

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06923-7 - Abortion Politics, Mass Media, and Social Movements in America

Deana A. Rohlinger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

### Dilemmas, choices, and consequences

Paul Hill picketed outside a Pensacola, Florida, abortion clinic every Friday for over year. Most of his signs bore messages such as “abortion is murder” and “abortion stops a beating heart,” but occasionally his signs carried a more threatening message: “Execute Abortionists.” Dr. John Britton, the clinic doctor, took precautions. He bought a flak jacket, hired bodyguards, and alerted the police to Hill’s behavior. On Friday July 29, 1994, Hill shot Britton and one his bodyguards, killing both. Hill did not flee the scene or hide the shotgun he used to commit the crime. As the police led him away in handcuffs, Hill proclaimed, “Today there will be no more baby killings in this abortion clinic!”<sup>1</sup>

The reaction to the shooting was immediate and not just by pro-choice advocates. Wanda Franz, president of the mainstream, pro-life group National Right of Life Committee, argued that individuals who claimed murdering a clinic provider was justifiable in order to save unborn babies are “very much on the fringe of the pro-life movement.” She added, “We feel as strongly about stopping this as we do about stopping the violence of abortion . . . We’re very concerned about the general population being encouraged to think that pro-lifers are violent.”<sup>2</sup> This was not the first of such statements made by the National Right to Life Committee. The group was so concerned that violence was tarnishing the movement’s image that it launched an “unending” campaign to counter this perception. The organization likened the pro-life movement to the civil rights movement, and compared moderate groups, such as itself, to the nonviolent Southern Christian Leadership Conference and violent pro-life “fanatics” to the Black Panthers.

Hill was convicted for two counts of murder and executed by the state of Florida in 2003. The execution received extensive coverage, and both pro-life

<sup>1</sup> James, Meg. “Abortion Doctor, Aide Are Slain in Pensacola.” *Palm Beach Post*, July 30, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Hall, Mimi. “Abortion Foes Deny There’s a Conspiracy.” *USA Today*, August 5, 1994.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06923-7 - Abortion Politics, Mass Media, and Social Movements in America

Deana A. Rohlinger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and pro-choice advocates commented on the event. Hill supporters called him an “American martyr,” insisting that “Paul Hill did exactly what was right according to the Bible. Think, twenty-five babies that day for the cost of two bullets. What a great deal.”<sup>3</sup> Pro-choicers argued that these comments and continued violence at clinics only proved that the “anti-abortion” movement was comprised of extremists, who would kill to advance their anti-woman agenda. Eleanor Smeal, president of Feminist Majority, opined “There are hundreds of extremists out there. They don’t believe in the ballot box or the judiciary, so they take it into their own hands and use bullets.”<sup>4</sup>

I recount this tragic story not to reinforce stereotypes about activists mobilizing around the abortion issue. I do so because there is an important lesson to be learned in this example; one that is often missed by scholars. Social scientists focus on the ideas, individuals, and groups that are included in media coverage. This emphasis obscures analyses of who is *missing* from coverage and why. In the coverage of Hill’s execution, the mainstream pro-life groups that were quick to condemn his actions were conspicuously absent. The National Right to Life Committee, which is the largest pro-life group in the United States, did not appear once in more than one hundred stories and editorials written on the execution nationwide.

The current stock of knowledge would suggest that mainstream groups were absent because they were not relevant, interesting, or strategic enough to get media attention. This is an inadequate explanation in the case of the National Right to Life Committee, which is highly regarded by journalists. A better explanation is that the organization *chose not* to comment on Hill’s execution. After all, commenting on Hill’s execution would not help the group bolster its image as a civil rights movement, nor would denouncing Hill effectively distance the organization from violent pro-lifers. The organization had nothing to gain from reminding the public that it was part of the very movement to which Hill claimed membership.

Scholars miss these strategic silences because they focus on the *coverage* of movement organizations rather than *the choices* groups make. This focus makes sense. Scholars try to connect strategy, or the link activists make “between the places, the times and ways” they deploy their resources in order to achieve a goal (Ganz 2000, 1010), to tangible outcomes. Naturally, scholars assess the effectiveness of group strategies relative to something that is amenable to analysis such as the mobilization of people (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986), the creation or maintenance of collective identity (Gamson 1997; Snow and Anderson 1987), and institutional change (Gamson 1990; Ganz 2000; Piven and Cloward 1977). Additionally, scholars presume that when media is involved

<sup>3</sup> Pinkham, Paul and Rachel Davis. “Abortion Doctor’s Killer Executed by Injection.” *Florida Times-Union*, September 4, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Goddard, Jacqui. “Impending Florida Execution Piques Abortion Debate.” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 2, 2003.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06923-7 - Abortion Politics, Mass Media, and Social Movements in America

Deana A. Rohlinger

Excerpt

[More information](#)*A strategic choice approach*

3

getting attention, rather than avoiding it, is the goal. Indeed, media coverage matters for groups. Organizations included in coverage can:

- Change the debate around an issue.
- Reach and mobilize a sympathetic public.
- Get recognition for their positions.
- Build their coffers.
- Buttress their legitimacy with politicians and the public.
- Create an opportunity for political change.

Given the potential rewards, it is easy to see why other aspects of media strategy, especially those that seemingly do not have such a large payoff, fall by the wayside.

The lack of scholarly acknowledgement of “strategic silence” points to a larger problem in the literature. Scholars examine how activists use different mediums to further their goals, but do not theorize about media strategy more generally. In the current stock of knowledge, media simply are a weapon in a group’s arsenal which it wields with more or less success. As a result, scholars consider an organization’s use of different mediums – such as mainstream, alternative, and online news media – separately. The problem with this piecemeal approach is that it obscures how groups *simultaneously* use different outlets to advance their goals. Likewise, this approach ultimately subordinates media strategy to political strategy, ignoring how activists align media and political strategies as well as when activists make tradeoffs between the two.

This book challenges conventional understandings of the movement–media relationship and offers a theoretical approach that elucidates how media strategy works and affects the trajectories of activist groups. Rather than focusing on whether a group gets mainstream attention, I consider the media field writ large and introduce a *strategic choice approach* that highlights what (and how) organizations regard and use media to forward their goals.

## A STRATEGIC CHOICE APPROACH

Strategy is the heart of social movements. Activists make choices about how to deploy their resources in ways that seem likely to advance their goals. Strategy, however, is not simply a more or less effective means to an end. The choices activists make matter because they reflect the broader political environment as well as the actors operating in it. When an organization adopts an outrageous position or uses a shocking tactic to get attention for its ideas, allies and opponents alike must decide whether and how to respond. Strategic decision-making rarely is easy. Decision points often are rife with dilemmas, or “two or more options, each with a long list of risks, costs and potential benefits” (Jasper 2006), and the consequences of choosing one course of action over another are impossible to know (Jasper 2004). Like scholars, activists can only trace the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06923-7 - Abortion Politics, Mass Media, and Social Movements in America

Deana A. Rohlinger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

course of a campaign and retrospectively examine the implications of past decisions in light of current organizational and political realities.

While scholars increasingly make dilemmas and tradeoffs central to their understanding of social movements (Downey and Rohlinger 2008; Jasper 2012; McCammon 2012), researchers studying the movement–media relationship have largely reduced decision-making to a handful of organizational variables that either help or hurt a group’s efforts to get media attention. The literature on mainstream coverage of protest events, for example, typically codifies choice by categorizing a group according to its ability to respond to journalistic requests for information, its age, its overall repertoire of tactics, and the kinds of issues it represents.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, this approach is practical and useful. In quantitative analyses, choices are variables that must be defined, and relatively big decisions (such as how to structure an organization so it reflects the values of its leaders) affect other choices down the line (such as how to attract media attention to a cause). This work sheds light on how certain kinds of choices shape the media outcomes of groups. On the other hand, treating choice as a set of variables that account for why some groups get media coverage and others do not ignores the reality that deciding whether or not to engage a news media outlet is a key organizational dilemma – and not all groups try to get mainstream attention. Qualitative scholars also are guilty of focusing on whether a group garners mainstream coverage. Researchers emphasize the tactics that activists use to overcome one or more organizational deficits and attract the media spotlight. While this work sheds light on how a group that chooses to engage mainstream media can build its credibility with journalists over time, it obscures when and why an organization may choose to *avoid* media attention.<sup>6</sup> The tendency of scholars to operationalize strategic choice narrowly, in short, is not a methodological flaw, but a conceptual one.

In order to expand how scholars think about media strategy, I outline three fundamental media dilemmas activist groups face.<sup>7</sup>

- Dilemma 1: whether to engage external media outlets.
- Dilemma 2: whether to respond to negative media attention.
- Dilemma 3: how to publicly deal with losing issues.

There are three important caveats. First, these dilemmas are not mutually exclusive, and resolving one dilemma may create another (Jasper 2006). Strategic choices are rarely discrete and a choice may involve two or more dilemmas simultaneously. Likewise, one strategic decision can create another

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith (1996); Oliver and Maney (2000); Oliver and Myers (1999); Smith et al. (2001).

<sup>6</sup> For example, see the work of Gamson (1990), Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993), Rohlinger (2002), Ryan (1991), Ryan, Anastario, and Jeffreys (2005), and Wolfsfeld (2004).

<sup>7</sup> Jasper (2006) offers an overview of dilemmas groups face across institutional arenas. The dilemmas outlined here are narrower and highlight the overlaps among institutional arenas as opposed to the similarities across them.

dilemma for an organization. A group that decides to engage external media outlets (Dilemma 1) may be immediately confronted with Dilemma 2 – whether to respond to negative coverage. Second, like other strategic choices, any given dilemma is discrete, but recurring. An activist group, for instance, will have to decide whether to engage external media outlets (Dilemma 1) throughout its organizational history.

Finally, most strategic choices require a group to make tradeoffs (Jasper 2006). This is particularly true as it relates to mass media. One reason that groups try to get coverage is because mass media overlap with and influence virtually every other American institution, including political institutions (Bourdieu 1998a). Groups try to employ this overlap to their advantage and use media attention as leverage in other institutional arenas (Gamson and Meyer 1996; Raeburn 2004). For example, groups routinely use mainstream media to “name and shame” corporations for discriminatory policies with high levels of success (King and Soule 2008). There are times when organizations have to choose how to deploy their finite resources. This may require groups to prioritize one institution over another and trade off gains in one institution for losses in another. I discuss below the basic media dilemmas and tradeoffs in more detail.

### **Dilemma 1: whether to engage external media outlets**

There are two kinds of media: *direct media*, which are created by activists associated with a movement group, and *external media*, which use a particular set of norms and practices to create a media product that (ideally) generates profit from consumer sales and advertising. Direct media typically include newsletters, pamphlets, websites, listservs, forums, videos/documentaries, and songs or radio programming produced by group activists, while external media include mainstream and alternative news outlets (on- or off-line), radio stations, blogs, commercial documentaries, concerts, and social media. The distinction between direct and external media is important because while all movements may use mass media, not all groups choose to regularly engage media over which they have little to no control. This is because attracting media attention is rife with risk. Mainstream media professionals are quick to marginalize ideas that challenge the status quo, and this can have devastating consequences for organizations (Gamson 1990; Gitlin 1980). Negative attention can:

- Make a movement and organization appear unrealistic in its goals or dangerous to social mores and institutions.
- Cause constituents to withdraw their support from an organization and cause.
- Prompt elites to distance themselves from an issue.
- Undermine the political inroads made by a movement.
- Provide opponents fodder in their efforts to derail movement progress.
- Disrupt an organization and undermine its ability to function effectively.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06923-7 - Abortion Politics, Mass Media, and Social Movements in America

Deana A. Rohlinger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Given this, there are good reasons for activists to seriously consider whether or not to engage external media outlets – even when journalists call them for a quote.

There are several ways this dilemma may be resolved. A group may decide to engage external media and do its best to sidestep the potential pitfalls it entails. An organization that makes this decision will likely create a division dedicated to the media cause and designate a spokesperson to build credibility with media professionals. While these efforts can help a group get better coverage, it is far from a guarantee. There will be times when an organization wants media attention, but finds that its issue does not fit with the news of the day (Ferree et al. 2002). Likewise, there will be times when an issue or organization does get media attention, but the coverage is inconsistent with a group's agenda and goals. Both of these resultant dilemmas are addressed below.

An organization may also choose to focus its media efforts on outlets that are more sympathetic to its goals. While these enclaves of support may be relatively small, they provide a group an opportunity to mobilize consensus and action among its core constituents (Koopmans and Olzak 2004). Given that mobilization processes are rarely uncontested (Klandermans 1988), groups that target sympathetic venues may find it easier to move people to action when they require a quick response. Despite the potential benefits, the decision to focus its media efforts on sympathetic outlets may seem a foolhardy one. However, as I discuss in more detail later, the linkages among media outlets allow ideas to “cross over” from one venue to another (Bennett 2003). An organization may target ideologically like-minded outlets and find that as its ideas gain traction in sympathetic venues they are increasingly covered in mainstream ones (Rohlinger 2007). The potential for crossover is particularly high in the contemporary era where digital technologies put information at a citizen's fingertips in an instant; a development that has intensified competition among news outlets to report, “tweet,” and post breaking news first. Like media coverage itself, crossover is not guaranteed. Organizations may find that they continually preach to the proverbial choir and do not expand their reach in any substantive way.

An organization may also decide to develop its own outlets so that it has control over how its issues are portrayed to the public. Activists can use a newsletter or a website to provide current and potential supporters information about the group, its cause, and current campaigns. Likewise, a group can create radio and public access programming, craft online videos, sponsor mediated events (such as community lectures and concerts), or craft advertisements that allow activists to sell its ideas to a broader public without interference. This choice is not without tradeoffs because the audience a group reaches via these venues may be fairly limited. Websites are great “brochures” for a group (Earl and Kimport 2011), but an individual has to be looking for the group or cause in order to be exposed to the information. Similarly, content circulated on niche media venues (such as public access stations) reaches small audiences. This is not to

*A strategic choice approach*

7

suggest that groups cannot find ways to increase their reach. The point is that an organization will have difficulty finding a mainstream audience if activists want to consistently control how its causes are represented.

**Dilemma 2: whether to respond to negative media attention**

At some point, a group will be unhappy with how it is represented and will have to decide whether (and how) it wants to respond to the coverage. The dilemma is how to respond to negative attention without making the organization look bad, or worse. The options available to an organization depend on the nature of the bad press. A group will respond differently to an opponent publicly bashing the organization than it will to a journalist who has written an unfavorable story, or to the actions of an ally.

Opponents come with the territory. Mainstream news thrives on conflict, which means opposing points of view and ad hominem attacks are part of most stories. Given this reality, a group can craft a response to their opponents and try to even the score the next time they issue a press release or give a quote to a journalist. When media professionals write stories that question the goals, tactics, or leaders of a movement, it is more difficult for a group to craft an effective response because they rarely have leverage with journalists. While organizations seek media coverage for their issues and events on a regular basis, journalists only occasionally need information from activists (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). More importantly, there typically is no shortage of groups from which a journalist may get a quote, meaning there is an incentive for a group to grab the media opportunity if it arises – even when the outlook for the resulting coverage is less than desirable. An organization can respond to negative coverage, but the likelihood that it will result in different or better coverage in the short term is unlikely.

If a group decides to respond to the negative attention, it has several options it can pursue simultaneously. It can take on the outlet directly and try to get the offending journalist to write a correction or a follow-up piece which presents the organization in a more pleasing light. An organizational representative can write a letter to the editor to the offending outlet. If the letter is published, the group can publicly challenge the story and take the outlet to task for inaccurate reporting. An organizational leader can write an editorial and try to get another media outlet to run it. Alternatively, a group can issue a press release that refutes the coverage and challenges other outlets to report an issue accurately.

Again, the decision to pursue any of these options may seem foolhardy on its face. After all, a group must expend precious resources (time, money, and labor) to pursue these options and the media coverage payoff is low, at best. However, the tradeoff is not so simple. An organization can derive benefits from responding to bad press even if it does not get a chance to refute it. A response lets supporters know that the organization is engaged and fighting to educate the public, and provides an excellent opportunity for a group to ask supporters to



fund an advertising campaign to counter misinformation. An organization also can use negative attention as a rationale for changing how it uses mass media. A group may argue that ongoing bad press requires it to cultivate relationships with alternative outlets or create its own venues.

Alternatively, a group may decide to ignore bad press altogether. Silence can have benefits. There are times when responding to negative media coverage creates other challenges for an organization. If a group denounces a tactic or campaign of its ally, it is by extension potentially criticizing its own supporters. Unless the tactic involves violence against people or property, there is little to be gained from alienating your allies or a pool of potential supporters. The beauty of a non-response is that silence can be interpreted different ways by different audiences (as censure or support), and all of these interpretations can favor a group. Silence also can effectively distance an organization from a rancorous debate or an undesirable association. It made sense for the National Right to Life Committee to remain silent on Hill's execution, particularly since Hill used his impending execution as a platform to validate violent tactics. Silence distanced the group from Hill's brand of pro-life politics. Not all forgone media opportunities are as clear cut because, while media coverage is sometimes an end in and of itself, it also is a means to influence political processes (Wolfsfeld 2004). Organizations operate in multiple institutional arenas simultaneously. Because institutions overlap, activist groups can use media attention to create opportunities to effect change (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008; Raeburn 2004). If given a choice, an organization will likely decide to exert influence in an institution over media attention.

These choices do arise. Social movements are composed of groups that may share a broad goal, but disagree on virtually everything else. Sometimes these disputes can have deleterious effects on a movement (Benford 1993). However, there are times when factionalism within a movement can benefit groups with moderate goals. The emergence of radical groups make moderate organizations more appealing to politicians, which may create an opportunity for moderates to advance their agenda (Haines 1988). This tradeoff has consequences. Radical groups can have a "tarring effect" on the entire movement by generating moral outrage toward (and negative publicity for) the movement as a whole (Rohlinger 2006). Groups must try to exploit the short-term benefits of the "radical flank effect" without significantly damaging the reputation of the organization or the movement.

### **Dilemma 3: how to publicly deal with losing issues**

A group routinely frames – or ascribes meaning to – its issues (Benford and Snow 2000). While an organization frames issues in ways that reflect its mission and goals, even sympathetic politicians rarely adopt a group's interpretations of and solutions to a social problem wholesale. Generally speaking, framing an issue in a way that is amenable to organizational goals is a constant challenge with which



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06923-7 - Abortion Politics, Mass Media, and Social Movements in America

Deana A. Rohlinger

Excerpt

[More information](#)*A strategic choice approach*

9

a group must contend. This is particularly true when a group's opponents are on the offensive and have found a policy solution that is popular with a broad segment of the electorate, including some of the organization's own supporters. How a group publicly responds to these losing issues becomes important because it stands to lose the political battle and public support.

An organization has four options when it comes to losing issues. First, it can accept the predominant frame and challenge its merits. An organization acknowledges its opponent's position as valid and tries to quibble on the details in an effort to change public opinion and defang a policy before it passes. This option is the riskiest in terms of its potential to undermine broader public support. By challenging the particulars of a frame rather than the frame itself, the organization recognizes its opponent's position as legitimate and mainstream. Unless the points the group makes are as popular as the proffered frame, the organization may be marginalized for its positions and lose public support. Second, a group can try to co-opt its opponent's frame (Ellingson 1995; Noonan 1995). While this strategy may not win the day, it can confuse the audience and reduce support for the frame without reducing support for the organization.

Third, a group can try to reframe the debate in an effort to draw public attention to other resonant values that are relevant to understanding the issue at hand. This strategy also is unlikely to change a losing issue into a winning one. However, it allows a group to challenge popular positions without marginalizing itself in the process. In fact, an organization that successfully sidesteps rancorous debate and offers alternative ways to understand an issue can position itself as mainstream and garner additional support. Finally, a group can choose to avoid the debate altogether. Silence can be an organization's best option. However, a group is only likely to choose this option if its leaders decide the potential benefits of remaining silent outweigh the costs of taking a public stand on a losing issue. An organization may opt out of the public debate because it knows that a policy does not have the political support to pass. Likewise, a group may decide to skip one public battle in favor of another – one that it believes it can win.

How an organization approaches a losing issue will vary according to other strategic choices and tradeoffs it has made over the years. A group that has spent decades cultivating relationships with media professionals is more likely to avoid rancorous debate and losing issues than a group that does not have these connections because the former will have other media opportunities down the line. An organization, in contrast, that strategically avoids all but sympathetic media may see losing issues as *the* opportunity to move its ideas into new outlets precisely because its allies are not anxious to be cast as villains in a contentious debate. A group in this position may regard engaging external media on a losing issue (and getting bad press for it) as a winning prospect in the long run, particularly if it is able to find ways to reframe – or at least offer a viable alternative to – the current debate.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06923-7 - Abortion Politics, Mass Media, and Social Movements in America

Deana A. Rohlinger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

All organizations confront these three basic media dilemmas. Each of these dilemmas, the choices available, and potential tradeoffs organizations face are summarized in Table I.1. The table is not exhaustive. The purpose is to highlight the benefits of conceptualizing strategy in terms of the strategic choices a group makes, rather than the media coverage it gets. Here we see the potential tradeoffs associated with different choices as well as why the decision to avoid media attention makes sense in certain circumstances. For example, negative media attention can result from the actions of opponents *or* allies, or may simply be a poorly executed story. The source matters because the strategic options available to an activist group vary – as do the potential tradeoffs. Groups that opt out of a rancorous debate involving their opponents may lose public face, but may gain political leverage behind the scenes. The tradeoff involved when allies are the cause of negative media attention is different. As seen in the case of Hill’s execution, silence distanced National Right to Life Committee from movement extremists. Of course, how a given group responds to these dilemmas is shaped by a number of factors including organizational, movement, and institutional dynamics. I take these issues up in the next chapter.

#### LESSONS LEARNED FROM A STRATEGIC CHOICE APPROACH

This book challenges conventional understandings of the movement–media relationship and explains how organizations use mass media to forward their goals in a rapidly changing political environment. To do so, I draw on tens of thousands of organizational and media documents, a content analysis of 1,424 media stories, and interviews with activists and journalists to comparatively analyze how four organizations mobilizing around the abortion issue used mass media to effect political change from 1980 to 2000. Here, I briefly highlight the conceptual benefits of a strategic choice approach.

First, a strategic choice approach’s emphasis on decision-making elucidates the relationship between media and political strategies and highlights those moments when tradeoffs are likely to occur. In most cases, organizations take a hit to their public image in order to increase their influence with politicians. This important point is absent from the existing literature on the movement–media relationship which, given the emphasis on outcomes, often conflates political and media strategies. As Table I.1 makes clear, I do not treat media and political strategies as unrelated. Groups regularly create campaigns whose success depends on the effective use of media. The point is that the relationship between the two needs to be analyzed so that we understand how media and political strategies work in tandem and when they diverge.

Second, a strategic choice approach sheds light on how organizations think about mass media, which helps us understand what media venues activist groups use and to what end. A flaw in much of the current scholarship is the assumption that groups want mainstream attention because it will increase their political clout. This is true for some, but not all, organizations. A group that regards