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A Marxian Critical Perspective on News Framing Competition: Defensive Counter-Narratives During the Victorian 2016 Country Fire Authority Industrial Dispute

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Abstract

Communication scholars are interested in how political, social and industrial groups compete to influence news framing in their favour. However, little is known about how groups with less power compete, and how they respond strategically to the inequality of framing influence. This article analyses public communication and news framing during the 2016 Australian dispute between management of the Victorian Country Fire Authority and the Victorian United Firefighters Union. How did the union use a defensive counter narrative to justify the legitimacy of their position within news coverage? Most contemporary media research assumes a liberal pluralist perspective of framing competition between political, cultural, and industrial groups, whereby they compete for positive media attention on a level playing field. This study fits better within a Marxian critical framework. It helps to explain why the employer's perspective was structurally advantaged in news reporting such that the union resorted to a defensive counter narrative. The framework also explains how this communication strategy reinforced the dominant frame.

When journalists report controversial social, political and industrial issues, they contribute to a "symbolic" contest over which interpretation is presented to news audiences (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989: 2). And, professional communicators in adversarial groups compete in the news "marketplace of ideas" (Asard and Bennett, 1997: 28). They frame their arguments strategically so that they will be accepted and legitimated by mass media audiences (Esser, 2013; Helfer and Aelst, 2016; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015). This competition can also be understood as a public battlefield where communicators essentially contest public meaning and social reality for mass audiences. Political outcomes here have important implications for the accumulation and distribution of power in society (Rucht, 2004; Young and Pieterson, 2015: 132-133).

Whereas some framing research conceptualises opposing communicators as advancing *issue* frames or *advocacy* frames (D'Angelo, 2018), this article considers how strategic communicators engaged in industrial disputes represent opposing political *narratives*. Political narratives are stories

strategically crafted to convince the public of the legitimacy of the communicator's position. Heroes, villains and victims (Stone, 2002) are positioned within storylines to frame an issue. Contests between such frames constitute "a collective struggle over meaning" between groups with different perspectives, interests and power (Vliegenthart and Van Zoonen, 2011: 112).

Political narratives are fundamentally contested, commonly resulting in political debate involving at least two sides to a story: a narrative frame *for* an issue interpretation and a frame *against* that interpretation (Birkland and Lawrence, 2009; Miller and Riechert, 2001). Political communication through narrative seeks to influence journalists' interpretation of conflict and introduce news audiences to the supposed legitimacy of a communicator's ideas. A narrative frame can thus be conceived as a type of frame, and the words *narrative* or *narrative frame* can be used interchangeably.

Academic interest in strategic framing competition reflects the growing professionalisation of political parties, movements and organisations such as unions. To advance media profile, they use external experts and the campaign methods developed by advertisers, public relations professionals and marketers (Davis, 1999, 2002, 2013). Manning (2019) found that, throughout the 1990s, UK unions increasingly hired press officers to manage media relations, although it was usually the larger ones who could afford dedicated staff resources and technology. Former Australian Council of Trade Unions Secretary, Greg Combet, described how media management became increasingly important to unions during the 1990s:

> We needed to exploit alternative levers of power, and in a democracy the ability to influence public opinion through the media is one of those alternative sources of power. (Combet and Davis, 2014: 191)

Commentaries on successful Australian trade union campaigns, such as the Maritime Union of Australia's 1998 Waterfront dispute and the Australian Council of Trade Unions' 2005-2007 campaign against the Liberal government's Work Choices legislative changes, suggest that strategic public relations campaigns played an important part (McConville, 2000; Muir, 2010). However, analysis of the case study used in this research—the 2016 Victorian Country Fire Authority dispute (Fielding, 2022)—concurs with older studies of union news coverage finding that unions are usually framed negatively in the media, notwithstanding their attempts to improve representation (Davis, 1999; Gamson, 2001; Glasgow University Media Group, 1976; Kendall, 2005; Martin, 2004; Morley, 1976).

Considering the high stakes for 'winning' in the news marketplace of ideas, little is known about the conditions under which groups such as unions and employers compete to have their preferred frame presented. The Country Fire Authority dispute occurred in the southern Australian state of Victoria in 2016. Managers of an emergency services organisation, the Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA), plus their professional firefighter workforce, represented by the Victorian United Firefighters Union (UFU), engaged in public contestation over Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) negotiations. The EBA clauses deemed most contentious by CFA management were those requiring them to consult with workers about the purchase of materials including uniforms and safety equipment. Also required was a minimum number of firefighters that could be despatched to a fire. The UFU argued that these clauses were required to provide safer firefighting practices. But, CFA management contended that the clauses unfairly allowed CFA firefighters to intervene in management operations. Like many industrial disputes, organisational power was at stake: the union argued that workers should have some collective input into workplace policies and the

employer rejected such involvement. Most contemporary framing studies have a liberal pluralist assumption that employer and union compete to influence media framing on a level playing field. From this perspective, CFA management would be assumed to have 'won' the media framing competition by marshalling superior communication skills and resources. Conversely, the union would be positioned as a less than effective communicator.

Liberal pluralist approaches, however, tend to discount structural power imbalances between the groups who are competing to influence news framing. The CFA dispute occurred between a structurally powerful employer and the less powerful workers with their union. The union had little opportunity to influence news framing; journalists consciously and unconsciously adopted the employer perspective as the more legitimate interpretation of events.

In analysing the CFA dispute framing competition between the employer and union can be interpreted through a Marxian critical framework which challenges the idea that groups with marginal voice compete on a level playing field for positive media attention. This critical view is influenced by Marx's theory of capitalism (1887) and Gramsci's conception of cultural hegemony (1929-1935/1992). Their insights enable analysis of how ideologies are maintained and reinforced through news media. For my research purposes, one can also explain why the workers and their union were disadvantaged in news framing competition and thy this led the union to respond defensively (upon realisation that they were losing the competition for positive media attention).

This article uses a Marxian-critical framework in its conceptualisation of a *defensive counter narrative* to explicate the strategic decision-making of the UFU's communicators when they found it difficult to gain positive media attention. Furthermore, the framework suggests not just that the union's defensive counter narrative had little influence on news media framing; it may have actually strengthened the employer's hegemonic frame.

Strategic framing competition and contested narratives

The concept of a defensive counter narrative is relevant to studies of framing and narrative competition between groups who are competing for positive news media attention amidst a structural imbalance of power. Since political, industrial and social advocacy groups mostly rely on mass news media to communicate their ideas and perspectives (Castells, 2009), there is much research interest in how communicators compete to influence news reporting and, in turn, audience perspectives (Arceneaux et al., 2019).

Liberal pluralist views have dominated scholarship about news framing and narrative competition since the 1980s, notably in the work of Schudson and Entman (Entman, 2003; Schudson, 1989; Schudson and Anderson, 2008). Their perspective positions news media as a putative 'fourth estate' that protects the public interest by holding the powerful to account (Mullen, 2010: 674), and aligns with the conceptualisation of media as a 'marketplace of ideas' (Schmuhl and Picard, 2005). Through this lens, journalists notionally play a democratic role by presenting news objectively and accurately while upholding pluralist values (by integrating diverse perspectives in a balanced and neutral way) (Schudson, 2001; Schudson and Anderson, 2008).

Within the liberal pluralist field of study, framing theory is regularly used to understand how communicators strategically compete to influence news coverage (D'Angelo, 2002; Dan et al., 2020; Hallahan, 1999; Lilleker, 2006; Scheufele, 1999). Strategic framing has been described as important to democratic politics because it is used to convince others that a given group's "side of the story" is legitimate (Entman, 2003: 147). Strömbäck and Esser similarly described strategic

framing as "structuring the meaning and significance of a political message in order to influence the version of the story that the media will feature" (2017: 75). They suggested that the goal of strategic framing is communicating "a favorable interpretation on information" to "determine the parameters of a debate before it even begins" (Strömbäck and Esser, 2017: 75). This competitive environment means that strategic framing is used by political groups and social movements not just to persuade audiences of the legitimacy of a group's perspective but also to refute the arguments of opposing groups (by "sponsoring" their own "preferred definitions" of an issue in news coverage) (Carragee and Roefs, 2004: 216).

Some studies of news media content are designed to gauge the outcomes of strategic framing competition. For example, Bell and Entman (2011) analysed news coverage of the US Bush government's 2001 and 2003 tax cuts and found that these policies were not presented in a balanced way. The policies were predominantly framed as positive for economic growth in line with the Bush administration's arguments. Implied in this analysis was that the Bush administration had won the framing battle over this policy, and that the Democrat opposition lost (Bell and Entman, 2011). Other scholars have also analysed how two-sided policy debates are framed in news media. Examples include Hilton et al.'s (2014) study of news framing of a Scottish policy debate over alcohol minimum pricing; Callaghan and Schnell's (2001) study of the media framing of gun control debates; and Gilding et al.'s (2012) analysis of media framing of the Australian Resources Super Profits Tax debate. These studies suggest that the competition between media frames can be measured to determine which side won.

Interest in news framing competition led to a focus on journalistic frame building, a sub-field which considers why news frames are developed or produced (Boesman, et al., 2016; Hänggli, 2012; Sallot and Johnson, 2006). Most contemporary news framing research reflects liberal pluralist assumptions, including proposing that groups who compete to frame their representation in news media are key influences on journalists' frame building processes (D'Angelo and Shaw, 2018). A diachronic process model of framing was proposed by Entman et al. (2009) to help understand the complex competition to influence news frames. This model suggests three key manifestations: frames in culture; strategic framing competition between at least two elite groups of communicators; and journalist frames (Entman et al., 2009).

In a case such as the CFA industrial dispute, Entman et al. (2009) would assume even competition between strategic communicators representing the employer and workers' view of the dispute. Each side would bring their own definitional frame. This suggests that the group who frames most effectively will *win* the competition to shape their representation positively (Entman, 2003; Hallahan, 1999; McCabe, 2012; Pan and Kosicki, 1993; Sallot and Johnson, 2006). Effectiveness in this regard would include how well spokespeople aligned their perspectives with dominant cultural frames (Bell and Entman, 2011; Gilding et al., 2012; Hänggli, 2012).

The diachronic process model of framing also encompasses strategic re-framing. Once the news media has framed an issue and influenced public opinion accordingly, communicators continue to evolve their framing strategies in response (Entman et al., 2009). The propensity for strategic communicators to re-frame their arguments in response to negative media attention aligns with Anderson's concept of counter framing (2018). By studying the framing of pro and anti-gun control advocates on Twitter, Anderson argued that over time, original frames evolve to counter opposition frames, representing a 'back-and-forth' dialogue (Anderson, 2018: 121). He suggested that every frame has a possible counter frame, and that only by studying communication over time can you identify the tensions between them in the context of audience reaction (Anderson, 2018). A similar

concept was proposed by O'Keefe (1999) who reviewed studies about one-sided and two-sided messages in advertising and non-advertising contexts. One-sided messages are those advocating for a particular view, while two-sided approaches contain a particular view alongside some acknowledgement of different perspectives (O'Keefe, 1999). For two-sided messages, O'Keefe (1999) suggested the message can either be refutational of the opposing view or non-refutational (because it doesn't directly challenge opposing arguments).

Marxian critical scholars start from the premise that competitive framing involves groups with differential power, namely union and employer representatives. Industrial, structural power imbalances between employers and unions reproduce an unequal struggle for positive media attention. Thus, liberal pluralists assume communicators can improve their media representation by accumulating skills and resources, whereas critical scholars (2004) argue that labour is less able to represent itself effectively because their message does not fit the news media's typical frames concerning industrial disputes (Martin, 2004).

Other scholars similarly critique liberal pluralist perspectives for ignoring the ideological dimensions of structural class power within which framing competition occurs (Hackett, 1984: 245). Raeijmaekers and Maeseele (2017: 648) argued that journalists idealise the concept of objectivity with the claim that it will allow them to identify "truth" and serve a "pluralistic public discourse". They noted, however, that in practice the ideal of objectivity leads journalists to assume there is a single social consensus on political and social issues. This naturalises and obscures ideological interests and presents a hegemonic view at the expense of a true plurality of contested ideas (Raeijmaekers and Maeseele, 2017). Patching and Hirst (2021) also critique journalists' epistemic faith in objectivity and the notion that news constitutes an equitable marketplace of ideas. Obscured here are the inherent realities of imbalanced power between labour and capital in capitalist societies. Other critical scholars agree that objectivity gives journalists a way to maintain their ideological bias, including the assumed legitimacy of employers' opposition to union collective action (Glasgow University Media Group 1976: 267; Hall et al., 1978: 58.

In relation to framing research, Carragee and Roefs advocated a theoretical integration with media hegemony analysis (2004). They used the seminal research of Gramsci to depict media frames as one of the outcomes of the struggle between ruling elites who want to maintain a dominant ideology and opposition groups or classes who challenge ideological orthodoxy (Carragee and Roefs, 2004). Furthermore, they argued that research that fails to address how frames construct meaning on behalf of vested interests is detrimental to framing scholarship's "theoretical and substantive significance" (2004: 219). More recently, Carragee has reiterated the failure of framing studies to address the under researched area of power imbalance (D'Angelo et al., 2019: 24).

Marxian critical scholars focus upon on the way trade unions are framed as illegitimate and unnecessarily adversarial arising from "a set of implicit assumptions about the nature of the industrial and political world" (Manning, 1998: 307). This illegitimacy is premised on unions being framed in the news media as the cause of industrial unrest and as a sectional interest working against the national interest (as employers' perspectives are taken for granted) (Beharrell, et al., 2009; Eldridge, 2013; Hartley, 2013; Morley, 1976; Wayne, 2003). For instance, Wayne (2003) described how newspaper reporting about industrial action by airport workers presented unionism as a threat which caused chaos in society, while failing to give any legitimacy to the wage rise case that the workers were negotiating. Patching and Hirst argued that although journalists occupy the working class (because they do not own the means of production and work for a wage), they align

themselves ideologically with the "ruling class "(2021:198). Thus, they are more likely to report on labour disputes from the ruling class perspective.

This discrepancy in media reporting of trade union disputes gives employers the advantage of being the 'primary definer' of news framing (Hall et al., 1978). Unions must therefore respond defensively on the employers' terms. This idea explains the news framing of the CFA dispute. The employer's narrative depicting certain EBA clauses as a union's illegitimate attempt to take over the Victorian Country Fire authority dominated media reporting at the expense of the UFU's narrative emphasising how the clauses protected firefighters' safety (Fielding, 2022).

Under these circumstances, less powerful frames are positioned as the *alternative* to the dominant frame. This idea underlies Gamson's (1988: 221) argument that "there is no theme without a countertheme", and that the dominant theme is normative whereas the countertheme is adversarial. Other studies have revealed that groups whose narratives represent 'counterthemes' against dominant media frames are forced to defend their legitimacy. Thus, Hackett and Zhao's (1994) analysis concerning media framing of the Vietnam War found that peace narratives, while struggling to counter the dominance of pro-war narratives, had to defend the legitimacy of their standpoint.

In this context, Hallin (1984) theorised that news coverage initially represented the war positively in line with the US administration's perspective within a societal 'sphere of consensus' that did not seem controversial to journalists (Hallin, 1984: 21). Once opposition to the war expanded, particularly amongst members of the Democratic party, war reporting moved from the sphere of consensus to the realm of 'legitimate controversy' whereby journalists would report alternative perspectives (1984: 21). However, Hallin also found that groups, such as the anti-war movement remained marginalised in media reporting. Their views challenged consensus views and were thus perceived by journalists as outside the sphere of legitimate controversy. Hallin's research suggested that journalists have the power to define what is considered legitimate and controversial, and that groups who challenge the distinction are automatically marginalised in media framing.

In regard to news coverage of union activity, Hall et al. argued that dominant frames depended on counter definitions to bolster their ideological position (1978). In industrial relations stories, he suggested that unions had the opportunity to be legitimate sources. Crucially, however, this legitimacy was limited. Unions could only provide a *counter* view to the ruling ideological perspective: they couldn't define the situation at hand in their own terms (Hall et al., 1978). This suggests that unions are provided a legitimate but sectional perspective on industrial news stories. They contribute to the sphere of legitimate controversy but are not considered legitimate enough to present a primary interpretation of the interests at stake in a given dispute (Morley, 1976).

These critical perspectives align with research about the framing of political and social conflict within the 'protest paradigm' (Boyle and McLeod, 2018; Cable, 2014; Brown and Harlow, 2019). Social or political protest movements which challenge the status quo are usually framed in the media as deviant, disruptive or even violent (depending on their positioning within the 'hierarchy of social struggle) (Cable, 2014: 162; Brown and Harlow, 2019: 509). In the case of industrial disputes, unions and workers with less class power challenge or protest against existing working conditions (Cable, 2014). They are inherently disadvantaged in news framing competitions with their employers.

Theorists have proposed reasons why dominant narratives or frames are difficult to counter. For instance, Bamberg (2004: 373) argued that counter narratives leave dominant stories intact. Those stories may be reshaped by counter stories, but the latter never "totally step outside" the dominant

master narrative. Thus, they remain complicit with the prevailing frame by countering "from within". Dominant frames were also described by Entman as capable of "de-emphasizing contradictory data" which does not fit with dominant interpretations (1991: 8). Lakoff argued, from a cognitive perspective, that when opposition groups try to explicitly challenge dominant frames, the latter are inadvertently activated in the minds of the audience (Lakoff, 2009). Westen (2008) used Lakoff's example of the Republican's "tax relief" frame, arguing that it was made especially powerful for the Republicans. Not only did the Democrats fail to contest it, but they also used the same wording themselves in their policy statements, which served to strengthen the Republican world view (265). Westen also perceives counter framing as a strategy that usually fails because it implicitly accepts that opposition groups "have something to answer to". This reinforces the dominant frame (336-37).

Marxian approaches are useful in explaining why groups with less power use defensive counter narratives (with greater or lesser communicational success). A defensive counter narrative can be defined as a strategic re-framing response which is used by a less powerful communicator when they find they are losing the framing definition contest against a more powerful opponent. Groups employ defensive counter narratives to defend against accusations of illegitimacy. This concept deepens our understanding of how groups with different power resources compete for positive attention in the news media (such that one narrative frame dominates issue reportage).

Method and findings: Identifying a defensive counter narrative

This section presents the case study analysis of public communication used during the CFA dispute to contexualise the defensive counter narrative by the union and their political allies. The method and findings of this research, briefly outlined, are more extensively detailed in Fielding (2022).
This dispute arose over Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) negotiations between managers of the Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Victorian United Firefighter Union (UFU). Both groups had political allies. CFA management was supported by Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) and members of the Victorian state and federal Liberal and National Parties. The union was supported by Victorian state and federal Labor Party members.

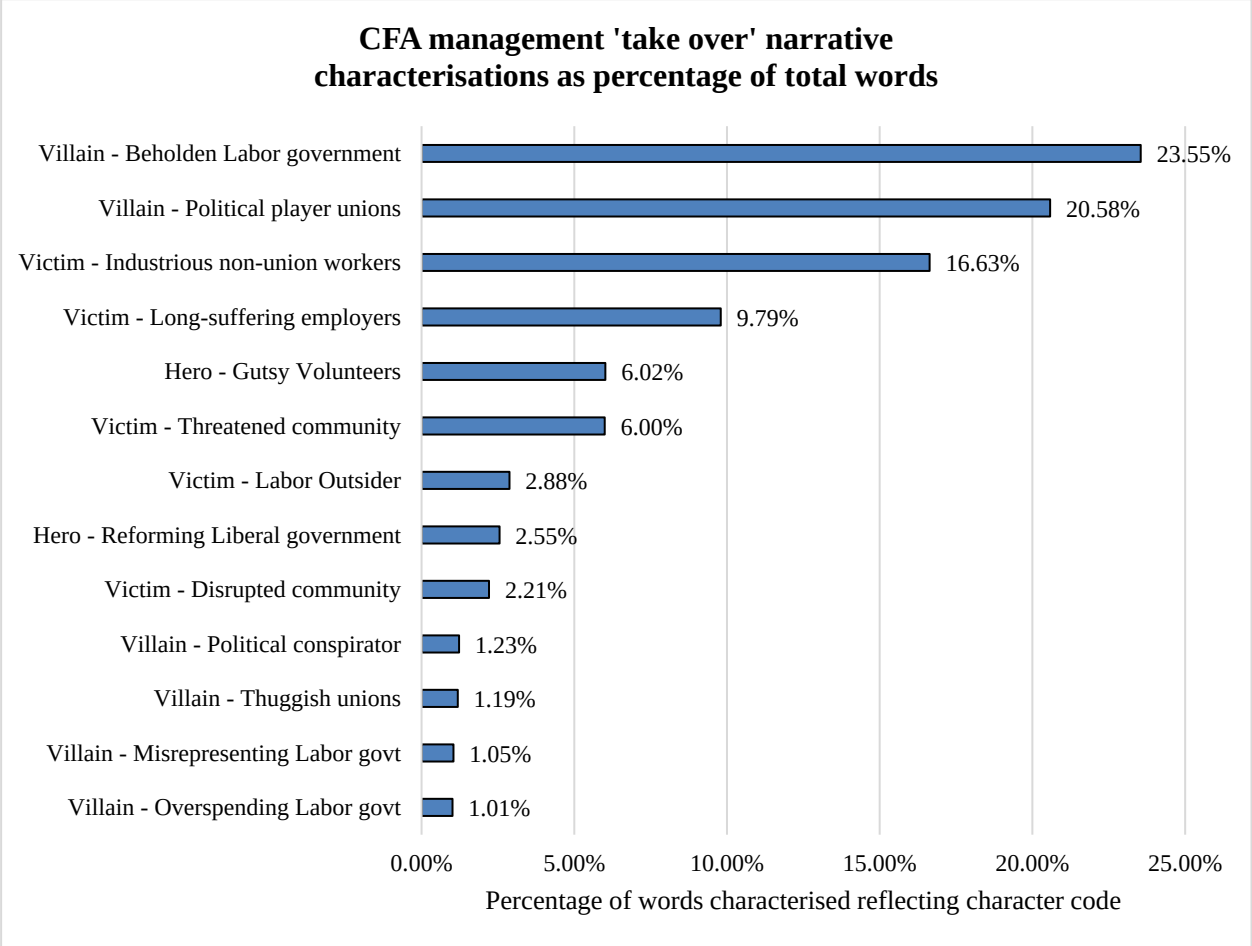
In line with Stone's research (2002), strategic frames used by opposing groups were classified as narratives made up of heroes, villains and victims. These characterisations were identified and categorised using manual qualitiative and quantitiative content analysis. Each personality type was graphed to show their percentage in proportion to the total number of words evident in public communication. Also depicted was the frequency of each type and their magnitude. This aligns with Matthes and Kohring's (2008) frame element cluster method which triangulates both the implicit meaning and frequency of frames (Lim and Jones, 2010).

The public communication analysed comprised press releases, speeches, parliamentary debates, social media posts and public notices or newsletters about the CFA dispute within the period of public contestation (from 1 April 2016 to 2 July 2016). Here, there were 103 public statements by the union, the UFU, and their allies, and 86 by the employer, CFA management, and their allies. In-depth interviews were undertaken with two stakeholders representing the union and three union members from the firefighter workforce.

The employer and media's narrative frame: the CFA's 'take over' story

The heroes, villains and victims, as classified by the CFA management, were found to fit a story: the union was illegitimately trying to use the EBA to take over the Victorian United Firefighter Union. The workers' collective action was framed as a villainous intervention in the operations of the emergency services organisation. Two clauses in the Enterprise Bargaining Agreement were framed by the employer as especially problematic: one required at least seven firefighters to be dispatched to structural fires; and another allowed for consultation between employer and workers over operational decisions such as the purchase of uniforms. As per Figure 1, the two dominant characterisations used in the employer's 'take over' narrative were the union as political players (20.58%) and the Victorian Labor government as beholden to the union since they supported the UFU's perspective (23.55%). The volunteer firefighters were framed as the victims of the dispute (16.63%), along with the employer (9.79%).

Figure 1: Percentage of words per characterisation in 'take over' narrative of CFA, CFA / VFBV / Liberal National. Derived from Fielding (2022, p. 71, Figure 2).



Analysis compared the characterisations in the 'take over' narrative with the news narrative used to report the CFA industrial dispute in 309 print, television and radio news reports. Here, 86.62% of the sampled content fitted within the 'take over' story accusing the union of illegitimately intervening in the natural authority of the employer, with 13.38% fitting the union's story (Fielding,

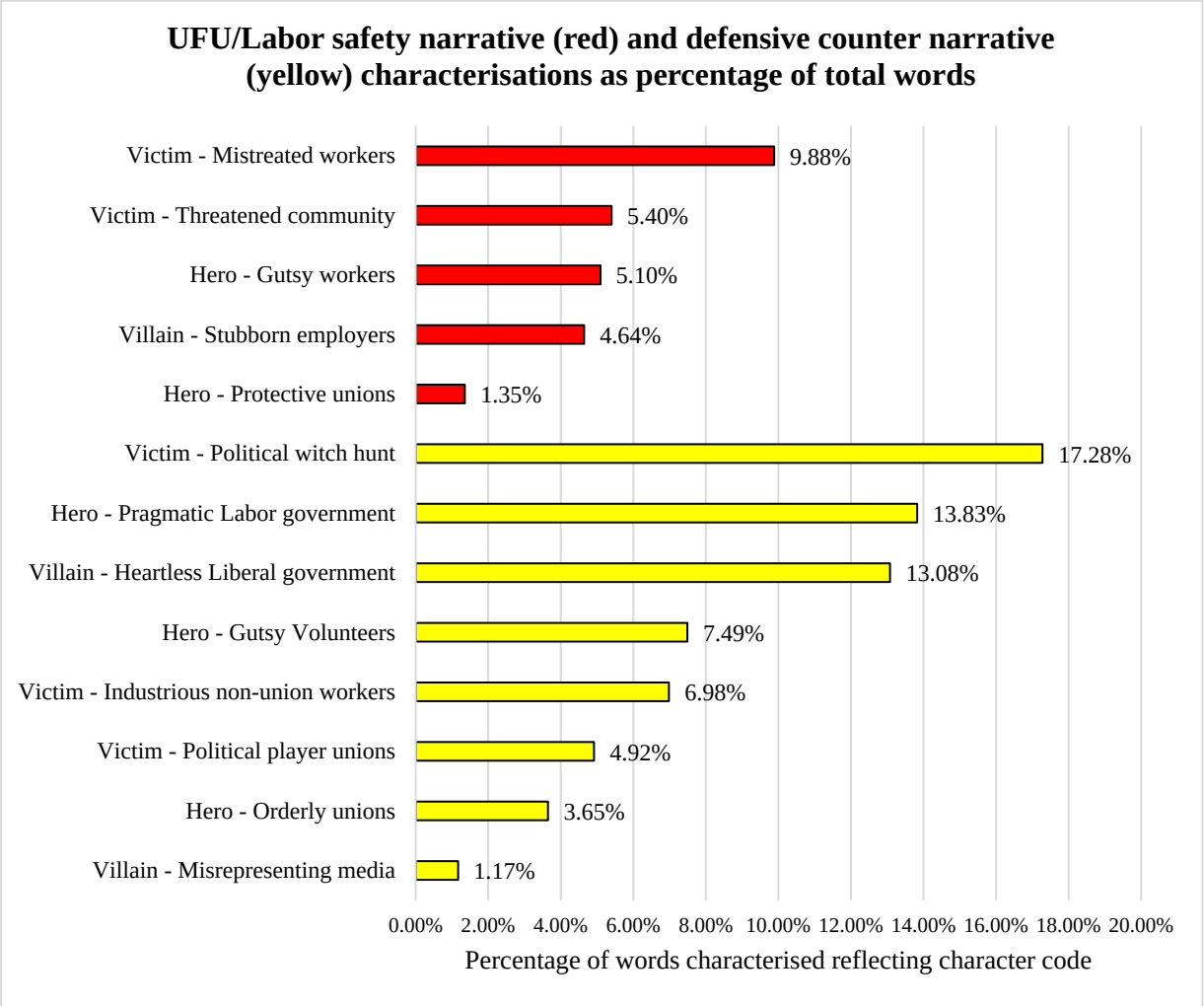
2022). This demonstrates that the majority of journalists adopted the 'take over' story as their favoured interpretation of the industrial dispute.

The union's narrative frames: 'Safety' story and defensive counter narrative

The union's public narrative in favour of the EBA represented an alternative interpretation of the dispute to the anti-interventionist 'take over' narrative used by CFA management. The union's story highlighted how given clauses in the EBA were designed to improve firefighters' safety conditions in dangerous workplaces. As Figure 2 reveals, the dominant characters in this 'safety' narrative were the workers as mistreated victims of the employer's failure to sign the EBA (9.88%). The community were also framed as potential victims if firefighters could not carry out their emergency services safely (5.4%). The firefighters were framed as brave for doing dangeous work (5.1%).
Ideologically, this 'safety' story was diametrically opposed to the employer's 'take over' perspective. The former emphasised union collective action in the CFA workplace to improve safety conditions for workers and the community. This 'safety' story potentially countered the employer's 'take-over' story by showing how workers could improve workplace outcomes by contributing to their conditions of work. That story also countered the employer's take-over narrative by negatively framing CFA management as opponents of the workers' collective efforts to improve their safety conditions through the EBA negotiations.

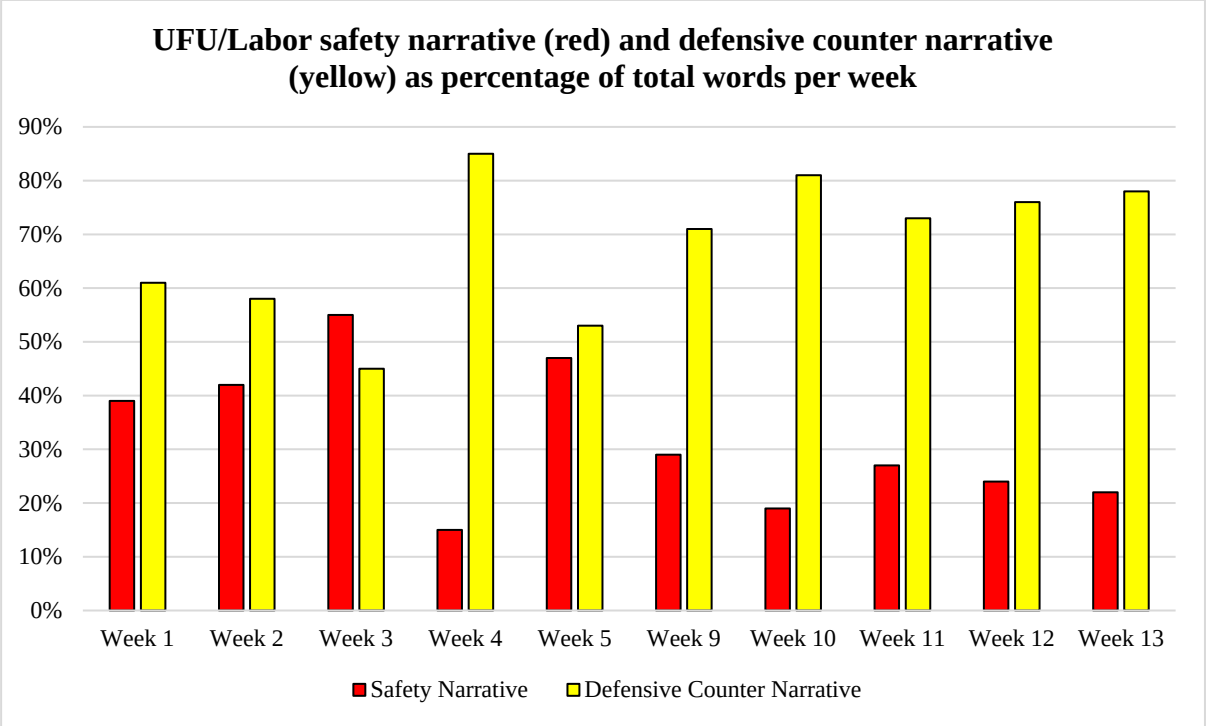
This 'safety' narrative, however, was not the one told by the union and their allies in public communication during the CFA dispute, nor was it the most prominent. A second story—conceputalised as a defensive counter narrative—was used to refute or argue against the 'take over' story by positioning it as evidence of a political witch hunt (17.28%). The Victorian Labor government also used this defensive counter narrative to justify their intervention in the dispute (as a pragmatic decision to move past stalemate [13.83%]). The Liberal federal government were also framed villanously as using the dispute to discredit unions (13.08%). Volunteer firefighters were defended as political pawns, framed as both heroes for their firefighting (7.49%), and as victims of political game-playing (6.98%). Figure 2 divides the characterisations that fit the 'safety' story (red) from those that fit the defensive counter narrative (yellow).

Figure 2: Percentage of words per characterisation in UFU/Labor narrative representing safety versus defensive counter narrative. Derived from Fielding (2022, p. 74, Figure 4).



Error! Reference source not found. provides a different perspective of the UFU and Labor Party's use of the safety narrative and defensive counter narrative. The percentage of each narrative in their public communication is compared across 13 weeks of public contestation. The defensive counter narrative was found to be prevalent in all but week three and became more dominant as the dispute unfolded.

Figure 3: Percentage of words fitting UFU/Labor Safety Narrative vs Defensive Counter Narratives per week of public communication (no communication from week 6 - 8).



Let us now compare the UFU's two narratives with the characterisations used in the media narrative. Of the 13.38% of the media narrative which told UFU stories, 72% fit the defensive counter narrative (9.67% of total media narrative), and 28% the 'safety' narrative (3.7% of total media narrative). This analysis shows that overall, the UFU's two narratives had very little mainstream media reporting, and that the defensive counter narrative was more successful in gaining coverage than the safety story.

Discussion: Evaluating defensive counter narratives as a communication strategy

This analysis demonstrates that once the media adopted CFA management's 'take over' narrative as their dominant interpretation of the CFA dispute, the UFU developed a defensive counter narrative. Where most studies of framing or narrative competition attribute to groups a single frame or narrative to communicate their perspectives, in this case the union and their allies were found to be using two: a safety frame was employed justify the signing of the EBA; and a defensive counter narrative was developed to argue specifically against the employer's 'take over' story (by contending that the union was not acting illegtimately). CFA management, however, did not exhibit a defensive counter narrative because they were not challenged to defend their EBA position. Invariably, a defensive counter narrative is a strategic communication device used by the less powerful competitor to challenge the more powerful, dominant media frame.

The union's need to develop a defensive counter narrative in their public response to the dominant employer story challenges key assumptions underlying the diachronic process model of framing (Entman et al., 2009) and, in turn, liberal pluralist perspectives on frame building. More

precisely, strategic communicators do not have equal opportunities to influence journalists' framing of labour disputes. The employer's 'take over' story was advantaged because journalists perceived it to be more legitimate, relevant and credible than the union's safety narrative.

In line with Marxian critiques, the employers' advantage in frame building did not result from their superior communication skills and resources, but reflected an inherant structural advantage (Beharrell et al., 2009; Eldridge, 2013; Hartley, 2013; Morley, 1976; Patching and Hirst, 2021; Wayne, 2003). Martin's (2004) suggestion that unions struggle to influence media framing of industrial disputes because their frames do not fit with dominant media frames accords with this idea. It also confirms Patching and Hirst's (2021) argument that journalists align their views with the ruling class, rather than the working class. In the CFA dispute, the UFU and their Labor allies' safety narrative had little influence on the dominant news frames. Collective action by labour was deemed as an illegitimate threat to CFA management's taken-for-granted authority. The concept of a defensive counter narrative brings class and ideological analysis into framing competition research (Hackett, 1984; Raeijmaekers and Maeseele, 2017) and illuminates the theme of structural power imbalance (Carragee and Roefs, 2004). This study echoes Carragee and Roefs' call to integrate framing research with a media hegemony thesis (2004) informed by the insights of Marx and Gramsci.

Liberal pluralist analyses of counter frames and narratives are challenged by the concept of a defensive counter narrative. Liberal pluralist approaches fail to recognise the inherent structural advantage groups, such as major employers, have over their communication rivals. The UFU were forced to adopt a defensive counter narrative because news coverage had employed the 'take over' story as their primary interpretative frame. In this respect, they strategically had to defend against damaging accusations the union and the Labor Party were acting villainously in the dispute.

The concept of defensive narratives also shares some similarities with Van Gorp and Vercruysse's (2012) suggestion that there is more than one way for communicators to counter dominant frames. However, like other liberal pluralist framing research, Van Gorp and Vercruysse imply that strategic counter frames can be developed to shift dominant interpretations. This puts the onus on communication skill while disregarding the structurally uneven playing field. Likewise, although the UFU's defensive counter narrative could be described as refutational, this does not account for why some messages are more ideologically powerful than others (O'Keefe, 1999).

Having conceptualised the UFU's use of a defensive counter narrative, three reasons can be posited to explain why the union developed this communication strategy during the CFA dispute. Firstly, one must acknowledge their naturally defensive position when dealing with journalists because of their mistrust of news media organisations as commercial entities. Unions are found to hold defensive positions naturally in their activities because of the structural power imbalance between them and employers. Such defensive positions have been prevalent since unions first formed in Australia. For instance, Dyrenfurth and Quartly (2007) studied worker representations of capital through the caricature of "Fat Man" in the 1890s. This was influenced by a defensive culture whereby "fat" represented the greedy, lazy and exploitative characteristics of employers (46). There is evidence in the analysis of interviews with spokespeople from the UFU that they feel the same defensiveness against a media industry that they perceive as aligned to employer interests. This led them to attack the media for their coverage of the dispute. For example, interview analysis shows that UFU leadership perceived the media to be acting improperly and did not trust journalists to report fairly, with a UFU official blaming the "media hype" on a desire to "sell papers". An interview with a firefighter and member of the UFU also reveals that, when asked for comment by a

journalist, they did not trust them to represent their views accurately and so declined the opportunity.

Perceptions of the media as aligned to the capitalist class also led the UFU to assume that the media were aligned to the Liberal Party. The same firefighter referenced above blamed what he called the media's misrepresentation of the dispute on a "PR war" to "get votes for the Liberal party". It is noteworthy that the most common characterisation used by the UFU and their allies in their defensive counter narrative depicted UFU members as victims of a political witch hunt. This accusation was directed at the union's opponents in the dispute—the employer and Liberal Party allies, in concert with the news media. This reactive standpoint contributed to the UFU's use of a defensive counter narrative in public communication.

Defensive and suspicious attitudes to the media amongst union leaders are also evident in Davis's (2002) interview-based study. One unionist referred to "media bias", which was seen as evident in dealing with prejudiced journalists working in right-wing media organisations. They perceived unions to be self-interested (131-132). Another interviewee remarked that media organisations were themselves businesses which had fought their own industrial relations battles against their workers. In this context, there was a tradition of writing "union bashing stories", particularly in *The Mail* and *The Sun*, which were Murdoch-owned tabloid newspapers (132). A UFU official acknowledged that "not everyone" in the media misrepresented the dispute, but named *3AW* and *The Herald Sun* in saying:

> I do not mind hard interviews but when someone actually seeks to pervert what you are saying for their own media headlines and ratings at the expense of good people being firefighters, you have to ask the question whether it is worthwhile, and the answer is no.

News Corp Australia owner, Rupert Murdoch, was described as "declaring war on printing unions" when they went on strike over plans to move their hand-printing newspaper facility from Fleet Street to an automated plant (Tuccille, 2003: 150). Other studies make a similar point about the corporate nature of the news media industry. As "powerful economic institutions", they have little "incentive to carefully examine the system that nourishes them" (Bird and Dardenne, 2009: 214). Here, Davis reported that there was a perception amongst union leaders that the tabloid press in particular, with little industrial relations knowledge, had sought out negative union stories such as "picket-line shots of unruly strikers" (Davis, 2002: 132). Against this background, there is the possibility that the defensive position taken by the UFU in their interaction with journalists became a circular problem. Tensions between the union and journalists were reinforced, and this may have contributed to journalists' villainous characterisation of the UFU in media reporting.

The UFU official's critique of the Murdoch-owned *The Herald Sun's* CFA dispute coverage accords with analysis which found *The Herald Sun* and Murdoch's *The Australian* were the most imbalanced outlets. The employer's 'take over' narrative was privileged in 95% of content (Fielding, 2023). This one-sided reporting by the Murdoch media constituted an overt campaign against the UFU, the Labor Party, and unionism more broadly, a form of conscious bias that can be conceptualised as conservative advocacy journalism (Fielding, 2023). The Murdoch campaign, with its large volume of reporting, possibly set the agenda for other media in the dispute (thereby influencing the dominant framing that depicted the UFU as villainously taking over the CFA). Thus, the union were perhaps justified in their defensive attitude towards Murdoch's *The Herald Sun* and *The Australian*, as well as other outlets that followed the Murdoch outlets' lead.

The second reason for the UFU's defensive counter narrative was their inability to influence media reporting in line with their 'safety' story, due to the dominance of the 'take over' story. As argued by Hall (1978), once the terms of a debate are set, the communicators who oppose the arguments of the primary definer are forced to use the primary interpretation as their starting point. This dominant frame, once established, is extremely difficult to change because the primary definer has already established the problem and set the limits for how it will be discussed (Hall, 1978). This finding aligns with Morley's (1976) argument that the dominant political culture defines what is "reasonable", "realistic" and "fair" in industrial relations news framing. This kind of framing forces trade unions to debate on the basis of this definition, and they therefore automatically become the defensive oppositional party (257). As mentioned, defensive counter narratives are also relevant to studies of protest movements who are framed as deviant to the status quo and are thus forced to defend their legitimacy (Boyle and McLeod, 2018; Cable, 2014; Brown and Harlow, 2019). The UFU recognised that they were being framed as villanous within the dominant 'take over' narrative and so chose to strategically support the legitimacy of their position using a defensive counter narrative.

The third reason the union used a defensive counter narrative is because they were more successful in receiving media coverage when doing so. Analysis of media reporting has shown that, of the 13.38% of media reporting that aligned with the union's characterisations, 9.67% aligned with the UFU's defensive counter narrative and only 3.7% with the safety story (Fielding, 2022). Journalists preferred the information provided in the defensive counter narrative as it fitted best with the 'take over' narrative they were using to intepret the dispute. This finding reinforces Arceneaux et al.'s (2019) argument that mass media increasingly uses its media power to force communicators "to adapt their strategic narratives to the news cycle rather than vice versa" (139-140).

Despite the UFU's attempts to use their defensive counter narrative to undermine the dominant 'take over' narrative, this strategy was ultimately unsuccessful. The employer's 'take over' story consistently dominated reporting. This lack of succcess in countering the dominant media narrative accords with Hackett and Zhao's (1994) description of anti-Vietnam war protestors who struggled to counter the dominant American war master narrative in newspaper reports. Because of their counter position, this peace movement had to respond to the dominant narrative, which meant that, when they did have a chance to put their view forward as a source in media stories, they used these opportunities to defend their movement's legitimacy rather than critique the Vietnam war (Hackett and Zhao, 1994). In this respect, the UFU narrative was predominantly used to counter the dominant CFA 'take over' story, rather than advancing their 'safety' narrative (which explained why the EBA clauses were required for firefighter protection). Had the UFU not developed a defensive counter narrative and instead told only the 'safety' story, their natural disadvantage in media framing would still have been a major problem. The 'safety' narrative was, like the defensive counter narrative, marginalised in media reporting because it did not fit the dominant representation of union collective action as being illegitimate.

These findings reflect the views of scholars who theorise that unions receive negative media coverage because they challenge the status quo, which positions them as illegitimate (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976: 267; Hall et al., 1978: 67-68; Hallin, 1984; Morley, 1976: 252). Applying Hallin's concept of the sphere of legitimate controversy, the UFU were included in news reporting about the CFA dispute and could challenge what journalists perceived as the natural authority of CFA management. Crucially, however, the UFU and their Labor Party allies were

automatically considered by journalists to be less legitimate than the employer. For this reason, in line with Hall, CFA management's dominant 'take over' narrative was able to "command the field" by setting the "terms of reference" for a two-sided debate (1978: 61). The UFU was forced to use a defensive counter narrative against the employer and media's dominant 'take over' story, and their safety story was marginalised.

These findings challenge key assumptions of liberal pluralist perspectives on framing competition by highlighting how structural imbalance disadvantages groups who are engaged in framing competition against a more powerful adversary. For example, from Strömbäck and Esser's (2017) definition of strategic framing, in a two-sided industrial dispute, it is assumed that the employer and union are competing to influence the media's interpretation of the dispute and thus to determine the parameters of the debate. However, if these parameters are already set by the media and their primary sources before any public communication occurs, then competitors do not have equal opportunity to influence how the dispute is interpreted for mass audiences.

The UFU's and Labor's use of a defensive counter narrative within news coverage may have reinforced the dominance of CFA management's 'take over' narrative by focusing attention on this aspect of the dispute. By arguing that they were not trying to take over and destroy the CFA, the UFU may have inadvertently reactivated the 'take over' story. Furthermore, when communicating the defensive counter narrative, the union was not telling their safety story which interpreted the EBA clauses as delivering a safer working environment for salaried firefighters. This idea aligns with Bamberg's (2004) suggestion that counter narratives are complicit and thus serve to replicate dominant narratives, as well as Entman's (1991) suggestion that counter frames obscure, rather than highlight opposition perspectives.

In conclusion, measurement and comparison of the narrative frames used by competing spokespeople in the CFA dispute showed that the employer's narrative was advantaged in media frame building because the latter adopted the employer's 'take over' story (Fielding, 2022). This led the UFU to strategically use a defensive counter narrative in their public communication, which may have had the unintended outcome of reinforcing the dominance of the employer's narrative as media frame building evolved.

These findings revive Marxian critical perspectives of frame building while challenging the more commonly used liberal pluralist theories. Unions and employers are just one example of groups competing for positive news framing who have discrepant power and resources. Further research should draw on this understanding to identify how defensive counter narratives are used by other strategic communicators in situations of uneven power and dominant news narratives. Research could also explore further whether defensive countering of the dominant frame reinforces its authority or advances an oppositional communicator's representation in news coverage.

The data underlying this article will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author. The author reports there are no competing interests to declare. The research in this study was approved by the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee.

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