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Corporate Interests: How the News Media Portray the Economy

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This study examines contradictory claims about the news media's coverage of the economy. After discussing various sociological perspectives on news media, I compare the objective performance of California's economy, as measured by statistical indicators, to accounts of the economy found in the state's largest newspaper—the Los Angeles Times. *The data reveal that, despite growth patterns that overwhelmingly favored economic elites, the negative news about the economy disproportionately depicted events and problems affecting corporations and investors instead of the general workforce. When the* Times *did discuss problems affecting workers, the articles were relatively short, most often placed in the back sections of the newspaper, and rarely discussed policy alternatives to the status quo. Moreover, unlike the viewpoints of business leaders and government officials, the viewpoints of workers or their spokespersons were rarely used as sources of information. These findings provide qualified support for existing scholarship purporting that the news media, when reporting on the economy, privilege the interests of corporations and investors over the interests of the general workforce.*

The news media's coverage of the economy, along with its attendant political consequences, has been the subject of considerable debate within the social science literature. Although most social scientists and media critics believe that the news media suffer from various shortcomings (see review article by Gamson et al. 1992), and that these shortcomings affect the content of the news, the social science literature contains significant disagreements over basic questions about how the news media generally depict the economy. For example, some scholars contend that members of the news media hold overly antagonistic views about the corporate community, and that these attitudes, along with a general desire to help "liberal" political causes, manifest as a disproportionate number of negative articles about the economy. Most scholars, however, disagree with this argument. Pointing to structural links to the capitalist economy, strong social ties to the federal government and the corporate community, and a reliance on "official sources" for much of the information that eventually becomes news, other scholars contend that the news media typically focus on the common economic interests and concerns of the country's economic elite. Furthermore, these scholars hold that the news media, by covering the economy in this manner, constrain public discourse on important economic policy issues, keeping it within a range of ideas supportive of the existing socioeconomic order.

Using a content analysis of California's largest newspaper, the *Los Angeles Times*, this study empirically analyzes these contradictory claims. During the late 1990s, the patterns of growth in California's economy exacerbated preexisting levels of inequality in the state. While corporations

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and investors enjoyed rising profits and incomes, a significant portion of the state's workforce experienced stagnant wages and limited opportunities for full-time employment. Given these economic conditions, if the news media generally support "liberal" social and political causes, as some scholars suggest, then we would expect that the *Times* would emphasize the many economic problems facing the region's sizeable low-wage workforce. This, however, was not the case. Although the *Times* ran a wide range of stories about the economy, a content analysis reveals that they concentrated on events and problems affecting corporations and investors, even though the economy was performing quite well for this segment of society. Based on these and related findings, I argue that the news media, when reporting on the economy, tend to privilege the interests of corporations and investors over the interests of the general workforce.

Four Perspectives on the News Media's Coverage of the Economy

The following section summarizes four prominent sociological perspectives on the news media. Based on claims associated with each perspective, I derive several hypotheses about the manner in which the news media typically cover the economy. Then, later in the article, I empirically examine these hypotheses with data derived from the *Los Angeles Times*' coverage of the economy between 1997 and 1998.

The News Media Emphasize Bad Economic News

Classic liberals saw the "free press" as an indispensable component of democratic society (see e.g. Mill [1825] 1967; Tocqueville [1840] 1963:181–90). From their perspective, a free and independent press, firmly rooted in a vibrant and pluralistic civil society, can help prevent the rise of tyrannical regimes by critically monitoring the use of state power. When breaches of prescribed authority occur, the free press, according to classic liberals, could effectively alert the public, who could then mobilize to redress the exposed illegalities, corruption, or incompetence. This capacity, which can be described as the "watchdog" function, makes the news media an important component of democracy's overall system of checks and balances.

Some contemporaries of this tradition, however, believe that the news media have become too zealous in performing their watchdog function (Blood and Phillips 1995; Harrington 1989; Lerner and Rothman 1990; Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter 1986:254–92; Stein 1975; Wattenberg 1984). Advocating what I term the "bad-news-bias perspective," these scholars contend that the news media's coverage of the economy does not accurately reflect the underlying realities of day-to-day events and long-term socioeconomic trends. Instead of "balanced" coverage, the news media purportedly run a disproportionate number of negative stories about the economy. In an early articulation of this perspective, Herbert Stein (1975) claimed that the news media, by overemphasizing bad economic news, often create widespread misconceptions about the economy. These misconceptions, he maintained, eventually distort the democratic process, in part because they lead elected officials to pursue inappropriate economic policies, and in part because they increase the likelihood that reform-minded politicians will win elections. Both outcomes, according to Stein (1975), lead to "bad government" (p. 41). Overall, this body of scholarship suggests the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Negative accounts of the economy outnumber positive accounts of the economy.

Why would the news media overemphasize negative aspects of the economy?[1] The literature constituting the bad-news-bias perspective contains several explanations, but the most prominent one contends that the journalism profession traditionally attracts individuals who are hostile toward the established political and economic order (Lerner and Rothman 1990; Lichter et al. 1986; Rothman and Black 2001; Rothman and Lichter 1982). Early research on this subject concludes that members of the national press corps, as compared to leaders in the corporate community, are considerably more likely to have left-of-center political views (Lichter et al. 1986; Rothman and Lichter 1982). Specifically, this research found that, during the 1960s and 1970s, prominent journalists overwhelmingly voted for Democratic presidential candidates, and as a group, they strongly supported the idea that the federal government should regulate the economy and provide a social safety net. Based on these findings, Stanley Rothman and Robert Lichter (1982) claim that most journalists have political views consistent with the "left wing of the Democratic Party," and that the journalism profession increasingly embodies the "new morality" associated with 1960s radicalism (p. 117). Recent research on this subject generates similar conclusions. It finds that journalists with the national press corps, on average, hold more liberal political views than the general public (Dautrich and Hartley 1999:95–8) and corporate managers (Rothman and Black 2001). Importantly, these findings, along with Stein's (1975) aforementioned argument about the preponderance of negative news, suggest that journalists emphasize the economy's shortcomings in order to support liberal political causes. If this is true, and given that the welfare of workers is a central concern of liberal politics, then we would expect the news media to highlight the ways in which the economy performs poorly for the general workforce. This argument suggests the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Most negative accounts of the economy focus on problems affecting the general workforce rather than problems affecting corporations or investors.

The News Media "De-politicize" the Economy

In stark contrast with the classic liberal tradition, Marxian social theory generally describes civil society as an instrument of class domination. In a highly influential work, Antonio Gramsci ([1932] 1971) argued that elites within democratic societies largely maintain their privileged socioeconomic position through a "cultural hegemony," defined as an ideological leadership over allied and subordinate social classes. According to Gramsci, the major institutions of civil society, by promoting ideas and cultural norms supportive of the existing socioeconomic order, help generate widespread public consent for the structural inequality inherent within capitalist societies. This type of hegemony, he believed, was highly effective because it was subtle and ubiquitous, and because it led most people to adopt worldviews consistent with the interests of elites. Later in the century, scholars associated with the Frankfurt School continued this line of research. They argued that the mass media, instead of providing a means to rationally debate issues of public importance, most often disseminate a depoliticized discourse that helps elites conceal widespread social and economic inequality (Habermas [1962] 1991; Horkheimer and Adorno 1944; Marcuse 1964).

Often the harshest critics of the news media, contemporaries of this tradition employ what I call the "cultural hegemony perspective." In general, this perspective maintains that the news media, acting on behalf of the powerful societal interests that finance them, portray

1. The literature contains at least two other explanations. One explanation contends that journalists focus on the day-to-day fluctuations in the economy rather than the long-term processes that promote economic development (Lichter et al. 1986:291; Stein 1975:39; Wattenberg 1984:370–3). Since negative fluctuations often occur during periods of robust growth, this journalistic practice purportedly creates an unduly pessimistic portrayal of the economy. Another explanation claims that the news media intentionally focus on negative events, because media executives believe that stories about conflict and adversity attract more readers (Stein 1975:39–40; Wattenberg 1984:375).

the economy in a way that lends ideological support to society's existing economic arrangements. In a pioneering analysis of television news, the Glasgow University Media Group (1976, 1980) found that, despite popular support for socialist economic policies at that time, national news broadcasters in Britain systematically interpreted economic events from a procapitalist perspective. For example, they found that the news media repeatedly linked rising inflation rates to excessive wage gains made by workers, despite the plausibility of several other explanations, some of which would have underscored basic limitations of capitalist economies. Based on these and other similar findings, the Glasgow University Media Group concluded that the news media, by covering the economy in this manner, help to keep discourse on public policy issues within a range of ideas that affirms the existing economic system and the social mores that support it.

Recent scholarship from this perspective identifies at least three economic and organizational constraints that supposedly prevent journalists from mounting a sustained critique of the corporate community and allied social groups (Bagdikian 2000; Herman 1999; Herman and Chomsky 2002; McChesney 2000; Parenti 1993). First, the ownership structure of the news industry purportedly aligns the news media's coverage of the economy with the overall business interests of the corporate community.[2] Here several scholars contend that, since a handful of corporate conglomerates own the country's major news outlets, and since these corporations strive to maximize profits just like any other for-profit firm, the news media lack the economic and organizational independence needed to critique the economic system from which they and their parent companies benefit (Bagdikian 2000; Herman 1999:11–54; Herman and Chomsky 2002:3–14). Second, certain industry-wide business practices, it is believed, further diminish the news media's capacity to critique the economy. Typically, advertising revenue from large corporations, rather than subscription fees paid by the readers or viewers of the news, represents the primary source of income for most news organizations. Some scholars claim that this business practice makes large corporations, through their purchase of advertising services, the *de facto* "patrons" of the news industry (Bagdikian 2000:105–73; Herman 1999:13–28; Herman and Chomsky 2002:13–8). Importantly, this situation can place the news media in a conflict of interest, one that purportedly impedes their ability to judiciously cover many important economic issues affecting their readership.[3] Finally, according to these same scholars, the norms and practices of the journalism profession place additional constraints on the news media's ability to critique the prevailing economic system. At least tacitly, many scholars studying the news media assume that the political views of journalists significantly affect the content of the news. This presupposition, for example, underlies most of the scholarship constituting the bad-news-bias perspective. By contrast, scholars working from the cultural hegemony perspective typically disagree with this assumption. Instead, they claim that journalistic norms—maintained by the industry's training, editing, and promotional practices—help ensure that journalists, regardless of their personal political views, produce news that is consistent with the business interests of their corporate employers (Reese

2. Over the last two decades, the media industry has undergone a major consolidation. During the early 1980s, the media industry was comprised of approximately 50 corporations. Now, due to a wave of recent mergers and acquisitions, just six large conglomerates control nearly the entire industry (Bagdikian 2000:x–xxi). During June of 2000, this trend affected the *Los Angeles Times*, as it became a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Tribune Company—a Chicago-based $5.3 billion multimedia conglomerate, which owns and operates numerous entertainment and media businesses across the country, including 15 newspapers and 26 television stations (Tribune Company 2002).

3. Until recently, all reputable newspapers in the United States maintained a strict organizational division between the newsroom and the business department. But, in 1997, the *Los Angeles Times* started a national trend by revamping their organizational structure, allowing marketing and advertising executives to participate in the newspaper's story selection process, something that was formerly the sole responsibility of journalists and editors. By design, this new organizational structure enables outside commercial forces to influence the newspaper's content. Over the last few years, numerous newspapers around the country have emulated this business model. For a fuller account of this change in journalistic norms, see Bagdikian (2000:xxv–xxvii).

1990). In sum, the cultural hegemony perspective maintains that, for the structural reasons mentioned above, the mainstream news media typically obfuscate and ignore economic problems affecting workers and other non-elites, and in doing so, they suppress discourse on serious alternatives to existing economic policies. Based on these arguments, one can reasonably derive the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3: The news media rarely run stories about economic problems affecting workers.

Hypothesis 4: The news media rarely mention economic reforms designed to improve the material well-being of workers.

The News Media Emphasize the Views of Elites

Drawing on Weberian notions of social class, bureaucratic rationality, and mass democracy, C. Wright Mills (1956) developed an influential account of power relations in American society. He argued that during the twentieth century the enlargement and concentration of bureaucratic authority in the United States left a small group of individuals in control of the country's most significant levers of power. This "power elite," as Mills called them, purportedly hold and exercise power through their leadership positions in society's largest private and public bureaucracies, which Mills believed operate with little interference from the electoral process. Importantly, according to his argument, the power elite share common cultural and political views, which along with their mutual economic interests help them function as a *de facto* ruling class.

Scholars drawing on this sociological tradition employ what I call the "power elite perspective" on the news media. This perspective, in general, stresses that the national news media have substantial social and organizational ties with the inner circle of power-holders in the United States (Akhavan-Majid and Wolf 1991; Dreier 1982a; Dreier and Weinberg 1979; Witcover 1990). For example, through interlocking directorates and other associations, the country's largest newspapers have strong institutional affiliations with the corporate community, business policy groups, and prestigious social clubs (Dreier 1982a; Dreier and Weinberg 1979). Similarly, through an extensive two-way flow of personnel, many of the nation's major news organizations have strong social ties to the highest levels of the federal government (Witcover 1990). Conversely, major newspapers rarely, if ever, have these types of affiliations with public interest groups, labor unions, or grass-roots charities.

Due to these social and organizational ties, some scholars maintain that—especially on economic policy issues—the national news media share common political views with the corporate community and other powerful organizations (Croteau 1998; Dreier 1982a, 1982b; Gans 1979). Originally termed "responsible capitalism" by Herbert Gans (1979:46–8), this political orientation seeks long-term stability in the capitalist economy through moderate state regulations, when needed, and tentative support for certain liberal institutions, such as labor unions, public education, and a social safety net. Importantly, according to Gans and others, this centrist political orientation frames the journalism of the country's major newspapers.[4] On one hand, despite structural links to the capitalist economy, and despite strong

4. The evolving relationship between the *Los Angeles Times* and the local business community has been the subject of numerous scholarly works. Historians of Southern California note that, from the late-nineteenth century through the 1950s, when it was owned and operated by successive generations of the Otis-Chandler family, the *Times* tacitly presided over Southern California's business community (Berges 1984; Davis 1990; Gottlieb and Wolt 1979; Hoffman 1981). Wielding its substantial political clout against labor unions and social reformers of all types, the *Times* helped construct a notoriously "open shop" business environment in Los Angeles and its surrounding communities (Davis 1990:101; Gottlieb and Wolt 1979; Starr 1985:73–5). Furthermore, through its editorials and story selection, the *Times* consistently promoted large-scale infrastructure projects that facilitated the region's rapid population growth (Berges 1984; Gottlieb and Wolt 1979:127–43; Hoffman 1981; Starr 1985:70). In the case of the Owens River water project, a controversial aque-

social ties to the federal government and elite social organizations, major newspapers maintain sufficient autonomy to expose the wrongdoings of corrupt or incompetent corporate executives and government officials. But, on the other hand, since prominent journalists and editors are tangential members of the national elite themselves, major newspapers almost never question the desirability of the country's prevailing economic system or the highly stratified social order that it produces. Recent research by David Croteau (1998) lends support to this long-standing argument. After analyzing survey data on Washington-based journalists working for national news organizations, he finds that the general public, not the national press corps, have more liberal views on economic policy and related issues. Seemingly, this finding contradicts earlier research on the subject, which purports that journalists, on average, hold more liberal political views than the general public and corporate managers (see bad-news-bias perspective). But Croteau reconciles the apparent inconsistency, at least in part, by distinguishing between social and economic issues, something that many other scholars have not done sufficiently. "Like many profit-sector professionals," Croteau (1998) concludes, "journalists tend to hold 'liberal' social views and 'conservative' economic views, [but] most of all, they can be broadly described as centrist." In sum, the power elite perspective maintains that the national press corps—due to their social, organizational, and economic ties with national elites—share common viewpoints with corporate leaders about many important economic issues, and that these common viewpoints ultimately influence the manner in which the news media cover the economy. The research supporting this argument reasonably yields the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: When covering the economy, the news media emphasize events and issues affecting corporations and investors and downplay events and issues affecting workers.

The News Media Rely on "Official Sources" of Information

Another sociological perspective on the news media—one that cuts across the power elite and cultural hegemony perspectives—stresses the typical sources of information used by journalists, and the possibility that these sources affect the content of news. In general, this perspective emphasizes how the news media's information-gathering practices usually place journalists in contact with a limited range of sources. This occurs because, in an effort to maximize efficiency, the journalism profession has routinized the information-gathering process, matching particular types of stories with particular sources of information. As a result, the information-gathering process is organized around places where news "happens" and credible information is readily available (Fishman 1980; Gans 1979:116–45; Herman and Chomsky 2002:18–25; Sigal 1973:37–64; Tuchman 1978:15–38). For instance, national economic correspondents typically gather most of their information from the New York Stock Exchange, Wall Street brokerage houses, the Federal Reserve Bank, the Department of Labor, and other similar sources. This organizational practice, used by both the print and television news media, makes reporters heavily dependent upon "official sources" for much of the information that eventually becomes news. Research on this subject finds that journalists with the national press corps, when gathering information for stories about the economy, say they "nearly always" consult business spokespersons approximately six times more frequently than union representatives (Croteau 1998). Similarly, prominent television news

duct system that, when completed in 1913, transformed erstwhile arid land across the Los Angeles basin into prime real estate, the *Times'* pro-growth advocacy substantially increased the value of the Chandler family's vast landholdings. But by the 1960s, as the Chandler family's control waned, and as the newspaper aspired to national prominence, the *Times* began to adopt the centrist political tone of "responsible capitalism" (Gottlieb and Wolt 1979).

programs, such as ABC's *Nightline* and PBS's *The News Hour*, rely heavily on high-ranking officials from the federal government and corporate community for information and viewpoints on the economy (Croteau and Hoynes 1994; see also Glasgow University Media Group 1980:97–115). These findings suggest the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 6*: Journalists rarely use union leaders, workers, or their spokespersons as sources of information about the economy.

The significance of these findings, of course, rests on the assumption that the social position of the news media's sources affects the content of the news. According to these scholars, this is indeed the case. Under the journalistic norm of "objectivity," sources can express opinions but journalists cannot. Therefore, it logically follows that the social positions of sources, more than the political attitudes of journalists, affect the way the news media portray a broad range of public policy issues.

Extending this logic, other researchers have shown that the news media's portrayal of many important social and economic issues partially reflects the unequal capacity of different social groups to gain the attention of journalists (Dreier 1982b, 1987; Lieberman 2000; Molotch and Lester 1974). The information-gathering process, from this perspective, frequently operates in reverse. Instead of journalists seeking out information, different social groups often vie for opportunities to supply journalists with their viewpoints. Under such circumstances, the ability of corporations and other wealthy organizations to marshal enormous resources gives them a significant advantage over less powerful groups. On this subject, Peter Dreier (1987) writes that,

> because high-level government, corporate, and foundation officials have greater sources to use in reaching reporters, they are able to initiate and dominate the flow of what becomes "newsworthy." These powerful organizations have the resources not only to stage events and hire public relations staffs, but also to fund and publish reports and books by "experts" who can become "reliable sources." In contrast, the poor, the powerless, and the unorganized lack the resources to command such routine access to reporters and the media. (p. 72)

But, despite their sizeable advantages, the corporate community's privileged access to the news media can be successfully challenged. At times, other social groups can gain favorable access to journalists, although as Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester (1974) point out, this often entails disrupting society's norms and daily routines. During the late 1960s and 1970s, for example, the national news media ran more negative stories about the corporate community and the economy than they had in previous decades. Among other factors, Dreier (1982b, 1987) associates this phenomenon with the strategic actions of several liberal social groups, which enabled them to successfully attract the attention of prominent journalists, something that ultimately manifested as more articles about the economy's shortcomings. But, as Dreier shows, the corporate community, perceiving this upswing in negative news as a political threat to their business interests, responded with a sustained counter-mobilization, which eventually restored their favorable access to the national press corps (see also Vogel 1989, 1996:268–98). Given this body of research, one would expect that the news media's depiction of the economy, at least in part, depends upon the political perspectives and attitudes of their sources. This line of scholarship suggests the final hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 7*: Articles citing business spokespersons or government officials will report good news about the economy more often than articles citing union leaders, workers, or their spokespersons.

Research Design and Data

To analyze these claims about the news media, I have constructed a research design that compares the objective performance of the economy, as measured by statistical indicators, to accounts of the economy found in California's largest newspaper—the *Los Angeles Times.* In order to create a representative sample of articles, I used the Lexis-Nexis archive of electronic databases to identify all articles about the economy appearing in the *Times* during 1997 and 1998. Within the specified dates, I used the keyword function in Lexis-Nexis to obtain all articles with the words "economy," "markets," "labor," "workers," or "recession" in the headline or introductory paragraphs.[5] Then I eliminated articles from the foreign desk, leaving only those articles about the domestic economy within the data set. The resulting materials included all topically relevant articles—whether they were hard news, human-interest stories, or editorials—appearing in the front, metro, and opinion sections of the paper. These selection criteria yielded 201 articles—149 from the front section, 37 from the metro and editorial sections, and 15 from Sunday's opinion section.

Articles from the business section were not included in the data set. At first, this decision might strike some readers as peculiar, for seemingly an analysis of economic journalism should include articles from the business section. But this aspect of the research design, although it undoubtedly excludes many important articles about the economy, should actually strengthen my primary argument for two interrelated reasons. First, as Gans (2003:65–6) notes, nearly all newspapers design their business sections around the implicit interests of investors and business managers. This orientation, for instance, manifests in the business section's emphasis on the stock market and related aspects of the economy,[6] and the fact that nearly all newspapers label this section as the "business section," rather than the "economy section" or "labor section."[7] Given these circumstances, the inclusion of articles from the business sections in the analysis would hinder my effort to understand those parts of the newspaper with the greatest chance of affecting public opinion about the overall performance of California's economy. Second, and perhaps more importantly, since the business section by design appeals to a specific audience, research that finds a pro-business slant in the business section provides little sociological insight into important questions about the news media. Thus, in order to examine a more substantively important research question—one that focuses on sections of the newspaper that tacitly claim political impartiality—I excluded articles from the business section.

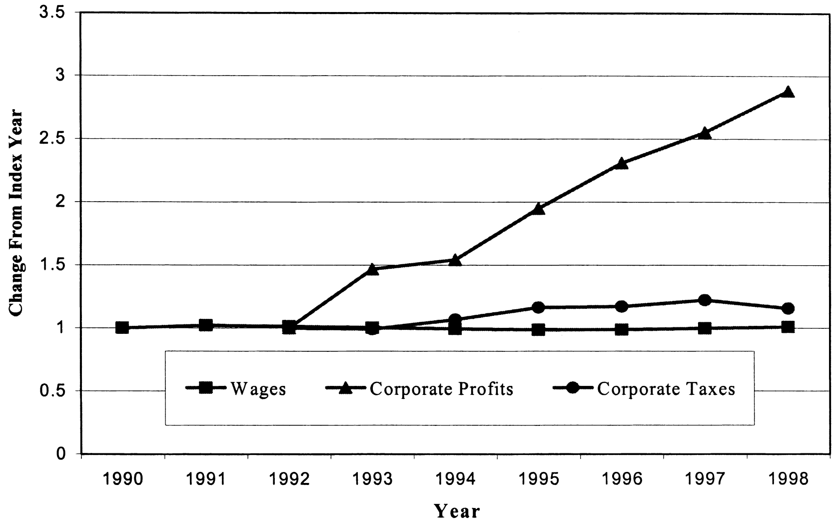
Next, I read all of the articles, coding the content of each in terms of several criteria. First, the story's date of appearance, location within the newspaper, and number of words were recorded. Then, more substantively important factors—such as the story's topic, source of information and viewpoints, the appraisal of the economy's performance, and discussion of reforms, if any—were analyzed and coded accordingly. This coding process transformed the newspaper's qualitative accounts of the economy into quantitative information, which could then be statistically analyzed to reveal broad patterns in their coverage of the economy.

For several reasons, accounts of the economy found in the *Los Angeles Times* between 1997 and 1998 present an optimal opportunity to test competing claims about the news media. First, as Figures 1 through 3 illustrate, the particularities of the growth patterns in California's economy during this two-year period—rapidly rising profits for corporations and investors, but stagnant wages for workers—were well established and growing more acute

5. The keywords used in this study, besides their ability to capture a broad range of articles on the economy, were chosen to maximize the number of articles about workers and negative economic news. For this reason, I included the words "recession," "workers," and "labor" as keywords, along with the more general terms "economy" and "markets." The inclusion of the first three keywords, if anything, biases the research design against my primary argument—that the news media under-emphasize the economic problems of the workers. Moreover, the keyword function in Lexis-Nexis is flexible, allowing for slight deviations in spelling. For example, the keyword "labor" also gathers articles on "laborers" or "labor unions."

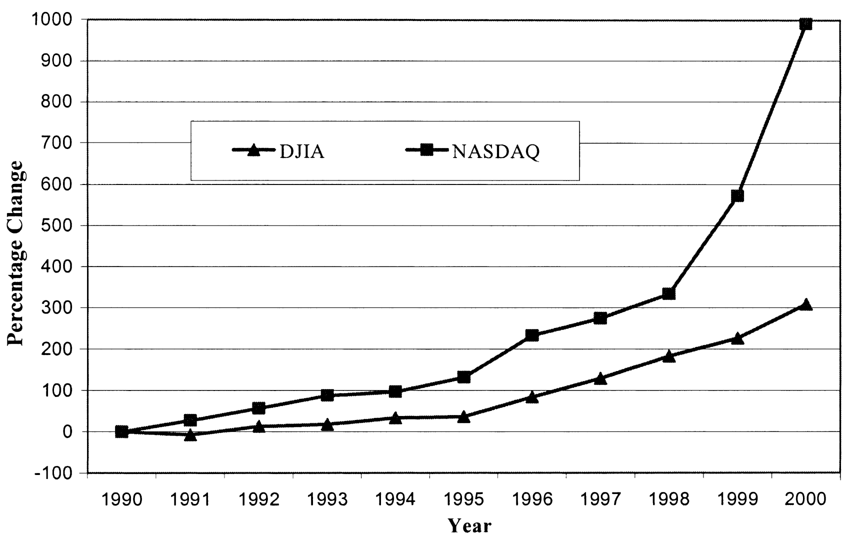
6. A Lexis-Nexis keyword search of the business section in the *Times*—over the years 1997 and 1998—revealed that the modal article during this period was about financial markets. The following keywords (with the number of articles in parentheses) were used in the keyword search: markets (1,374), economy (545), labor (220), and workers (173).

7. I thank an anonymous reviewer for making this observation.



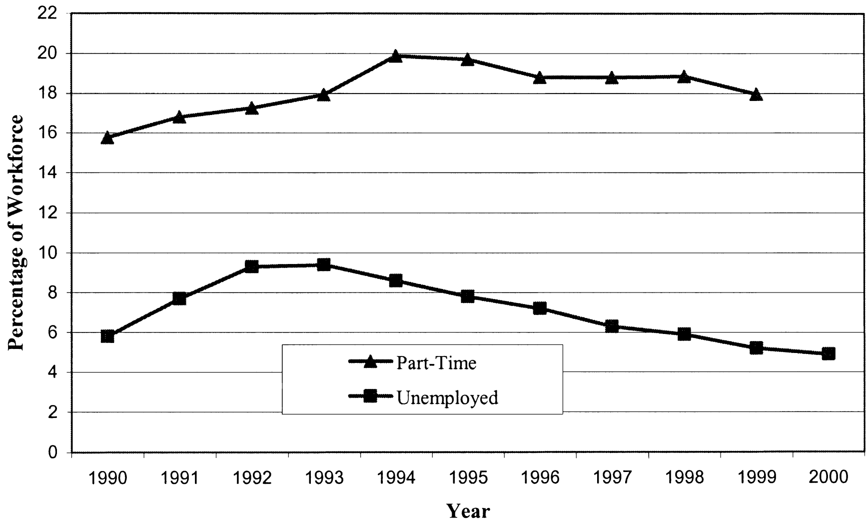
Source: California Department of Finance (1994–2000)

Figure 1 • ***Inflation-adjusted Wages, Corporate Profits, and Corporate Taxes: California, 1991–1998***



Source: Dow Jones & Company (2001); NASDAQ (2001)

Figure 2 • ***Percentage Change in Major Stock Market Indices: NASDAQ-100 and Dow Jones Industrial Average, January 1990–December 1999***



Source: California Department of Finance (1994 – 2000)

Figure 3 • *Percentage of California's Workforce Unemployed and Part-time: 1990 to 2000*

each year. Given this situation, if the news media possess "anti-business" sentiments, then these economic conditions would provide them with ample subject matter to express their discontent with the economy's performance. Second, according to some advocates of the bad-news-bias perspective, the *Times* ranks among the most liberal newspapers in the country (see e.g., McGowan 2001). If this claim is correct, and the *Times* is a member of the "liberal media," then this newspaper is more likely than most others to overemphasize bad economic news, a situation that biases the research design against my primary argument. Finally, with the largest circulation in California and the fourth largest circulation in the United States (Newspaper Association of America 2001),[8] the *Times* is the newspaper of record in California, and one of the most influential newspapers in the country ("America's Best Newspapers" 1999). These characteristics make the *Times* an important source of public information about the economy and a good candidate to represent the journalistic norms of other major newspapers.

Findings

The discussion of the findings proceeds in two parts. First, drawing on statistical indicators, I describe the growth patterns of California's economy during the 1990s. Then, using these objective indicators of economic performance as a reference, I analyze the more subjective accounts of the economy found in the *Times* during 1997 and 1998.

8. Based upon a six-month average, ending September 30, 2000, the Newspaper Association of America (2001) finds that the five largest daily newspapers in the United States, with circulation in millions (noted in parentheses), are as follows: *Wall Street Journal* (1.76m), *USA Today* (1.69m), *New York Times* (1.1m), *Los Angeles Times* (1.03m), and *Washington Post* (0.76m). The *San Francisco Chronicle* (0.457m) and the *San Diego Union-Tribune* (0.37m), with circulations well below the *Los Angeles Times*, are the second and third largest newspapers in California, respectively.

Objective Indicators of California's Economy

The structure of California's economy has changed significantly over the last few decades. Starting in the 1970s, when technological advancements contributed to a period of worldwide economic restructuring, and culminating after the recession of the early 1990s, when thousands of high-paying manufacturing jobs were lost due to cutbacks in defense spending, California experienced nearly two decades of economic instability. But, by the mid-1990s, the state's economy was growing rapidly, spurred most notably by new innovations and successful entrepreneurship in the high-technology sector. However, unlike the industrial-based economy of earlier decades, where the manufacturing sector created many high-wage jobs, much of the recent employment growth in California has occurred in low-wage industries, especially the consumer services and low-technology manufacturing sectors (Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000; Scott 1993). This pattern of employment growth—coupled with the proliferation of part-time, temporary, and contractual work arrangements—altered the economic foundations that previously supported an expanding middle class in the state. Thus, by the late-1990s, those equipped with the skills or capital needed to participate in the information-based sectors of the economy enjoyed many opportunities for prosperity, while less-educated members of the workforce faced stagnant wages and the vagaries of the contingent labor market.

Statistics on California's economy reflect these diverging trends. Figure 1 illustrates the degree to which the prosperity of the mid-1990s was distributed unequally between corporations and workers. Over a seven-year period between 1992 and 1998, corporate profits reported to the California Franchise Board increased nearly 300 percent, even after making downward adjustments for inflation. Moreover, since total tax payments to the state grew by only 20 percent, the average corporation enjoyed substantial increases in net profits during this period. The national economy experienced similar trends, as rising investor confidence, fueled by soaring corporate profits and new market opportunities made possible by globalization and the Internet, generated nearly a decade's worth of unprecedented growth in major U.S. stock markets (Figure 2).

Workers benefited much less from this economic expansion. After adjusting for inflation, wages in the manufacturing sector—which often serve as a proxy for wages across the working class—changed little during the 1990s (Figure 1). And even though unemployment fell substantially—from over nine percent of the workforce in 1992, down to around five percent in 1998—many of these new jobs were part-time positions (Figure 3). Both of these trends, stagnant wages and growth in part-time employment, are traditionally associated with recessions, not long periods of sustained economic growth. So given the uneven distribution of prosperity generated by this economic expansion, how did California's largest newspaper portray the economy's performance?

Journalistic Accounts of California's Economy

Based on an analysis of 201 articles on the economy from the *Los Angeles Times*, I find qualified support for the notion that the news media's coverage of the economy primarily reflects the common interests and concerns of the corporate community and investors. Although more than half of the articles in the data set contained some negative news—thereby supporting the general premise of the bad-news-bias perspective—a detailed analysis of the data reveals a pattern of journalism that downplays economic problems affecting workers. The following paragraphs describe the evidence that supports this conclusion.

Good, Bad, and Mixed Economic News. According to scholarship comprising the bad-news-bias perspective, a disproportionate number of articles on the economy contain negative news (Hypothesis 1). To test this premise, each article in the data set was placed into one of three mutually exclusive categories—good news, bad news, or mixed news—depending upon

Table 1 • *Good, Bad, and Mixed Economic News:* Los Angeles Times, *1997 and 1998, Number of Articles with Percentages in Parentheses*

	Type of News Story			
	Good News	*Bad News*	*Mixed News*	*Total*
Number of articles	79 (39.3)	15 (7.5)	107 (53.2)	201 (100.0)

Chi-square test for null hypothesis that there is no statistical relationship between the number of articles and type of economic news: $\chi^2 = 8.9$, $p = .030$.

the way it portrayed the economy's performance. To make this coding process as objective as possible, articles were sorted into these categories based upon the topic covered and the explicit language used in the article. The "good news" category includes any article that focused *solely* on positive aspects of the economy. Many of these articles, for example, discussed favorable macroeconomic conditions, such as falling unemployment and inflation rates, record increases in stock market indices, or the success of the high-technology sector. Conversely, the "bad news" category includes any article that focused *solely* on negative aspects of the economy. Articles in this category, for example, include those that reported on labor disputes, incidences of corporate downsizing, or the hardships of low-skilled workers. Finally, the "mixed news" category includes any article that discussed both positive and negative aspects of the economy. Examples of articles in this category include stories that covered sudden declines in the stock market, but then mentioned that stock prices have been at historic highs throughout the 1990s, or stories that reported robust macroeconomic growth, but then mentioned the possibility that this may cause inflation in the near future.

The results of this coding process, shown in Table 1, partially support the argument that the news media overemphasize negative accounts of the economy. As would be expected given the nature of the economy described in Figures 1 through 3, the data show that the modal newspaper account, occurring 53.2 percent of the time, reflects a mixed assessment of the economy's performance. However, the data also show that good-news articles outnumber bad-news articles by more than five to one. These results can be interpreted in two ways. With only 7.5 percent of the articles reporting exclusively bad news, as compared to the nearly 40 percent of the articles reporting exclusively good news, the data do not reveal a pronounced inclination toward negative accounts of the economy. But when combining the bad-news and mixed-news articles into one category, the data indicate that over 60 percent of the articles contain at least some criticism of the economy's performance.

Information about the size and placement of articles in the data set helps clarify this ambiguity. During the coding process, the word count and page number of each article were identified and recorded. From this information, two measures of an article's relative prominence were calculated: article size, as measured in number of words, and article placement, as measured by appearance or non-appearance on the front page. Assuming that longer articles are more prominent than shorter articles, and assuming that front-page articles are more prominent than back-page articles, the data show that, by a considerable margin, good-news articles received the most favorable coverage. As Table 2 shows, articles reporting good news appeared on the front page 77.2 percent of the time, and they had an average length of 1,413 words. Conversely, articles reporting bad news appeared on the front page only 33.3 percent of the time, and they had an average length of only 1,232 words. These findings clearly contradict the assertion that the news media most often emphasize the economy's shortcomings.

Economic Group Affected by Negative News. As discussed earlier, the social science literature suggests competing hypotheses about the news media's coverage of economic problems

Table 2 • ***Article Size and Placement by Type of Economic News:*** **Los Angeles Times,** ***1997 and 1998, Number of Articles with Column Percentages in Parentheses***

	Type of Economic News			
Prominence of Articles	*Good News*	*Bad News*	*Mixed News*	*Total*
Location of articles[a]				
Front page	61 (77.2)	5 (33.3)	57 (53.3)	123 (61.2)
Other than front page	18 (22.8)	10 (66.7)	50 (46.7)	78 (38.8)
Total	79 (100.0)	15 (100.0)	107 (100.0)	201 (100)
Average size in words[b]	1,413	1,232	1,258	1,318

[a] Chi-square test for null hypothesis that there is no relationship between location and type of economic news: χ^2 = 59.104, p = .000.
[b] F-test for null hypothesis that average size is the same across all three types of articles: F = 2.30, p = .10.

affecting workers. On one hand, some scholarship predicts that the news media, due to alleged liberal and anti-business attitudes held by journalists, will overemphasize the economy's shortcomings, especially when these shortcomings affect workers (Hypothesis 2). On the other hand, other scholarship anticipates that the news media, since they are major corporations operating within and benefiting from the existing capitalist economy, and since they are embedded within elite social networks, will most often ignore problems affecting workers (Hypotheses 3 and 5). To adjudicate between these competing claims, during the coding process, articles containing negative news about the economy were sorted into one of three categories—corporations and investors, workers, or the economy in general. These mutually exclusive categories represent the economic group, identified by the newspaper, that was most threatened by the problems discussed in the bad- or mixed-news articles. An article was labeled "economy" when the newspaper portrayed the events as threatening the performance of the economy in general rather than the well-being of specific economic actors. After analyzing the articles in this fashion, the data reveal an incongruence between the economic indicators presented in Figures 1 through 3 and the journalistic accounts of the economy presented in Table 3. Although the economic indicators show that workers failed to benefit much, if at all, from the economic prosperity of the mid-1990s, only 14.8 percent of the combined bad- and mixed-news articles discussed problems affecting workers. Conversely, 31.1 percent of the bad- and mixed-news articles discussed problems affecting corporations and investors, even though they were the primary beneficiaries of economic growth during this period. The remaining 53.3 percent of the articles discussed problems with the economy as a whole. Additionally, it should be noted that when the *Times* did focus solely on

Table 3 • ***Group Affected by Problems Discussed in Economic News:*** **Los Angeles Times,** ***1997 and 1998, Number of Articles with Column Percentages in Parentheses***

	Type of Economic News		
	Bad News	*Mixed News*	*Total*
Corporations/investors	4 (26.7)	34 (31.8)	38 (31.1)
Workers	6 (40.0)	12 (11.2)	18 (14.8)
Economy	5 (33.3)	61 (57.0)	66 (54.1)
Total	15 (100.0)	107 (100.0)	122 (100.0)

Chi-square test for null hypothesis that there is no statistical relationship between group and type of economic news: χ^2 = 8.9, p = .030.

Table 4 • *Size and Placement of Articles Containing Some Negative Economic News (Bad and Mixed Categories Combined):* Los Angeles Times, *1997 and 1998, Number of Articles with Column Percentages in Parentheses*

	Group Threatened by Economic Problems			
Prominence of Articles	*Corporations/ Investors*	*Workers*	*Economy*	*Total*
Placement of articles[a]				
Front page	28 (73.7)	4 (21.1)	31 (47.7)	63 (51.6)
Other than front page	10 (26.3)	15 (78.9)	34 (52.3)	59 (48.4)
Total	38 (100.0)	19 (100.0)	65 (100.0)	122 (100)
Average size in words[b]	1,447	1,315	1,160	1,255

[a] Chi-squared test for null hypothesis that there is no relationship between article placement and the group threatened by bad economic news: χ^ 2 = 59.1, p = .000.
[b] F-test for null hypothesis that average size is the same across the three types of articles: F = 4.05, p = .01.

problems with the economy—meaning those 15 articles coded as bad news—workers received slightly more attention than corporations and investors and the economy in general. However, since the sample size is small, again only 15 articles, the slight variations in the number of articles across the three categories are not statistically significant.

Information about the size and placement of articles in the data set containing criticism of the economy provides further support for the claim that the news media downplay problems affecting workers. Again, using an article's size and appearance on the front page as indicators of its prominence within the newspaper, the data reveal a strong association between an article's prominence and the group affected by the bad or mixed news about the economy. As Table 4 shows, articles reporting problems threatening corporations and investors received front-page attention 73.7 percent of the time, and they had an average length of 1,447 words. But articles reporting problems threatening workers received front-page attention only 21.1 percent of the time, and they had an average length of 1,315 words. By comparison, articles about problems affecting the economy in general, although they had the smallest average word count, were distributed almost evenly between the front and back pages of the newspaper. Nonetheless, the overall findings displayed in Table 4 portray a pattern of journalism that downplays coverage of economic issues affecting workers.

Articles Mentioning Reforms. Recall that the cultural hegemony perspective suggests that, for several structural reasons, the news media rarely discuss alternatives to existing economic policies, especially when proposed policy alternatives address problems and issues affecting workers (Hypothesis 4). To empirically assess this assertion, articles mentioning one or more potential reforms to existing economic policy were identified. For the purpose of coding the articles, reforms included policies advocating either economic liberalization or new government regulations. This process identified 31 articles—a number equaling 15 percent of the articles in the data set and 25 percent of the articles containing at least some negative news. By itself, this finding does not support the hypothesized outcome. But, after taking two additional factors into consideration, the data more closely support the assertion that the news media rarely mention economic reforms designed to help workers.

First, articles discussing reforms were generally given less-prominent coverage within the newspaper than other articles about the economy. As Table 5 shows, articles mentioning one or more reforms appeared on the front page only 29 percent of the time, and they had an average length of 1,217 words. By contrast, articles not mentioning reforms appeared on the front page more frequently (67.1 percent of the time), and they were generally longer (1,336 average

Table 5 • *Size and Placement of Articles Discussing Possible Reforms:* Los Angeles Times, *1997 and 1998, Number of Articles with Column Percentages in Parentheses*

	Discussion of Possible Reforms		
Prominence of Articles	*Yes*	*No*	*Total*
Placement of articles[a]			
Front page	9 (29.0)	114 (67.1)	123 (61.2)
Other than front page	22 (71.0)	56 (32.9)	78 (38.8)
Total	31 (100.0)	170 (100.0)	201 (100)
Average size in words[b]	1,217	1,336	1,318

[a] Chi-squared test for null hypothesis that there is no relationship between article placement and whether or not an article discussed reforms: $\chi^2 = 15.965$, $p = .000$.
[b] F-test for null hypothesis that average size is the same whether or not the article discussed reforms: $F = 1.39$, $p = .24$.

words). Taken together, this means that articles discussing reforms, as compared to articles not discussing reforms, were half as likely to appear on the front page and almost 9 percent shorter.

Second, when articles mentioned reforms intended to help corporations and investors, they were given more prominent attention, by a considerable margin, than articles mentioning reforms intended to help workers. As Table 6 indicates, articles mentioning reforms intended to help corporations and investors appeared on the front page 83.3 percent of the time, and they had an average length of 1,569 words. But articles mentioning reforms designed to help workers appeared on the front page much less frequently (only 14.3 percent of the time), and they were much shorter on average (only 1,120 words). Or, stated differently, this finding means that articles mentioning reforms designed to help corporations and investors were, on average, almost six times more likely to appear on the front page and approximately 28 percent longer than articles mentioning reforms designed to help workers. Combined, the data presented in Tables 5 and 6 depict a pattern of journalism that, while not avoiding the subject altogether, downplays discussions of potential economic reforms, especially when the proposed reforms address problems affecting workers.

Sources of Information. As described earlier, some scholarship on the news media finds that journalists rarely use union leaders, workers, or their spokespersons as sources of information about the economy (Hypothesis 6). To assess this contention, during the coding process,

Table 6 • *Size and Placement of Articles by Beneficiary of Discussed Reforms:* Los Angeles Times, *1997 and 1998, Number of Articles with Column Percentages in Parentheses*

	Beneficiary of Discussed Reforms			
Prominence of Articles	*Corporations/ Investors*	*Workers*	*Economy*	*Total*
Placement of articles[a]				
Front page	5 (83.3)	1 (14.3)	3 (16.7)	9 (29.0)
Other than front page	1 (16.7)	6 (85.7)	15 (83.3)	22 (71.0)
Total	6 (100.0)	7 (100.0)	18 (100.0)	31 (100)
Average size in words[b]	1,569	1,120	1,137	1,217

[a] Chi-squared test for null hypothesis that there is no relationship between article placement and the group benefiting from discussed reforms: $\chi^2 = 10.66$, $p = .005$.
[b] F-test for null hypothesis that average size is the same across the three types of articles: $F = 2.20$, $p = .13$.

Table 7 • *Sources of Information for Articles about the Economy:* Los Angeles Times, *1997 and 1998, Number of Articles with Percentages in Parentheses*

	1 Business Spokesperson	*2 Government Official*	*3 Business/ Government*	*4 Social Scientist/Author*	*5 Times op-ed Writers*	*6 Labor Spokesperson*	*7 More Than Three Types of Sources*	*8 Total*
1 Frequency	43 (21.4)	38 (18.9)	45 (22.4)	39 (19.4)	10 (5.0)	16 (8.0)	10 (5.0)	201 (100)
2 Article location								
Front-page	36 (83.7)	22 (57.9)	39 (86.7)	7 (17.9)	0 (0)	9 (56.3)	10 (100.0)	123 (61.2)
Other than front-page	7 (16.3)	16 (42.1)	6 (13.3)	32 (82.1)	10 (100)	7 (43.8)	0 (0.0)	78 (38.8)
Total	43 (100)	38 (100)	45 (100)	39 (100)	10 (100)	16 (100)	10 (100)	201 (100)
3 Type of news								
Good	15 (34.9)	19 (50.0)	22 (48.9)	7 (17.9)	3 (30.0)	7 (43.8)	6 (60.0)	79 (39.3)
Bad	1 (2.3)	1 (2.6)	2 (4.4)	7 (17.9)	0 (0.0)	3 (18.8)	1 (10.0)	15 (7.5)
Mixed	27 (62.8)	18 (47.4)	21 (46.7)	25 (64.2)	7 (70.0)	6 (37.5)	3 (30.0)	107 (53.2)
Total	43 (100)	38 (100)	45 (100)	39 (100)	10 (100)	16 (100)	10 (100)	201 (100)
4 Discuss reforms								
No	40 (93.0)	34 (89.5)	42 (93.3)	24 (61.5)	8 (80.0)	14 (87.5)	8 (80.0)	170 (84.6)
Yes	3 (7.0)	4 (10.5)	3 (6.7)	15 (38.5)	2 (20.0)	2 (12.5)	2 (20.0)	31 (15.4)
Total	43 (100)	38 (100)	45 (100)	39 (100)	10 (100)	16 (100)	10 (100)	201 (100)
5 Beneficiary of discussed reforms								
Corporations/Investors	1 (33.3)	0 (0.0)	1 (33.3)	2 (13.3)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (100)	6 (19.4)
Workers	0 (0.0)	1 (25.0)	1 (33.3)	4 (26.6)	0 (0.0)	1 (50.0)	0 (0.0)	7 (22.6)
Economy	2 (66.6)	3 (75.0)	1 (33.3)	9 (60.0)	2 (100)	1 (50.0)	0 (0.0)	18 (58.0)
Total	3 (100)	4 (100)	3 (100)	15 (100)	2 (100)	2 (100)	2 (100)	31 (100)

each article's primary source of information, as identified by the journalist, was recorded. To facilitate a quantitative analysis of the resulting information, the identified sources were grouped into one of seven mutually exclusive categories. The results of this coding process, displayed in row one of Table 7, provide strong support for the hypothesized outcome. As anticipated, the data show that union leaders, workers, and their spokespersons were rarely used as sources of information about the economy. Specifically, these individuals were used as primary sources for only 7.9 percent of the articles in the data set. This compares unfavorably with most other types of sources—the two exceptions being the category representing *Times* op-ed writers (used in 5 percent of the articles) and the category representing three or more sources (also used in 5 percent of the articles). The most frequently cited source was "business/government," a category for articles citing both business spokespersons and government officials as the primary sources of information. The next most frequently cited sources were business spokespersons (21.3 percent), social scientists and individuals described as authors (19.3 percent), and government officials (18.8 percent). Consistent with the literature of the subject, these findings demonstrate that journalists with the *Times* rely heavily upon individuals representing the corporate community and government for much of the information that eventually becomes news about the economy. In fact, at least 62 percent of the articles in the data set used some combination of business spokespersons and government officials as primary sources—a number nearly 8 times greater than the percentage of articles using union leaders, workers, or their spokespersons as primary sources.

When used as sources of information about the economy, business spokespersons and government officials seemingly received preferential treatment in other ways as well. According to the data displayed in row two of Table 7, there exists a moderate association between an article's source of information and its likelihood of appearing on the front page. Specifically, when journalists used business spokespersons as primary sources—either alone or coupled with government officials—the resulting articles appeared on the front page more than 83 percent of the time. But when journalists used union leaders, workers, or their spokespersons as primary sources, the resulting articles appeared on the front pages less frequently—approximately 56 percent of the time. The least prominent attention, however, went to articles citing social scientists and individuals described as authors. When journalists cited these sources, only 17.9 percent of the resulting articles appeared on the front page. Taken together, the data displayed in rows one and two of Table 7 provide moderate support for the claim that the news media privilege the corporate community and government as sources of information on the economy.

Sources and News Content. Finally, do the news media's choices of sources affect the content of the news? As described earlier, existing scholarship on this subject suggests that articles citing business or government spokespersons will contain favorable accounts of the economy more frequently than articles citing workers or their spokespersons (Hypothesis 7). The data analyzed here, however, provide only limited support for this proposition. First, as shown in row 3 of Table 7, the association between an article's source of information and its assessment of the economy is ambiguous. On one hand, as anticipated, the data clearly indicate that government officials—whether cited alone or cited along with business spokespersons—were frequently associated with favorable accounts of the economy. When government officials were used as primary sources, 50 percent of the resulting articles reported good news, while only 2.6 percent of articles reported bad news. Similarly, when journalists cited government officials along with business spokespersons as primary sources, 48.9 percent of the resulting articles reported good news, while only 4.4 percent reported bad news. These findings clearly support the hypothesized outcome. But, on the other hand, some findings deviate substantially from the expected results. Most notably, the data indicate that articles citing workers and their spokespersons frequently reported good news about the economy. In fact, articles citing these sources reported good news about the economy more often than articles citing business spokespersons—a finding that clearly contradicts the general thrust of the literature on this subject. Moreover, the data also show that social scientists and authors, not workers and their spokespersons, were the sources most frequently associated with negative accounts of the economy. In particular, when journalists used social scientists and authors as primary sources, over 82 percent of the resulting articles reported either bad or mixed news about the economy. But when journalists used workers or their spokespersons as primary sources, only 56 percent of the resulting articles expressed bad or mixed news about the economy.

Second, in contrast with anticipated results, the data show little correlation between an article's source of information and its likelihood of discussing reforms. As row 4 of Table 7 shows, the percentage of articles discussing reforms differs insignificantly across the various categories of sources. Although the sample size is small, making this finding statistically unreliable, it clearly does not corroborate the assertion that the news media's choice of sources affects the content of the news. There is, however, a notable exception to this finding. Articles citing social scientists and authors, compared with articles citing other sources of information, were significantly more likely to mention reforms in general (row four of Table 7) and reforms that benefit workers in particular (row five of Table 7).

Conclusion and Discussion

This study provides new sociological insights into the manner in which the news media portray the economy's performance. Ideally, in a democracy, the news media should help expose weaknesses in society's major institutions and facilitate rational debates on appropriate policy solutions to the identified problems. Scholars and media critics, however, overwhelming agree that the news media in the United States fall far short of this ideal (see review article by Gamson et al. 1992). Yet, despite this unanimity, the social science literature contains highly incompatible arguments about the causes and consequences of the news media's shortcomings. For instance, some media scholars claim that the national press corps hold overly antagonistic views about the corporate community, and that these attitudes, along with a desire to help liberal political causes, manifest as a disproportionate number of articles about the economy's shortcomings. But, on this same issue, other media scholars draw very different conclusions. In general, they contend that the news media—due to their structural links to the capitalist economy, their strong social ties to the corporate community and federal government, and their reliance on elites for much of the information that eventually becomes news—typically cover the economy from a "pro-business" perspective. Using articles that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* during 1997 and 1998, this study examines these competing claims about the news media. During the late 1990s, rapid economic growth in California produced unequal patterns of prosperity. While corporations and investors enjoyed robust growth in profits and income, a significant portion of the state's workforce experienced stagnant wages and limited opportunities for full-time employment. Given this situation, if the news media's coverage of the economy reflects liberal or "anti-business" political views, as some scholars suggest, then we would expect to find a plurality of articles on economic problems affecting workers. This, however, was not the case. Findings derived from a content analysis show that the *Times* ran relatively few articles about economic problems affecting workers. And when they did cover problems affecting workers, the articles were relatively short, most often placed in the back pages of the newspaper, and rarely discussed alternatives to existing economic policies. Furthermore, the *Times* rarely used union leaders, workers, or their spokespersons as sources of information and viewpoints on the economy. In fact, less than 8 percent the articles analyzed in this study used this group as the primary source of information.

These results cast considerable doubts over certain claims associated with the bad-news-bias perspective. While the data show that the news media publish a significant amount of negative economic news—and thereby confirm a core premise of this perspective—there is little evidence that the news media cover the economy from a liberal or anti-business viewpoint. This finding, I believe, indicates that the bad-news-bias perspective suffers from several theoretical shortcomings. First and foremost, it typically ignores the class position of those affected by negative economic news. If journalists and editors possess liberal or anti-business attitudes, and if these attitudes affect the content of the news, then the country's major newspapers would emphasize the numerous economic problems facing America's sizeable lower and working classes. But, according to the findings presented here, this is not the case. Even after omitting the business section, the data reveal that the *Los Angeles Times*—supposedly a core member of the "liberal press"—overwhelmingly focused on economic issues and problems important to corporations and investors. This occurred despite the fact that, during the period in question, corporations and investors were enjoying record levels of prosperity, while large segments of the workforce were experiencing economic stagnation. Importantly, these findings imply that the shortcomings of news media are class-specific. On one hand, the news media apparently succeed in drawing the public's attention to current events and economic problems threatening the well-being of corporations and investors. But, on the other hand, the news media apparently provide insufficient scrutiny of the numerous economic problems affecting the general workforce, especially the sizable population of low-wage workers. A second theoretical shortcoming is that scholars working from the bad-news-bias perspective, when analyzing the political attitudes of journalists, often combine an individual's viewpoints on social and economic issues into one overarching political orientation. This practice, I believe, can produce erroneous conclusions about how journalists typically view the economy. Granted, as highly educated and affluent urbanites, it seems likely that most members of the national press corps would have liberal views on social issues. But, even if this is true, it does not logically follow that these same individuals would have liberal views on economic issues. In fact, given their privileged position in the American class structure, it seems more plausible that, as Croteau (1998) argues, many members of the national press corps have center-right views on economic issues. And finally, in my estimation, the entire emphasis on the political orientations of journalists, as the primary determinant of the content of the news, seems misguided. Just like any corporate employee, journalists operate within a workplace explicitly organized around the interests of their employers. For this reason, as well as the other structural constraints discussed above, it seems improbable that the economic news would primarily reflect the personal preferences of journalists and editors rather than the larger business interests of the news industry's executive management and shareholders. This logic does not, however, imply that the news media never criticize corporations or prevailing economic policy—clearly they do on a regular basis—but rather it suggests that powerful social forces, arising from the structural relationship between the news industry and the capitalist economy, help align the norms of economic journalism with the general interests of the corporate community and investors.

Finally, the present study raises two interesting questions about the role sources of information play in shaping the news. First, although existing scholarship suggests otherwise, the data analyzed here reveal little correlation between the news media's choice of sources and the news media's assessment of the economy. Several explanations could plausibly account for the disparity between this finding and the hypothesized results. It could be that previous scholarship on this subject has overestimated the influence sources have on the content of the news. If this is the case, and sources cannot significantly affect coverage of the news, then perhaps journalists most often use sources to merely illustrate and support their preexisting conclusions rather than to gain fresh insights and opinions about their subject matter. But other explanations are equally plausible. It could be that an intervening variable is obscuring an otherwise significant relationship between sources and the content of the news. For example, it is likely that a journalist's specific topic of inquiry, such as a sudden decline in the stock market, plays a larger role in shaping the economic news than a journalist's source of information. A more definitive understanding of this relationship—one that controls for possible intervening variables—will require data and statistical procedures that fall beyond the scope of this research. For this reason, I do not argue that sources have a minimal effect on the content of the news—only that our present understanding of this issue remains unclear. Second, the present study demonstrates that social scientists and authors, not workers or their spokespersons, are most often associated with critical accounts of the economy and discussions of reforms. This finding was not explicitly anticipated by the literature, although in many ways it is consistent with the general notion of cultural hegemony. Again, a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon will require additional research. But, despite these two ambiguities, the bulk of the evidence presented here strongly suggests that the news media, when reporting on the economy, privilege the interests of corporations and investors over the interests of the general workforce.

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