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# **From Hunky Heroes to Dangerous Dinosaurs: Journalism-union relations, news access and press coverage in the 2002-3 British Fire Brigades Union dispute**

**DEIRDRE O'NEILL**

## **Abstract**

*Using the UK Fire Brigades Union dispute of 2002-3 as a case study, this paper assesses current union-journalism relations and briefly outlines the FBU's campaign to access the news agenda. Using quantitative methodology, it analyses the dispute coverage in the UK national press. While there are some opportunities that unions can exploit, such as 24-hour news and live broadcasts, newspaper analysis indicates that national press coverage generally favoured government and other elite sources as primary definers. While the FBU was given at least equal space to put its case in nearly half of all articles, certain sections of the press seemed impervious to any amount of public relations activity: five out of the nine papers analysed – the Mail, Express, Telegraph, The Times and the Sun – reveal coverage heavily loaded against the union, with the Times and Sun giving negligible space to the union viewpoint and choosing to use overwhelmingly hostile sources, narratives and opinions. It concludes that, in line with the findings of previous studies by the Glasgow University Media Group, public relations and media strategies have limited impact, at least in the UK press.*

## **Key words**

*National newspapers, Glasgow University Media Group, news sources, trade unions, firefighters, news agenda, news access, union-journalism relations, public relations, media strategy, primary definer, media resources.*

## **Introduction**

It is undoubtedly true that the media has a key role to play in strikes in terms of providing opposing views, both to the public and employees; in some cases the arguments that are most effectively presented in the media may even contribute to the final outcome of industrial action (Jones, 1986). Thus, unions need to access the news media and put their case effectively if they are to influence public opinion, win public support, and maintain members' morale.

This study examines to what degree a union, with limited media resources (Manning, 2001, Davis 2002), can succeed as a news source in defining and framing the newspaper agenda in the face of competing messages from better resourced official employer and government sources. This is explored by means of a case study of a national trade union dispute by firefighters in the UK. The union's media strategy is outlined through interviews with its press officer and other union officers to provide a context for the main focus of the study, a content analysis of UK national newspaper coverage during the first month of the dispute.

Past work on the coverage of trade union issues in the media, particularly by the Glasgow University Media Group, demonstrated media bias against and hostility towards the aims of unions (GUMG, 1976, 1980, 1982, 1993; Beharrell and Philo, 1977; Jones *et al*, 1985; Hollingsworth, 1986). Studies of the news media have found that journalistic practice tends to favour a reliance on elite sources for information (Hall *et al*, 1978) and that this, coupled with the concentrated ownership of media organisations, allow the views of government and private interests to define the limits of the news agenda within a dominant hegemony that marginalises dissent (Herman and Chomsky, 1994; McChesney, 2000). Particular concerns have been expressed about private ownership of UK newspapers that, together with high economic entry costs to the market, have resulted in a politically partisan news agenda that promotes the ideology of the free market while stifling plurality and diversity of opinion (Williams, 1996).

Since the year-long 1984 miners' strike, unions have improved public relations (Manning, 2001; Davis 2002) and a study of another major industrial dispute by ambulance workers in 1989-90 – which stopped short of strike action - revealed the unions did manage to maintain public support (Kerr and Sachdev, 1992). However, a decline in union action in the intervening years provides limited media coverage from which to draw firm conclusions and this is compounded by unions being largely sidelined in the media (Pilger, 1998).

Thirty years ago, Hall *et al* included trade unions as primary definers in the shaping of news but unions no longer “occupy a position in the hierarchy of credibility sufficient to ensure primary definition” (Manning, 2001, p.16) because, as Schlesinger (1990) points out, power structures shift over time. However, when frontline service workers such as firefighters take part in national strikes affecting large numbers of the public, the issue cannot be omitted from the news agenda and it is reasonable to assume the representative union would return to being a primary definer. But to what extent would a union be able to compete as a primary source definer, able to shape the news and put its case across, in the face of powerful elite sources? Therefore, media relations, which could help balance the coverage by putting across the union viewpoint, was going to be crucial in the firefighters' dispute, the first industrial action involving the service in 25 years, when members of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) voted for strike action in support of a 40% pay rise.

However, in their study of trade unions and the media based on the work of the Glasgow University Media Group, Beharrell, Philo and Hewitt (1977) were pessimistic that improved public relations would provide more balanced coverage for trade unions:

“There is little evidence to suggest that better communications or closer working relationships between public relations departments and the media ever significantly change the character of media coverage...rendered meaningless in isolation within a framework of reporting that is fundamentally hostile to the aims which trade unions represent in industrial society.”  
(Beharrell, Philo and Hewitt, 1977, p.136)

Thirty years on, this case study aims to see to what degree this view is still justified, or whether there are grounds for the more optimistic conclusions drawn in later

studies (Kerr and Sachdev, 1992; Davis 2002). This paper focuses on the national press coverage, which has been criticised as lacking a range of “objective information” and “informed opinions” (Sparks, 1999, cited in Harcup, 2004b, p.5).

## **The dispute in theoretical context**

A number of factors have contributed to UK trade unions and industrial relations issues being infrequently featured in news coverage compared to two decades earlier.

Due to a combination of anti-union legislation, the decline of the UK manufacturing base and an unwillingness to damage the Labour Party’s chances of getting elected, there has been a decline in industrial action in the UK since the early 1980s (though unions have recently started to reassert themselves). Some trade union representatives hoped this might mean they would get more coverage about the positive work they did, such as health and safety, but, acknowledges Mike Smith, former head of the Trade Union Congress press department, this did not prove to be the case (Donovan, 2002).

Another problem was the decline of specialist industrial correspondents on newspapers. Donovan (2002) says there are fewer than 10 industrial specialists on the nationals compared with more than 70 in the 1970s, while Manning (1999) points out their position was undermined by government sources involved in industrial disputes privileging political correspondents (Manning, 1999).

In *Policing the Crisis* (1978) Hall and his colleagues assert that reporting is carried out within a consensual view of society that assumes we all share the same interests (1978, p.55). This inevitably places unions at a disadvantage in a media agenda that, almost 30 years later, has greatly expanded coverage of financial and business news, focussed on profit and business leaders rather than workers, wages and conditions (Donovan, 2002). News stories are also framed in such a way that society is portrayed as “a structure of individuals” with events explained “in individual terms” rather than portraying collective solutions to problems (Curran and Seaton, 2003, p.103), a news culture hardly likely to favour the actions of trade unions, often viewed as being ideologically invested by journalists (Deacon, 2003).

Unions also have another inherent disadvantage in accessing the media, particularly when taking on employers or the government. Powerful and wealthy groups in society have greater media opportunities because they have greater access to and control over more material and ideological resources (Schlesinger, 1990). For all the criticisms that can be made of the lack of a news media strategy in the 1984 miners’ strike, the National Union of Miners was simply out-resourced in terms of communications (Jones, 1986; Manning, 2001).

Moreover, what is sometimes seen as biased or distorted coverage may, in some cases, be due less to any conscious desire on the part of journalists to attack trade unions and more to do with routine journalistic practices (Anderson and Sharrock, 1979; Hetherington, 1985; Harrison, 1985; Cumberbatch *et al*, 1986; Manning, 1998; Davis 2002). The aspects of industrial disputes that are often highlighted – the drama, the conflict, the powerful personalities (Greenberg, 2004) – are borne out by studies into mainstream news values (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O’Neill, 2001)

and, given these news values, judging the size, nature and impact of disputes before allowing them on to the news agenda would therefore appear to be normal journalistic criteria (Palmer, 2000).

The routine norms of journalistic practice – such as working to word limits, making regular calls to official contacts, or covering events that experience dictates will deliver a news story - are also likely to favour certain sources and narrative frames over others. In a dispute where a union locks horns with the government, the government sources tend to win out in what Becker (1967) describes as the hierarchy of credibility. With fewer journalistic staff in many newsrooms, there is a tendency to be over-reliant on organisations' public relations machines – and, by default, likely to favour those with the greater resources.

While there are undoubted problems for unions in terms of media coverage, the odds are not entirely stacked against them. A strong argument can be made that in our PR-saturated media environment resource-rich groups will dominate, but Davis (2003) and Wolsfeld (2003) believe the picture is mixed and there is evidence to support the liberal pluralist notion that pressure groups and trade unions are making some headway in gaining media access. Furthermore, routinised and ritualised journalistic practices can, to some extent, be viewed as levellers. According to Davis (2003), powerful resource-rich institutions have to appeal to news values as much as resource-poor institutions. The 'fourth estate' notion that many journalists adhere to means they must challenge those in positions of power.

Governments can also be seen as partisan because they represent the interests of particular political parties, and while they have power within the negotiating process – in the case of the FBU dispute by withholding funding for a proposed settlement – this can make governments vulnerable to criticism about their actions and motives too. Even a government that can avoid blame for the cause of a dispute can end up being blamed for the impact of strike action (Greenberg, 2004). Nor are governments, political parties or businesses monolithic institutions with a monolithic line – they too can be divided over issues such as the handling of disputes with the result that the media can end up focussing on disarray (Davis, 2003; Greenberg, 2004). A high level of media resources can also lead to cumbersome bureaucracy in large organisations, which also make them vulnerable to divisions or make them slow to respond (Manning 1998). Unions can, of course, call upon a pool of volunteers in the face of the media professionals employed by big organisations. This then places media training as central to any media strategy (Davis, 2003).

Other studies (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994; Miller, 1994) suggest that the hierarchy of credibility is not fixed and that public relations can help a union ascend it: the more a union can supply the media with a steady stream of credible information and stories, the more media currency it can accumulate, thus unions have become more professional in their approach to media relations and both unions and journalists reported a better communications relationship (Davis 2002) than in previous work (Philo, 1995; Manning, 1998). Despite these positive changes, unions claimed that disadvantages still existed in terms of fewer resources and negative bias in the media (Davis, 2002, p. 130). Nevertheless, a case study of the campaign by the Union of Communications Workers to stave off a government-proposed privatisation of the

Post Office in 1994 demonstrated that it was possible to win a successful public relations campaign (Davis 2002).

But it remained to be seen whether adopting more professional media relations would be able to challenge the rigid interpretative frameworks in news production found by the Glasgow University Media Group (1976, 1980, 1982, 1993; Beharrell and Philo, 1977) once a union undertook widespread *strikes*. Thus, the firefighters' dispute of 2002 provided an opportunity to examine the type of coverage in the national press when industrial action is conducted alongside a planned and concerted media campaign.

## **The Fire Brigades Union dispute and media strategy**

UK firefighters, represented by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), have usually received a good press, since their job puts them at the heart of dramatic rescues and can be dangerous (in fact, in October 2002 near the beginning of the dispute, 44-year-old Bob Miller was killed in the line of duty in Leicester: "Thousands mourn hero firefighter", *Daily Mail*, 12 November 2002). They traditionally enjoy high standing among the public and there is little doubt that the heroic image of New York firefighters after September 11 2001 did their British counterparts no harm.

But 2002-2003 saw firefighters locked in a protracted dispute and series of strikes with the employers (local government representatives who manage regional fire services) and the government in an effort to improve their wages, which they believed had fallen behind comparable workers.<sup>1</sup> This amounted to a minimum wage of £30,000 (£30k) a year for all firefighters, a 40% pay rise at a time of low inflation, low public sector pay rises and a desire by the Labour Government to prove its economic prudence and independence from trade union influence.

Like many other unions, the FBU had few media resources except its press officer, Duncan Milligan, who had only been appointed a few months before the start of the dispute. Later, three other press officers were seconded via the Trades Union

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<sup>1</sup> The firefighters' pay formula was traditionally linked to those of manual workers and the FBU believed that it was time that salaries were linked to the earnings of associate, technical and professional workers which had consistently risen faster than earnings of manual workers. The FBU justified this by arguing that the job required considerably more technical skills than a generation ago when the existing pay formula had been devised.

Not only was the union asking for a pay rise and a new pay formula, it was seeking to catch up on the pay spine for lost pay over the years. Thus it sought a minimum of £30,000 per annum for all members, a 40% pay rise. The FBU voted in October 2002 for a series of two-day and eight-day strikes in support of their claim which, when negotiations broke down, the union went ahead with in November 2002. This was the first national firefighters' strike since 1977.

The union tried to compromise on some 'modernisation' issues and indicated it would settle for less but the government, which by now had taken up the reins of the dispute from the employers, took an uncompromising stance. Despite a further five days of strikes, the FBU did not settle until 13 June 2003 when conference delegates voted for 16% over 2.5 years, linked to some updated practices. However, the dispute continued to rumble on for more than another year because the money for this staged pay deal was with-held and firefighters were angered at what they believed were new further demands to "modernise" practices, some of which they believed compromised public safety. In June 2004 the union disaffiliated from the Labour Party.

Congress (TUC) from three other unions. As industrial action became increasingly likely, the union recognised the imperative for media training, not merely for senior officials, but throughout the union structure. National, regional and brigade campaigning committees were set up a few months before the dispute, a “communication tree” (Seifert and Sibley, 2005, p.90), to involve the wider membership in training and decisions about strategies to deal with the media - issues such as how to deal with a bad press, the presentation of positive soundbites, and reasons for the 30K campaign (as the FBU called it).

While opinion polls showed firefighters had public support for higher wages (Seifert and Sibley, 2005, p.115), press officer Duncan Milligan’s experience led him to believe that the national press coverage would change from being balanced to being hostile and one-sided once strikes started (telephone interview, March 2004). Because of this, the leadership decided to concentrate resources in the first stage of its campaign at regional/local papers and regional broadcasters where it was felt reporting would be fairer. Because local journalists make routine calls to the emergency services for stories, Milligan stated, “There was a relationship there that we didn’t have with the [mass market tabloid] *Sun*”. Union members interviewed felt this translated to generally positive coverage in local media (though this was not tested in this paper).<sup>2</sup>

Experience of other disputes had also taught the union that papers inevitably focussed on the personalities of the leadership. Even before strikes took place, elected union General Secretary Andy Gilchrist was already experiencing coverage that linked him to the ‘awkward squad’ – the new generation of trade union leaders whom the Prime Minister had earlier referred to as “wreckers”. As a counterpoint, interviews with Gilchrist were set up with the quality press to put his members’ case and to dispel hard-left labels. However, he was to remain in the media spotlight and to later become the object of personal attacks in some parts of the press. “They [the newspapers] did their best to demonise Andy Gilchrist.” (Vallely, *Independent*, 23 November 2002.) It was interesting to note how other national negotiators were sidelined in national press reporting, with notably the female President of the FBU Ruth Winters rarely quoted or mentioned. Nor did any of the 350 articles analysed in this case study cover the fact that the pay claim sought parity for 1,700 control room staff, most of whom were women.

Manning (1998, p104) has highlighted the problem of “porosity”, diluting the main union message with contradictory voices, but ordinary union members available to the media on picket lines were forced to engage and it was difficult to maintain centralised media responses. Yet members remained remarkably ‘on-message’ because of the FBU’s earlier devolved campaigning committee structure, regular planning meetings and local training. “It was not by chance that there was a great deal of consistency,” said Milligan.

As contact with the media grew, this provided a virtuous circle of confidence-building and experience, with ordinary members proving to be their own best advocates. Members were recognising they had media currency and, by supplying the media with what journalists needed, including arresting images for TV of braziers, firefighters

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<sup>2</sup> The use of local media by unions might prove a useful area for further research.

picketing in smart uniforms, and bright fire engines and equipment, they were moving up the hierarchy of credibility of sources, at least in some sections of the media.

The leadership also identified the development of 24-hour rolling news as a major opportunity for media access. If members could be available to 24-hour news channels that had hours of broadcasting time to fill, they would get plenty of coverage and space to have their say. In fact, Milligan said a reporter at Sky News told him the Prime Minister's office complained that Sky was "FBU News".

While Gilchrist did write opinion pieces for national newspapers (for example, "No return to master and servant", *The Guardian*, 15 November 2002) and wrote letters to the papers, ordinary members also took up this baton. There was a concerted campaign of letter writing to the nationals (for example, *Daily Mirror*, 19 November 2002), and members wrote opinion pieces for the quality press, for example, firefighter Tony Jones' article in *The Guardian* "30K: Because we're worth it" (25 November 2002). The UK press often favours human interest stories (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001) and FBU members recognised that they could influence the agenda and content of such 'soft' news more easily than they could influence the hard news agenda. By feeding the media with human interest stories, the union could put across the situation of members with regards to pay and conditions, and their reasons for taking action, the complexities of which were often pushed out of a hard news agenda that focussed on divisions and conflict.

On local radio, members capitalised on phone-ins to put their case, and, despite inexperience, others took part in serious political TV programmes such as the BBC's 'Newsnight' and 'Channel 4 News'. But officials were all too well aware that interviews could be edited and changed. They learnt early on to insist on being told the questions that would be put to them by journalists beforehand, though Milligan took the decision to insist on live broadcasts whenever possible. This was a high-risk strategy, not only because members and officials might fail to perform well, but because of the risk of irritating and alienating journalists, but it meant the union representatives could say what they wanted, shaping the agenda to their perspective. The FBU's inclusive self-advocacy approach meant that the availability of press officers to journalists was not such an issue in this dispute and eased some of the pressures on them.

Newer technologies were also used as a communication tool during the strike. Press releases and bulletins were placed on the official website ([www.30kfirepay.co.uk](http://www.30kfirepay.co.uk)) and users were then emailed to let them know what was there. Later, texts were sent to alert users to the emails and new postings to speed up the process still further. This way, members could be kept up to date and 'on message' in their dealings with the media. Before the strike, officials and members had had high hopes for the internet and web sites as a means of communication to members and the public, and in combating any press bias. "The internet has often been hailed as a democratisation tool, able to contest news agendas, bypass mainstream news organisations, and to challenge society's dominant voices" (Harcup, 2004b, p.145). However, the £30k website and others, such as the independent website ([www.uk-firenet.com](http://www.uk-firenet.com)) set up by a Greater Manchester member, later became a source of internal dissent. "Using the internet started off as a positive development but it became very difficult to manage," said Sean Cahill, FBU Secretary of West Yorkshire region (interview, March 2004).



Site security was compromised on a number of occasions: spurious postings were made and data was removed. During the first 8-day strike, one website became inoperable. All of this meant that the official website became a rumour mill that misinformed and unsettled members, who inundated officials with queries. A great deal of time then had to be spent with members setting the facts straight.

## **The FBU Dispute: Close-up on Press Coverage**

Interviews with union members revealed they believed the press was generally hostile towards their case, with the mass-market tabloid the *Sun* cited as one of the worst offenders. For example, a West Yorkshire member, who had not been a union activist before the strikes, said, "I may have been naïve but I was shocked at the type of coverage the dispute received. That we got any public support was astonishing." What was perceived as hostile coverage also undermined his and his colleagues' morale, resulting in a decision to stop reading newspapers, which he believed were untrustworthy - two years on, he was still not reading them. (Interview, March 2004).

### ***Research Design***

In order to see if this perception of press coverage was fair, and to establish exactly to what degree the main protagonists - union, employers and government - were used as primary source definers in news stories, the national press coverage during the first month of strikes - November 2002 - was examined. This first month was chosen because this provided most coverage in all papers (later coverage was more sporadic) and therefore a sufficient number of articles from which to draw data.

Articles covering the FBU dispute during November 2002 were accessed using the Newsbank or Lexis Nexis databases from the following daily papers: the *Daily Express*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times* and the *Sun*. The *Daily Sport* and *Daily Star* were omitted due to minimal coverage and the Sundays were also excluded since any major developments were likely to have already been covered in the daily papers. In all, 350 articles were examined.

The *Daily Telegraph* (circulation: 839,069), the *Financial Times* (407,451), *The Guardian* (364,941), *The Independent* (214,490) and *The Times* (617,616) can be described as the UK's quality press; the *Daily Express* (800,403) and the *Daily Mail* (2,200,469) are mid-market papers; and the *Daily Mirror* (1,678,997) and the *Sun* (3,119,657) are tabloids. (Source: ABC, Dec 2005.) All the papers are owned by media companies or individuals (for example, the *Express* is owned by Richard Desmond, *The Independent* by Tony O'Reilly's News and Media, and *The Times* and the *Sun* are owned by Rupert Murdoch's News International) with the exception of *The Guardian*, which is owned by the Scott Trust. Only some papers declare support for political parties - the *Mirror* has traditionally been Labour, though it has become increasingly critical of New Labour's policies, especially regarding the Iraq War; the *Mail* and *Telegraph* support the Conservative Party; in the past the *Sun* supported the Conservative Party but switched to Labour in the 1997 general election, though it remains to be seen if it will support Labour in future; and the *Express* supported Labour in the 2001 election but has since changed allegiance. Defining the UK papers' various political stances is a matter of perspective. However, *The Guardian*

and the *Mirror* tend to be viewed as centre left, the *Financial Times* and *Independent* could be said to occupy the centre ground, while the rest are right of centre.

There were three main players in the dispute – the local authority employers (who negotiated with the union), the government (which would have to fund any pay rise), and the union. The aim was to see which sources ‘won out’ in being quoted the most and in framing the agenda. To this end, various indicators were examined.

One indicator was to see which protagonists’ views dominated the introductions to articles, thus helping to set the agenda of the story, and framing what follows, with other protagonists being forced to respond to the agenda set by the source in the introductions to articles. A pilot study revealed that dominant sources were straightforward to identify in the introductions and that these were the previously identified protagonists: government sources, employer sources and union sources. Any sources that fell outside these were recorded as “Other” sources. It should be noted that sometimes these sources were given equal billing in the Intro so that two or more sources were recorded as framing any one story.

Another indicator, which helped substantiate the previous findings, was to examine articles as a whole and to categorise them into those which overall mostly reported the viewpoint of the union and those that mostly provided viewpoints antagonistic to the union case. An overall antagonistic viewpoint was categorised as one where three quarters of an article dwelt on why the union action was wrong. For example, it included articles largely about the threat to the economy, union greed, failure by the union to negotiate properly, threats to public safety, splits in the union, a lack of public support, or the lack of modern working practices. The point should be made that the categorising of the second indicator was to some degree a necessarily subjective decision, but the expectation was that the findings from the first and second indicators would broadly support each other if it was true that a dominant source in the introduction really does frame the interpretation of the rest of the article. Articles where relatively equal weighting was given to the union viewpoint and opposing viewpoints were also recorded. A more detailed breakdown of the narrative themes that emerged is given in *Findings, Table 4*.

The third indicator was the degree to which certain sources were quoted, either directly or indirectly. The findings from the first indicator revealed that in the final analysis it was union and government sources that were dominant in framing stories (see *Findings, Table 1*, below) and most stories were presented as a struggle between these two opposing forces. Therefore the number of lines of text that were direct or indirect quotes from the union, or direct or indirect quotes from the government were counted and calculated as a percentage of the overall number of lines in the article and compared.

Finally, the main narratives (Greenberg, 2004) emerging from the stories were recorded. A pilot study revealed these to be Public Harm, Economic Harm, Union Harm, [the need for] Modernisation, Government Harm (the Government damaging its case or causing political damage to itself) and Other (some of which, it should be noted, were not necessarily negative union narratives).

## Findings

Any percentage figures provided have been rounded up or down to nearest whole number.

**Table 1: Sources used in the introductions of articles (main definers)**

Paper	Main definer				Total no. of definers*
	Union	Employers	Govn.	Other	
<i>Daily Express</i>	11	5	13	14	43
<i>Daily Mail</i>	4	1	11	10	26
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	29	8	11	15	63
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	9	8	15	14	46
<i>Financial Times</i>	11	5	3	1	20
<i>Guardian</i>	27	5	21	29	82
<i>Independent</i>	18	5	25	14	62
<i>Times</i>	11	7	31	31	80
<i>Sun</i>	5	2	14	25	46
% Totals	27	10	31	33	

\*Note that in some articles, two or more sources were given equal weighting in the Intro and were judged to be equally defining the story (for example, stories where the news angle focussed on the *disputed claims* of either side). Thus the total number of definers identified is more than the total number of articles examined.

**Table 1 shows that out of all the identified sources defining or framing the articles examined, 27% were union sources, 10% the employers, 31% the Government and 33% were other sources.**

With 27% of all sources in November using the union as one of the main definers in the introduction, thus framing the discourse around the union case, the union ability to influence the news agenda compares reasonably favourably with the efforts of the government, with more resources, at 31%. Interestingly, the local government employers, at 10%, did not fare so well, and appear to have been rather marginalised in the news agenda as the FBU and the government became the main opposing protagonists. One reason could be that “The state...has sometimes behaved like an Employers’ Federation writ large” (Knowles, 1952, p.201, cited in Seifert and Sibley, 2005, p.67) and that public sector workers face special problems due to central government-imposed tight budgetary controls (Hymen, 1989, p.225, cited in Seifert and Sibley, 2005, p.67). This was certainly the case when the employers and FBU seemed to have brokered a deal that the government was not prepared to fund (“Hopes of fire peace dashed by cash refusal”, *The Guardian*, 20 November 2002), placing central government centre stage in this type of dispute. The sidelining of the local government employers may also have been due to better-resourced government public relations or to journalists’ news values favouring the clear - though oversimplified - drama of two opposing forces locked in a political battle.

As well as looking at the overall findings, it is worth examining the differences between papers in their coverage. For instance, while the union comprised on average

27% of overall source definers, only 5 out of 46 (11%) sources dominating the articles appearing in the *Sun* were union sources, compared with 14 out of 46 (30%) sources for the government. In addition, it should be noted that the ‘Other’ source definers used by the *Sun* (25 out of 46, or 54%) were in *all* cases sources hostile to the union case. This 3:1 ratio of government sources to union sources framing articles was also evident in *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*; government sources outnumbered union sources in defining articles on a 2:1 basis in the *Daily Telegraph*. *The Independent*, *The Guardian* and the *Daily Express* were roughly equal in their use of government and union source definers, while the *Financial Times* and the *Daily Mirror* framed articles according to union sources roughly three times more frequently than government sources.

Overall, 74% of articles were not defined by union sources, though a few of the ‘Other’ sources also put forward the union case. These tended to be other union sources, including the Trades Union Congress. However, the vast *majority* of the ‘Other’ sources framing articles were elite sources *opposed* to the union’s cause, for instance, the government-commissioned Bain Report, which reviewed firefighters’ pay and conditions and proposed a more modest pay rise linked to increased productivity. Another source frequently cited source during November in the introductions and included in this ‘Other’ category was the Governor of the Bank of England, who unsurprisingly opposed a large pay rise on economic grounds. The main ‘Other’ source definers were opposition political parties (the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, often opposed to the union claim but equally critical of the government), the Confederation of British Industry (opposed to the union claim), and the army (which was being used by the government to fight fires on strike days).

**Table 2: Dominant viewpoints expressed in articles**

<b>Paper</b>	<b>Union view</b>	<b>Opposing view</b>	<b>Equal weighting to union and opposing views</b>
<i>Daily Express</i>	4	22	6
<i>Daily Mail</i>	2	16	1
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	31	6	5
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	4	24	6
<i>Financial Times</i>	3	5	9
<i>Guardian</i>	15	23	16
<i>Independent</i>	12	27	15
<i>Times</i>	4	44	9
<i>Sun</i>	3	37	1
% Totals	22	58	19

**Table 2 shows that of all the articles examined, 22% broadly expressed the union viewpoint, 58% broadly expressed viewpoints opposed to the union and 19% gave equal weighting to opposing viewpoints.**

The idea that the source dominating the introduction will help frame and define the rest of the narrative is broadly supported by the fact that in 22% of articles the union viewpoint dominated (**Table 2**). This roughly corresponds with the 27% of sources where the union was used as the primary definer from the start (**Table 1**).

With 74% of all source definers not from the union (**Table 1**), this may not appear to be a successful outcome for the FBU, but it needs to be put in the context of the range of possible sources that could be selected by journalists, and the greater government resources. It also needs to be set against the findings of **Table 2**. Since some of the ‘Other’ source definers, albeit a minority, were not antagonistic towards the union’s case, this translates into 22% of stories dominated by the union view, and 19% where the union view was given equal weighting, a total of 41% of articles where the union view was given space to be clearly expressed. For organisations trying to access and influence the media, it can be argued that the press is fulfilling its role as an impartial recorder if it produces articles where opposing views are given equal weighting. With regard to the dominant viewpoints expressed in the articles, the *Daily Telegraph* put forward a view opposing the union case 6 times more often than the union view, *The Times* 11 times more often, the *Mail* 8 times more often, while in the *Sun* the opposing view appeared 12 times more often than the union view. Only one paper, the *Daily Mirror*, had articles expressing the union view more often than opposing views.

Analysing the amount the union is directly or indirectly quoted as the third indicator was a less subjective process than the previous categorisation.

**Table 3: The percentage of direct and indirect quotes in all papers from a) union sources and b) government sources**

Paper	% direct or indirect quotes in articles	
	Union	Government
<i>Daily Express</i>	11	22
<i>Daily Mail</i>	11	23
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	28	17
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	15	24
<i>Financial Times</i>	23	22
<i>Guardian</i>	19	23
<i>Independent</i>	20	26
<i>Times</i>	9	27
<i>Sun</i>	10	15
Average Total	16%	22%

In seven out of the nine daily papers examined, government sources were quoted more often, notably twice as often in the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail*, and three times more often in *The Times*. And given that one consistent participant in this dispute was the union, it is fair to say its voice was marginalised in *The Times* (9%), the *Sun* (10%), the *Express and Mail* (11%) and to some extent in the *Telegraph* (15%), and raises questions about the quality and balance of information provided to readers of these papers.

Nor should it be assumed that articles where the government was not quoted might provide the opportunity for less hostile union coverage. For example, in *The Times*, 16 out of the 18 articles that did not quote the government instead quoted other hostile sources – there were eight stories sourced from some members of the Retained Firefighters’ Union (representing part-time firefighters) condemning the strike or from strike breakers (*The Times* on 27 November 2002 reported just four); one from insurers warning of an increase in insurance premiums if the strike went ahead; one was a reminder of how bad it was in the last period of major public service union disputes in the 1970s; and the remainder were comment pieces urging the government to defeat the union. Similar oppositional sources appeared in the *Express, Mail, Telegraph* and *Sun*.

**Table 4: Main narratives**

Paper	Main narratives expressed as % of total articles					
	Public harm	Econ. harm	Union harm	Modern.	Govn. harm	Other
<i>Daily Express</i>	30	16	12	7	5	30
<i>Daily Mail</i>	26	13	16	13	13	19
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	9	7	0	2	36	45
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	20	12	20	14	16	18
<i>Financial Times</i>	6	17	6	6	6	61
<i>Guardian</i>	19	15	1	8	16	41
<i>Independent</i>	20	13	16	10	13	28
<i>Times</i>	22	20	17	13	8	20
<i>Sun</i>	22	29	43	3	3	0
Average %	19	16	15	8	13	29

**Table 4 shows that out of all the narratives identified in the articles examined, 19% concerned public harm, 16% economic harm, 15% union harm, 8% related to the need to modernise, 13% to government harm and 29% to another narrative. It should be noted that some articles contained more than one narrative.**

While a total of 58% of the narratives (public harm, economic harm, union harm, the need to modernise) were potentially damaging to the union case (findings that support those in **Table 2**), many of the ‘Other’ narratives took the form of ‘the story so far’

and could be construed as neutral narratives. Nor was it surprising that narratives such as public harm or economic harm should emerge. These were identified as common narratives in Greenberg's study of the Ontario teachers' dispute (2004). For firefighters striking for a 40% pay increase and potentially putting people's lives at risk, the press would not be seen to be fulfilling its fourth estate role if it did not address these issues. This role, however, also meant that the government did not escape criticism for its handling of the dispute, even by those sections of the press opposed to the FBU's cause, with 13% of narratives criticising its handling of the dispute, though this was noticeably lower in the *Daily Express*, the *Financial Times*, *The Times*, and the *Sun*.

However, it should be noted that even government criticism was by no means an indication of support for the union's case: it was often couched in terms of spelling out the problems for the government if it did not win and urging it to take a stronger anti-union stance (for example, Grice and Clement, "Trial of strength that Blair simply cannot afford to lose", *The Independent*, 23 November 2002; Rae and Pascoe-Watson, "Britain can't afford to let firemen win", *Sun*, 18 November 2002).

The *Sun*'s preferred narrative was union harm (43%), more than double that of any other newspaper, followed by economic harm (29%). This highlights the dilemma for a paper like the *Sun*, which is aimed at a readership at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, many of whom may be in unions: it must attempt to couch its ideological opposition to unions in terms of lions led by donkeys: poor leadership or 'extremists' who are not representative of 'ordinary' members, but who are intent on leading members to defeat or splitting the union.

Also, the *Sun*, which in recent years has been supportive of the Labour Government, adopted a narrative of government harm in just 3% of articles. Conversely, the *Daily Mirror*, formerly a Labour supporting newspaper that has more recently become disenchanted with New Labour, had a preferred narrative of government harm (36%). The degree to which the *Sun* adopted narratives critical of the union is markedly higher than the other papers: nearly all of its narratives were hostile to the union case, and the 3% of narratives taking a stance critical of the government were critical of its lack of resolve in defeating the union. Narratives criticising the union were overwhelmingly favoured by *The Times*, *Telegraph*, *Mail*, *Express* and, to a lesser extent, the *Independent*.

As the dispute and claims and counterclaims continued through November 2002, another narrative included in the 'Other' category started to emerge: that of the media coverage of the dispute. There were a number of articles making explicit the public relations battle between the government and FBU and assessing which side was winning, and articles discussing the coverage by other papers. Writing about the public relations battle in *The Guardian* on 27 November 2002, Kevin Maguire stated: "The performance of the government, which is usually acutely aware of the need for a disciplined united front, has been shambolic compared to that of the FBU."

While it was not the primary aim of this study to examine the rhetoric of the dispute, the language used by some of the papers was noteworthy for a discourse reminiscent of coverage of industrial relations in the 1970s and the miners' strike of 1984, framing the union as backward, greedy, bullying, militant, mad, and imperilling the public.

Examples of headlines from the *Sun* in this period, which coincided with the run-up to the Iraq War, include, “Fire strike a ‘gift for terrorists’” (13 November 2002) and “Fire union chiefs are Saddam Stooges” (14 November 2002). Other *Sun* headlines read “Wrecker in chief” (14 November 2002); “Beat the Bully” (21 November 2002); “Crews ‘stuck in the past’” (26 November 2002); “Fury over FBU’s cop death rant” (28 November 2002).

*The Times* referred to the “Winter of Discontent”(12 and 13 November 2002,) the name given to a period in the 1970s when many unions in the UK were on strike, and the “hard left” (13 November 2002), while the *Express* referred to union “dinosaurs” and “our lives put on the line” (13 November 2002), as well as headlines such as “Killed by the fire strike” (15 November 2002).

A separate examination of opinion pieces related to the dispute provided a clear insight into the political stance of the papers with regard to this dispute: the *Mirror* was the only paper where all leader and comment/opinion columns about the FBU’s actions were supportive of the union case. *The Guardian* and *Independent* allowed equal views from both sides, allowing outside contributions from the union movement (though any opinions written by the papers’ own journalists condemned the strike). The *Financial Times* carried one opinion piece that was hostile towards firefighters. Four out of five such articles appearing in the *Mail* and *Express* criticised the firefighters, four out of four in the *Telegraph*, nine out of nine in *The Times* and fourteen out of fourteen opinion pieces in the *Sun* were *all* critical of the firefighters’ union case. That the latter two papers devoted so many opinion articles to the issue, all of which were hostile, is an indication of an energetic anti-union campaign.

While the *Mirror* gave prominence to the firefighters’ case and took an editorial line that supported their claim, this sometimes made for predictable, banal coverage that seemed at times more focussed on promoting itself and attacking its rival, the *Sun*. For example, a *Daily Mirror* report of 28 November 2004 (Yates and McGurran) contained this final paragraph: “Strikers at Cobham, Surrey, held placards saying: Don’t be blinded by the *Sun* and Look in *The Mirror*. They urged a boycott of the downmarket rag over critical coverage of the dispute.” The coverage in the *Financial Times* was arguably better. It was factual and informative and avoided editorialising for or against the union case in its news reports. That the union was used as the main primary source definer reflects the reality of its role as the prominent and consistent ‘player’ in the dispute. Greenslade (2004, p.430) states that the *FT* provides “more objective reports of industrial disputes than any other title”.

The “restrictive”, “Spanish” or “antediluvian” working practices of the firefighters was a repetitive theme in most papers’ opinion pieces (for example, the Leader article in *The Times*, “The firefighters’ strike must be fought”, 13 November 2002), along with greed, extremism and a lack of realism (Aaronovitch, “Calling all firefighters: return to join the rest of us on Planet Earth”, *Independent*, 15 November 2002). Mary Ann Sieghart, writing in the *The Times* on 15 November 2002, praises the government’s handling of the dispute, and repeats an unfounded government allegation that the union was making hoax emergency calls during strike days. She argues that even a lower 11% offer “sets a terrible precedent” and that “the unions are



now the problem”, before concluding that this fight has come “gift-wrapped in militancy, greed, Luddism and contempt for other people’s lives”.

Even in more liberal papers such as *The Guardian*, which gave much more space to the union viewpoint and provided balanced and informative reports about the dispute, its regular columnists were clear in their condemnation of the strike. For instance, on 26 November 2002 Hugo Young asserted: “A strong union, bent on self-interest and rejecting self-reform, is an enemy of political order and economic truth” (“Why we must not give the firefighters what they want”).

Taken overall, these observations and findings would appear to fit to some extent with the views of some media commentators: “[The Government’s] biggest ally in this dispute – Fleet Street – has unleashed wave after wave of incendiary words against Gilchrist and the FBU.” (Maguire, *The Guardian*, 20 November 2002).

## Conclusion

More recent studies of trade union reporting are correct in pointing out that, with imaginative and proactive public relations, opportunities exist for unions to put their case in the media (Kerr and Sachdev 1992; Davis 2002), particularly in local and regional media and in 24-hour TV news. But despite a relatively high readership of regional papers - 69.6% of all UK adults who read a national paper also read a local or regional paper - the ability of local news to counter the influence of the national press is questionable. The *Sun*, the largest-selling tabloid, has a circulation of nearly 3.1 million (Dec 2005, source: ABC) and claims a readership of up to 10 million. It is a paper known for its hostility towards trade unions, and the FBU’s media campaign was unable to steer it away from this line. Similarly, while 24-hour national news does present opportunities for marginalised groups who can appeal to TV news values and provide useful images, the combined market for rolling news is 21 minutes a week, per person, “an awfully small universe” (Mason, *The Guardian*, 16 January 2006).

While the use of the union as primary source definer compares reasonably well with the use of government sources as a definer, taken overall the data suggests hostile newspaper coverage: 27% of articles sourced unions as main definers (with most of the other sources used hostile to the union case); 58% of articles had an overall viewpoint opposed to the union; union quotes made up a 16% of the quotes in news stories compared to 22% for the government; and 58% of all narratives were narratives opposed to the unions

On balance, the union did not win the public relations battle in the national press, nor did it win even the 16% pay rise it indicated it would settle for. Certain sections of the press seem inured to any amount of public relations activity, though the overall picture is probably not as bleak as some union perceptions, with the FBU being given at least equal space to put its case in 41% of articles. However, the results for five out of the nine papers analysed – the *Mail*, *Express*, *Telegraph*, *The Times* and the *Sun* – reveal coverage heavily loaded against the union, with the Murdoch-owned *Times* and *Sun* giving negligible space to the union viewpoint and choosing to report using overwhelmingly hostile sources, narratives and opinions. While acknowledging that journalists must operate within certain routines and constraints, “it ought not to be

forgotten that journalists retain the power to choose between sources, and to include or exclude certain perspectives” (Harcup, 2004b, p. 49).

These findings do not live up to the usual occupational imperatives one might ideally associate with journalism, such as balance, a range of views and rational debate, but by ideological imperatives and agendas which ill serve newspaper readers and political discourse in the UK. “I’m not arguing for papers that slavishly support trade unions, but I would argue for independence from the views of proprietors, and for accuracy and balance in reporting.” (Mick Rix, telephone interview, January 2005). That this bias was the outcome despite the union’s well-planned, devolved media campaign would indicate broad support for the pessimistic views of the Glasgow University Media Group (Beharrell and Philo 1977, p. 136), at least in terms of national newspapers.

It is possible that fewer industrial disputes in the UK in recent years, together with the improved public relations adopted by unions, has lulled some media analysts and trade unionists into believing that industrial relations reporting could be conducted in a less hostile environment. Equally, experienced UK trade unionists and academics may not find these results unexpected – after all, the papers hostile to the FBU were the ‘usual suspects’. FBU press officer Duncan Milligan was not particularly surprised at some of the coverage, asserting that the *Sun* had almost caricatured itself in its efforts to attack the union. But interviews conducted for this study revealed a startling difference in attitudes from younger trade unionists who had never taken action before. They were shocked, hurt and angry at how they were being presented in papers, especially the *Sun*. There is no reason why a new generation coming into the trade union movement would know how the press reacted to disputes, since “assertive trade unionism was off the public radar” and unions were regarded by the media as “more-or-less finished business” (Murray, 2003, p.9-10).

This examination of the FBU’s strategy reveals that organisations normally outside the dominant hegemony have to be highly organised to access the media to the degree that the union did. While wider claims cannot be made for a study which confines itself to an analysis of national newspaper coverage in one industrial dispute, it appears that the conclusions of the Glasgow University Media Group cannot simply be viewed as an historical account of how industrial relations were reported in previous decades. With a growing number of industrial disputes in Britain, certain truths may have to be re-learned: that, despite representing around seven million working people in the UK, unions must work diligently and with a wide range of media to achieve space for their views in the news agenda; that public relations and a well-planned media strategy are limited in what they can achieve; that, at least in the privately-owned UK national press beset with vested business and political interests, unions have to operate in what is still a largely biased and hostile news agenda. Forewarned of this, members are less likely to be demoralised by negative coverage and, more crucially, unions can make strategic and realistic decisions about how best to deploy limited resources.

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## **Interviews**

Duncan Milligan, FBU Press Officer, by phone, March 2004

Nick Sutcliffe, Chair and Sean Cahill, Secretary, West Yorkshire FBU region,  
representing 3,000 members, March 2004

FBU members based at Halifax, March 2004

Mick Rix, former General Secretary of rail drivers union ASLEF, now union adviser,  
by phone, January 2005