that these present events are potentially problematic, but a focus on the future will increase the productivity of business interests, or at least keep businesses from declining.

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