START SMALL, BUILD BIG: NEGOTIATING OPPORTUNITIES IN MEDIA MARKETS[*]

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We track the strategic choices of Rhode Island Coalition against Domestic Violence (RICADV), a statewide collective actor working in one media market to expand opportunities to promote its mission. We reconstruct an organizational life history describing how RICADV built its communications capacity and deepened internal and external relations, thereby increasing media standing with Rhode Island journalists. To measure growth in media standing quantitatively, we analyze print coverage of three comparable clusters of domestic violence murders occurring in Rhode Island between 1996 and 2002. Over this interval, RICADV rose from invisibility to become Rhode Island reporters' foremost source for background information on domestic-violence murders. Also, the use of language identifying these murders as domestic violence increased sixteen-fold. Stressing dialogic and relational approaches, we conclude that despite restricted access to corporatized media markets, intentional collective actors can negotiate and expand media opportunities by strategically selecting mission-relevant media projects that match their existing resources and networks.

Between 1996 and 2002, the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV) moved from media obscurity to become the primary information source about domestic violence for Rhode Island reporters. This change was not part of a general trend. During the same seven-year period, most state domestic violence coalitions did not improve their media standing appreciably.[1] RICADV's success, therefore, merits analysis.

This longitudinal study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore how the collective actor, RICADV, working with the university-based collective actor, the Media Research and Action Project (MRAP)[2], strengthened its standing in the Rhode Island media market which ranks in the top quartile of U.S. media markets (43rd of 200). Beginning with qualitative approaches, we reconstruct how the collective actor RICADV parleyed growing media standing into expanded media opportunities. We then assess RICADV's media standing quantitatively via a content analysis that measures shifts in RICADV's ability to influence media coverage of domestic violence murders over a seven-year period. Finally, we tentatively conjecture on the impact of media standing on political standing.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1996, two collective actors, the statewide Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV) and the university-based Media Research and Action Project (MRAP)

initiated a common project. To further RICADV's mission of ending domestic violence, we wanted to strengthen its media standing, e.g., we wanted Rhode Island reporters to recognize RICADV as an indispensable source for news and background information regarding domestic violence.[3] RICADV and MRAP saw media standing as a prerequisite for achieving a second objective—to open new opportunities to promote RICADV's framing of domestic violence as a social problem not a private problem, requiring social not individual solutions. This paper assesses one aspect of our collaboration—RICADV'S efforts to alter the Rhode Island reporters' representation of domestic violence murders as unpredictable, private tragedies.

Our project's focus on domestic violence murders emerged from our joint work. In spring 1996, a month into our collaboration, a cluster of three domestic violence murders occurred within a six-week period. First, an elderly man brutally beat his wife to death. Then, a young man killed his girlfriend, his two-year-old, and himself. Three weeks later, a middle-aged man killed his wife, two children, and himself.

Print news presented the murders as inexplicable, private family tragedies. Coverage of the first case stressed the elderly couple's failing health. In the second case reporters quoted a shocked neighbor describing the perpetrator as "a really nice kid. . . . Things like this don't happen around here supposedly" (*Providence Journal* 4-29-96). Print coverage of the third case similarly conveyed shock and denial. The victims were a "model family," insisted their minister. The perpetrator's sister added, "I guess he loved them so much, he just took them with him" (*Providence Journal* 5-21-96).

RICADV did not influence this 1996 coverage. While comfortable calling press for a planned event, RICADV then lacked the capacity to leverage an unexpected incident such as a murder into a media opportunity. "We waited by the phone, but no call came," recalled one RICADV staff. To our surprise, the same reporters and media outlets that had covered RICADV education campaigns supportively failed to recognize the murders as domestic violence. RICADV asked MRAP to analyze news coverage of domestic violence murders systematically; MRAP's preliminary study confirmed that reporters in the Rhode Island media market routinely treated domestic violence murder as an isolated and unforeseeable event—a slasher movie cum morality play in which modern man[4] inexplicably unravels. Domestic violence murder coverage was sensationalized, decontextualized, and fixated on the perpetrator's motive, findings that replicated those of other studies described below.

In 1999, just as MRAP completed our study, a second cluster of three domestic violence murders occurred. By this point, RICADV had strengthened its capacity to respond rapidly to unexpected events. Its spokespersons, now quoted widely, shifted news accounts of the murders from the previous framing of domestic violence as a private, unpredictable tragedy to the advocates' social framing of domestic violence as a community responsibility. RICADV subsequently published a handbook for journalists summarizing recommendations from survivors, reporters, advocates and MRAP (2000).

When a third cluster of three domestic violence murders occurred in spring 2002, RICADV was even better positioned; it had consolidated its rapid response capacity and strengthened working relations with member groups and a broad network of allies all of whom it rapidly mobilized. At a packed press conference, Deborah DeBare, Executive Director of RICADV flanked by domestic violence survivors and leading politicians, called for social not private responses to domestic violence. The over-flow audience included film crews, photographers, and reporters from every major news outlet in Rhode Island, candidates for Attorney General, elected officials, law enforcement officers, and domestic violence advocates. Reporters had labeled the press conference a "must attend" event, and its coverage topped the evening news and the next day's headlines.

In contrast to domestic violence advocates' silence in 1996, news accounts in 2002 opened with RICADV's messages of community responsibility for domestic violence. Reporters highlighted the testimony of RICADV's domestic violence survivor group, Sisters Overcoming Abusive Relationships (SOAR). SOAR's Rosa DeCastillo described fleeing with her children

barefoot in the snow and urged the audience to "work together to ensure the safety of victims." A friend of Barbara Lombardi, a recent victim, also stressed social responsibility: "Tragically, our present system failed Barbara and should be held accountable—anything less would be an injustice."

RICADV's DeBare then linked these experiences to a major policy initiative; in ten days following the third murder, an RICADV-initiated coalition had crafted a seven-point plan to close gaps in the safety net of domestic violence services. A few months later, the Coalition and its allies shepherded the plan through the Rhode Island legislature. Thus, a seasoned RICADV turned the 2002 cluster of murders into a catalyst for policy change, not only a media opportunity but also a political opportunity.

After the bill's passage, RICADV and MRAP agreed to enter a period of reflection to distill the lessons from RICADV's intentional capacity-building and strategic intervention in the Rhode Island media market. From that reflection, came the study that follows.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND[5]

Since the founding of *Mobilization*, social movement theorists have debated whether opportunity is primarily exogenous—a structural opening caused by forces beyond social movements' control—or more negotiable—a strategic tug of war in which unequal contending forces wrestle for advantage amidst shifting historical conditions.[6] Mapping thirty variables appearing in these debates, Gamson and Meyer warn that opportunity "threatens to become an all-encompassing fudge factor for all the conditions and circumstances that form the context for collective action"(1996: 275). Eight years later, Meyer finds more variables added while previous variables have yet to be "disproved, refined or replaced," a tendency he finds "both completely understandable and frustrating" (Meyer 2004: 135). Since different studies focus on distinct theoretical issues and movements, Meyer continues, "analysts talk past each other" (2004: 135). For instance, studies stressing "big" opportunities (shifts in relatively stable structures and values) do not engage with those focused on "small" opportunities (shifts in more volatile attitudes, policies, and practices). Diverging methodologies further complicate debates; comparative studies of social systems and movements tend to highlight big opportunities, while studies tracking single movements over time, highlight small opportunities.

More fundamentally, theorists begin with divergent definitions of collective action and collective actors. Some focus only on collective acts of protest, others on action in the political arena, while others include cultural and economic dimensions. In defining collective actors, some studies vaguely refer to challengers while others may focus on individual activists, social movement organizations, coalitions, or whole social movements. Without much uniformity regarding what constitutes collective action or actors, it remains hard to generalize about intentional agency—how collective actors share perceptions, reach common cause, act and reflect together as a collective force:

> The presumption underneath a political opportunity approach is that the development of movements reflects, responds to, and sometimes alters the realities of politics and policy although most work gives short shrift to how. (Meyer 2004:139)

Criticizing theorizing that ignores collective actors' intent, Flacks (2005) agrees,

> It is surprising how rarely the historical studies that constitute the canon of the political opportunity (PO) perspective focus on the ways activists, in the movements being studied, understood and determined their own opportunities. Indeed, how organizers figure out their opportunities, and how movements expand on them is largely unstudied and untheorized.

As yet, he concludes, "the concept of 'political opportunity' provides little help in deciding what opportunities may actually be germane to what sort of mobilizing effort" (Flacks 2005).

To ground the debate over the nature of opportunity, Flacks urges that theorists follow the collective actor, a proposal resonant with Morris' (2000) suggestion that theorists study the processes that form and sustain collective actors. In line with both Flacks and Morris, Alimi (2003, 2004) demonstrates how Palestinian framers in the occupied territories in the years preceding the "first" Intifada utilized both print media and grassroots mobilization to construct a shared Palestinian perception of growing divisions in Israel regarding the continued Israeli occupation. Alimi argues that this internal Palestinian discourse was a critical component of Palestinians' reassessment of opportunity and that this discourse contributed to Palestinian mobilization; Palestinian organizations' shifting assessments of opportunities catalyzed increaseingly overt conflicts with the Israeli state.

We share Alimi's interest in tracking how small opportunities, strategically nurtured by collective actors over time, can expand into bigger opportunities for more permanent structural changes. This longitudinal study of the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence, a statewide organization representing opponents to domestic violence, tracks how they negotiated media opportunities by strengthening their internal communication capacity and broadening relationships. As RICADV negotiated with media outlets to strengthen its media standing, it expanded opportunities to promote its oppositional frame via mainstream news outlets.

MEDIA OPPORTUNITY

Mass media form the "master forum" (Gamson 1998) of our historical period. Yet for social movements, U.S. corporatized mass media markets offer limited access (Gans 2003; Herman and Chomsky 1988; McChesney 1999). To gain media standing, actors raising counterhegemonic perspectives as well as actors marginalized by inequalities such as race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship or age must overcome barriers institutionalized in news gathering routines; pressured to produce fast, interesting stories that avoid legal controversies, journalists gravitate toward sources widely deemed "reliable," and avoid marginalized constituencies (hooks 1992; Huesca 1996; Van Dijk 1996).

Sourcing decisions are political; in choosing sources, reporters decided whose accounts count. When accounts count, their sponsors gain visibility and options to press for added power. When accounts do not count, their proponents remain beyond the public eye; they lack credibility and their framings of reality remain marginal.

Individual activists and informal groups can master the skills and resources needed for occasional media appearances. Becoming a routine source in a market-driven mass media system, however, requires the sustainable energy of a collective actor with social and material capital far exceeding that of an individual activist or an informal group. To sustain a routine working relationship with media outlets, e.g., function as a routine source, a collective actor must invest over time in communication capacity building so that media strategies[7] can enhance political strategies (Ryan 1991).

Movements' often paltry success establishing media capacity and gaining media standing provides anecdotal support for "strong hegemony" approaches (Herman and Chomsky 1988; McChesney 1999; Gans 2003) that document how modern mass media structures con-strain democratic discourse. While fully accepting these structural constraints, RICADV and MRAP build their work on weaker hegemony approaches that stress agent-focused opportunities for changing media (Barker-Plummer 1996; Ryan, Carragee and Schwerner 1998). In adopting a weaker hegemony model, collective actors strategically assess their options and weigh their resources and networks against the dangers and pressures of structural inequalities (Ganz 2004; Jasper 2004). Raymond Williams calls this reflexive strategizing, "options under pressure" (Williams in Wood 1996:106). Applying a similar approach to media-movement interactions,

weaker hegemony adherent Barker-Plummer calls for a dialogic approach to relations between movements and reporters that can acknowledge collective actors' reflexivity:

> A dialogic approach looks for two-way influences from any interaction, and it assumes the participants in any interaction can learn about and use the resources of the other— especially if those resources are discursive knowledge resources. . . . Seeing the media-movement relationship as two-way does not preclude it from being an imbalanced interaction, nor deny that one organization holds more power than the other. A dialogic model comes with no guarantees. . . . But to say that a relationship is difficult, complex, subtle and unbalanced is not to say that its outcomes are inevitable. (1996: 33)

Highlighting intentional interactions embedded in historically shaped inequalities, Barker-Plummer's dialogic approach resonates with theorists stressing relationships and coalitions (Diani 2000; Bystydzienski and Schacht 2001), discourse (Steinberg 1999), power (Carragee and Roefs 2004), strategy (Alimi 2004; Gamson 1990; Jasper 2004; Ganz 2003), reflexivity (Fonow and Cook 1991), and collective processes and infrastructure (Morris 2000 and Kurtz 2002).

Like Steinberg's historically embedded discourse analyses, Barker-Plummer's dialogic approach recognizes that, at heart, social change involves actors communicating—developing strategies by airing grievances, testing challenges, negotiating conflicts, lobbying allies, evaluating accomplishments, and sharing lessons. As relations deepen and collaborations widen, the collective actor extends its power, gaining standing in widening circles.[8] Like Klandermans (1992) and Gamson and Meyer (1996), Barker-Plummer calls for longitudinal studies of media opportunity:

> Movement and media interactions play out over time. Only by studying these interactions across time can we track the influence of one discourse on the other. Short term studies that declare a critical movement or discourse to have been marginalized and thus to have 'failed' in the short terms, may be missing some of the most important effects. (1996: 32)

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AS AN ISSUE CULTURE

Meyer (2004) flags the value of an "issue-specific conceptualization" (132) of opportunity, an insight of particular importance for the collective actor negotiating media opportunities. Historically rooted framing contests start with the existing issue culture (Gamson 1992). Domestic violence advocates today build on previous decades of organizing that successfully established domestic violence as a social problem worthy of public and media attention (Bart and Moran 1993; Tierney 1983).

While the movement against domestic violence has established public awareness of domestic violence, media coverage does not consistently adopt the movement's framing of the issue—that ending domestic violence requires social intervention. To the contrary, researchers have identified the following recurring problems with existing coverage:

- News suggests victims, at least partially, are responsible for their fate (Meyers 1997).
- Inscribed as crime news, domestic violence reports focus on the sensational. Reporters revert to predetermined framings such as "tragic love goes awry" (Jones 1994; Meyers 1997).
- In an exculpatory search for perpetrator's motive, domestic violence is psychologized and individuated. (Pagelow 1981; Soothill and Walby 1991).
- Coverage focuses on perpetrators' motives and victims disappear (Meyers 1997).

- Coverage obscures social dimensions of domestic violence—ways that society produces and promotes violence against women (Bart and Moran 1993).

Coverage patterns also vary by beat. A Living Page reporter may describe a new domestic violence shelter sympathetically, yet, re-assigned to the crime beat, may revert to traditional crime reporting lacking substantive insight into underlying issues (Kaniss 1997; Iyengar 1991; Berkeley Media Studies Group 2000). Crime news' common severing of problem from causality undermines efforts to change public policy and consciousness (Loseke 1989), leaving past and potential victims isolated; atomized victims struggle for protection while the social roots of domestic violence remain obscured (Meyers 1997). To address these problems, advocates and researchers have urged:

- Changes in news practices: (Benedict 1992; Byerly 1994; Jones 1994; Meyers 1997; RICADV 2000);
- Changes in journalist training (Byerly 1994; Jones 1994; Berkeley Media Studies Group 2003);
- Journalistic guidelines regarding domestic violence coverage (Benedict 1992; Johnson 1994; Meyers 1997).

Though practical and compelling, the recommendations do not address the barriers to change inherent in a market-driven news industry. While some argue that newsgathering practices can change (Meyers 1992), media critics generally concur that corporate mass media systems bedevil reform efforts (Gans 2003; Herman and Chomsky 1988; McChesney1999) unless grounded in strong collective efforts (Croteau and Hoynes 2001; Ryan 2005). Thus, despite their practicality, the reforms proposed above remain a critique. It would take a collective actor to translate the critique into an intervention strategy, to develop the relational ties and networks (Diani 2000) needed to implement that strategy and distill lessons. In 1996, RICADV decided to attempt such an intervention.

METHODS AND FINDINGS

MRAP's preliminary study (RICADV 2000) found that existing news coverage sensationalized domestic violence murders while framing them as private tragedies. RICADV was eager to replace this individuated framing with its frame conceptualizing domestic violence as a social problem, "everybody's business." To negotiate wider opportunities for promoting this social frame, RICADV worked to improve its media standing as a routine news sources for reporters, a goal involving internal strengthening and external relation building. Positioning ourselves as theorists and activists working with RICADV,[9] we tracked RICADV's decision making and strategizing, its actions and reflections. We wanted to explore how intentional collective actors strategize to gain opportunity, an issue on which many studies remain "agnostic" (Meyer 2004: 139).

Conceptualizing the research

To conduct an actor-centered, longitudinal study, we needed to resolve questions of scale, scope, and duration, and to identify outcomes that would serve as measures of media standing. Regarding scale, RICADV represented a collective actor working within interacting political and media arenas (Rucht 1988; Ferree, Gamson, Gerhard and Rucht 2002); as a statewide coalition, RICADV was mandated to work for change in Rhode Island social policy, its political catchment area coinciding with the geographical area covered by the Rhode Island media market.[10] The research's scope was RICADV's communications work driven by two goals—

solidifying media standing and expanding media opportunities in the Rhode Island media market. To track the development of RICADV's growing communication capacity, we coupled qualitative methods with quantitative content analysis assessing RICADV's shifting influence on domestic violence murder coverage.

Our estimates of duration were informed by previous MRAP research that it took years not months for a social movement organization to become a routine source (Ryan 1991). Collective actors need to train staff and spokespersons, develop and refine internal and external communications systems, prepare messages and establish standing with reporters as a consistent and reliable source; while added resources can speed some processes, relation-building occurs in real time and the process can not be rushed.

Qualitative Approaches

As do individual activists, collective actors have life histories. To track the collective actor RICADV's growing communication capacity, we broadened life-history methods, which are gernerally understood as:

> Oral in-depth interviews conducted by a researcher within the framework of a research project. Thus life histories involve interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee and involve a scientific intention in the telling of a story. (della Porta 1992: 169)

Our collective life history approach involved thirty hours of oral in-depth group interviews with staff, survivors, coalition members, interns etc. These were transcribed, reviewed by participants, and augmented by archival research, participant observation, and individual inter-views. The resulting collective life history tracks RICADV's conscious efforts to establish good working relationships with journalists (media standing) and, how it turned that standing into new opportunities in its media market.

Qualitative Findings

We began our life history of the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV) in 1996 when the organization, rooted in the Rhode Island women's movement, crafted a strategic plan to forward its mission of ending domestic violence in Rhode Island.[11] In winter of 1996, RICADV hired a full-time communications coordinator, Karen Jeffreys, and charged her with developing and overseeing RICADV communications initiatives, including both mass media and grassroots outreach.

A seasoned community organizer, Jeffreys took a movement-building approach to communications. She reasoned that those directly affected by domestic violence—victims and survivors—should be at the heart of setting the movement's directions. Starting there, Jeffreys worked to establish diverse networks of communication and support. "Everyone is a communicator," was our slogan. To ensure group participation, Jeffreys translated MRAP's framing work into a collective process, dubbed as the "media caucus" at RICADV (Ryan 2005). Other media systems included a communication plan, media protocols,[12] and a rapid response team at the organizational level. Jeffreys began to build RICADV's communications infrastructure and then worked with staff and members to map a communications strategy resonant with its overall strategy. Jeffreys called what she did "public relations," but her approach was far from the popular understanding of "PR" as sound-bite-driven marketing. She conceptualized public relations as genuinely relating to one's publics, i.e., creating working relationships with all constituencies relevant for RICADV's mission of ending domestic violence in Rhode Island. Jeffreys also brought to RICADV her existing ties to the Media Research and Action Project (MRAP). Based on prior experience, MRAP estimated it would take five to seven years to

Table 1. Time Line of RICADV's Growing Communication Capacity 1996-2002

BASELINE —JANUARY 1, 1966	
January l, 1996	RICADV cannot respond easily to external events/crises. It has a short, rudimentary list of press reporters but media coverage is sporadic. RICADV decides to strategically plan and develop communications capacity.
CLUSTER ONE—3 MURDERS APRIL – MAY 1996	
Year 1 (1996)	RICADV creates strategic plan. Hires first communications staff (Karen Jeffreys). Conducts communications needs assessment with member groups. Establishes communication infrastructure – media data base, protocol, monitoring, etc.
Year 2 (1997)	RICADV creates a collective framing process called a media caucus. Interns expand labor resources. Media database becomes more organized. First public awareness campaign, Act Now. Survivors speak publicly and organize first events.
Year 3 (1998)	Survivor work expands. First communication plan developed to promote strategic goals. RICADV computerizes media database. Media caucus develops first statewide campaign. Second (part-time) communications staff hired (Alice Trimiew). RICADV clarifies decision-making practices. Articulates core values as respect, diversity, and equality.
Year 4 (1999)	Functioning as an agency-laden institution, RICADV offers to smaller member groups communications support: media databases, monitoring, writing press releases, faxing, etc. RICADV develops cultural agreements around diversity. Materials developed in English and Spanish. Survivor speakers' bureau developed.
CLUSTER TWO—3 MURDERS AUGUST – SEPTEMBER 1999	
Year 5 (2000)	RICADV helps a member group oust state representative who batters girlfriend. RICADV publishes *Handbook for Journalists,* strengthens ongoing ties with journalists. RICADV strengthens relations with courts. Gives reporters court records. Strengthening national networks, RICADV joins national committee.
Year 6 (2001)	Coalition deepens its attention to diversity issues in domestic violence work. RICADV now can respond to external events rapidly. When murder occurs, RICADV now calls police and reporters with crime clarification.
CLUSTER THREE—3 MURDERS FEBRUARY – MARCH 2002	
Year 7 (2002)	Electronic media database has 800 contacts dividable by region, beat, topic, outlet, etc. RICADV now responds easily and rapidly to external events/crises. Rapid response systems include media caucus, court research database, survivor speaker's bureau, etc. RICADV successfully conveys proactive framing of murder clusters as not just individual tragedies but as symptoms of need to fix community safety net. Using relations with court, police, legislators, and member agencies, RICADV leads policy initiative in wake of cluster of three murders. Helps to pass legislation August 2002. RICADV shares its systems with 37 states. Public education campaigns go national.

Table 2. Murder Clusters as Critical Discourse Materials

Year	Number of Cases	Period when Murders Occurred	Interval
Cluster 1 – 1996	3 murder cases	April 21 to May 20, 1996	5 weeks
Cluster 2 – 1999	3 murder cases	August 1 to September 19, 1999	7 weeks
Cluster 3 – 2002	3 murder cases	February 15 to March 19, 2002	5 weeks

establish RICADV as a routine source. To establish a baseline of information, the partners began to monitor existing news coverage of domestic violence. RICADV interns combed the news clips to identify reporters covering domestic violence-related beats. Using the same news clippings, MRAP analyzed media framings of domestic violence.

At the same time, Jeffreys and other staff with roots in the Black Liberation and feminist movements began to strengthen RICADV's ability to make decisions collectively through solidarity building practices focused on core values and world view, diversity and conflict resolution practices.[13] With internal capacity to dialog and resolve differences reinforced, RICADV then developed a communications plan, a collective framing process dubbed a media caucus, media trainings and other media systems.

As internal and external communications capacity grew, RICADV gained media standing. In 1996, RICADV had not gained access to media coverage when an external crisis—a cluster of three domestic violence murders—occurred. Three years later in 1999, RICADV *could* influence media coverage of a similar murder cluster. By 2002, RICADV turned a murder cluster into a media opportunity, and then a political opportunity, a legislative campaign to reform Rhode Island's domestic-violence laws. Furthermore, on a state and national level, RICADV was functioning as a small agency-laden institution (Morris 2000) supporting other collective actors' media capacity building (see table 1).

QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES

While increased calls from reporters suggested that RICADV's media standing had grown, we hadn't assessed that growth systematically. To do so, we decided to measure shifts in RICADV's rapid response capacity—its ability to influence unplanned events. The obvious beginning point was RICADV's 1996 decision to intensify communication work. As a closing point, we chose 2002 when RICADV concluded that, within the Rhode Island media market, it had achieved its goal of becoming an indispensable source of news and information regarding domestic violence. To measure ability to respond quickly to outside, unpredictable events we looked for possible critical discourse moments (Chilton 1987). We settled on three comparable clusters of domestic violence murders. Each cluster involved three independent domestic violence murder cases that had occurred in a compressed time period—five to seven weeks. Moreover, the three murder clusters had occurred at three-year intervals at the beginning, middle and end of our proposed study.

We measure growth of RICADV's media standing in terms of its capacity to use the critical discourse moment to introduce the domestic violence movement's perspectives via the language and the sources that reporters use.

Study Design and Methods

MRAP's preliminary frame analysis of domestic violence murder coverage RICADV 2000), found that coverage stopped framing domestic violence murders as "private family tragedy" or "love gone awry" when the murder was labeled as domestic violence and when

domestic violence advocates or experts were quoted. Based on these findings, RICADV decided to urge reporters to adopt two changes in journalistic practice: first, to use the words, 'domestic violence' if speaking about violence between intimates in order to set context (RICADV 2000: 6-2); and second, to downplay or use selectively sources who stress the personal, tragic aspects of domestic violence (family, neighbors, random bystanders). Instead, RICADV urged reporters to seek sources who discuss domestic violence murder—and its prevention—in its social context. In short, police, domestic violence survivors, advocates, or other experts can frame domestic violence more broadly than family and bystanders. (RICADV 2000: 6-9)

To analyze RICADV's progress vis-à-vis these changes, we measured the use of domestic violence language and sourcing patterns after three comparable clusters of domestic violence murders. The first cluster in 1996, serves as a baseline occurring before RICADV established systematic communications infrastructure and practices. The 1999 cluster and the 2002 cluster provide measures at three-year intervals.

Sample Selection

Using a news-clipping service, we surveyed all weekly and daily papers, in the Rhode Island media market for coverage of any domestic violence murder[14] that occurred between 1996 and 2002. Crosschecking the sample against Lexis-Nexis, we identified 275 stories addressing the 22 domestic violence murder cases that occurred in Rhode Island between 1996 and 2002.

From this sample we selected a subset of murder cases that occurred in comparable conditions; in each case, a cluster of three murder cases in less than two months. Spaced at three-year intervals (1996, 1999, 2002), the clusters represent the seven-year time period over which RICADV established a communication staff, strategy and infrastructure. Thus, the clusters permit us to contrast changes in coverage against the incremental growth of RICADV's communication capacity. We treated each cluster of murders as one critical discourse moment (Chilton 1987).

We focused on murders rather than incidents of domestic violence more generally for several reasons. Use of murders ensured that the issue met news criteria. Murders could be identified irrefutably as domestic violence (as contrasted to domestic violence incidents that are contested by either party). Finally, murder stories represented a clear example of unplanned crisis coverage. As such, murder stories were a good measure of RICADV's ability to take advantage of an external, unanticipated media opportunity. Moreover, a cluster of murders occurring in close proximity, we hypothesized, might create a media opportunity; reporters might be more open to domestic violence advocates highlighting the murders' common features: in domestic violence murders, usually there is a history of violence, others besides the victim know about it, and existing prevention systems fail.

Our focus on local print media reflects communications scholars' findings that local news provides the most common journalistic venue for domestic violence crimes since they are usually deemed of mostly local interest (Meyers 1997; Loseke 1989). National media, covering only the most egregious or unusual domestic violence murder cases, offer a less reliable arena for evaluating coverage patterns. Our focus on print media grows from Kaniss' (1997) finding that local print news outlets serve as kingmakers directly impacting politicians, police and other institutions. Broadcast news, Kaniss finds, generally trails print coverage, the longer print accounts providing raw material for broadcasts' shorter "headline" versions of events.

Coder Training and Content Variables

We trained two teams, each comprised of three coders, to identify both the patterns of sources and the kinds of domestic-violence language used in the newspaper articles. Post-

training, intercoder reliability averaged .92. We compared the reporters' choices of lead and key sources and articles' use of domestic violence language. Removing advocate/activist sources from the sample, we looked for use of domestic violence language by nonadvocate sources and reporters. This article compares media coverage of each of the murder clusters in relation to our two key variables—journalists' choice of language to describe the murders and journalists' choice of sources.

To analyze journalists' choice of language describing domestic violence murders, we first reviewed RICADV press releases for each murder. From these press releases we created a glossary of common phrases used by advocates vis-à-vis the murders.[15] Each news article was then coded for reporters' incorporation of language that corresponded to the advocates' domestic violence message. Coders documented where and how often the term appeared. Each story was coded three times, each time by an independent coder. A final coding reviewed all cases for consistency, data entry errors, etc. Intercoder reliability exceeded .90.

Positing that journalists use sources to shape the story line (Soley 1992), we also studied source patterns. We coded articles for all quoted sources, identified by relationship to the crime (e.g., police, domestic violence advocate, bystander, victim, victim's family, friend, co-worker; perpetrator; perpetrator's family, friend, coworker, and so on). The police category included court professionals. The advocate category included survivors and all others involved in domestic violence work or activism. We focused this analysis on sources used in lead quotes and key quotes.[16]

CONTENT ANALYSIS: FINDINGS

A comparison of news coverage of the 1996, 1999, and 2002 murder clusters reveals significant changes in reporters' use of domestic violence language and sourcing patterns.

Domestic Violence Language

In news articles covering the first cluster of domestic violence murders, there were only 0.57 references per article to domestic violence, i.e., on average, less than one reference per article. By 1999, news stories, however, were averaging five references to domestic violence per article, roughly a seven-fold increase ($t(32.4) = 3.2$, $p = .003$). After the publication of the handbook for journalists, subsequent dialogue and relation building, references to domestic Violence rose to ten per article. This doubled the reference per article rate from 1999 ($t(133) = 2.6$, $p = .01$). Measuring change from the baseline year of 1996, however, 2002 figures represent a sixteen-fold increase ($t(82.2) = 9.4$, $p = .001$). Table 3 summarizes these increases.

Sourcing Patterns

To analyze trends in sourcing patterns, we studied shifts in lead source and shifts in key sources.[17] The lead source was the first source cited in the article. *No news story covering the*

Table 3. Domestic Violence Language in News Articles Compared for Three-Year Intervals

Year	Average Number of References to Domestic Violence per Article
1996 – cluster 1	.57
1999 – cluster 2	5.0 (c1→c2, p=.003)[a]
2002 – cluster 3	10.0 (c2→c3 p=.01) (c1→c3 p=.001)

Note: [a] c = cluster

1996 cluster of murders quoted a domestic violence advocate as lead source. The majority of lead sources at this point were police, victim's relations (family, friend, coworker), perpetrator's relations (family, friends, coworkers) and bystanders (the proverbial "man on the street" interview). Police and victim's relations, tied for the most common lead source; 28.6% of the 1996 stories lead with a quote from the police or from victim's family, neighbors, or coworkers. Similarly bystanders and perpetrator's relations split second place at 7.1% and 7% respectively.

By 1999, the situation had changed. In print coverage of the second cluster of murders, advocates rose from invisibility to become reporters' most common lead source; 30.8% of articles quoted an advocate (A) as their lead source. Reporters continued to use police as the lead source but to a lesser extent (P = 19.2%). Reporters dramatically *decreased* their use of victim's relations and perpetrator's relations as lead sources; by the second cluster of murders, use of victim's relations (V) had dropped to 7.6% and no perpetrator's relations were quoted. Reporters, however, continued to solicit reactions from random by-passers. (B = 11.5%)

2002 coverage demonstrates further changes. Advocates and police have remained the two most common lead sources. Reporters' preference for advocates as lead source has continued to rise (40.3%) but reporters' use of police sources has increased as well; in the third cluster of murders reporters cite police as lead source almost as frequently as in 1996 (24.8%). The additional visibility garnered by advocates drew, therefore, not from police but from bystander sources.

A graphical representation of trends in lead source citation can be found in figure 1. Besides lead sources, we analyzed all key sources—sources quoted in the first three or last paragraphs or quoted for at least one paragraph—coding them again by their relationship to the murder. Changes in sourcing patterns for key sources were virtually identical to those cited for lead sources above.

Changes in the Culture

Since advocates routinely use domestic violence language, we expected an increase in use of domestic violence advocates as lead or key sources might result in a concomitant increase in domestic violence language. This would tell us that domestic violence advocates had become more visible in public discourse but would not mean that other public voices had embraced domestic violence language. To test whether reporters and/or other sources—police, bystanders, victim's families—increased *their* use of domestic violence language over the six-year period, we created a dummy variable that removed all articles citing advocates as sources. Using the resulting "nonadvocate" subsample, we conducted an independent sample T-test to determine the means for domestic violence citations when advocates are not quoted.

In table 5 we see that for the nonadvocate subsample, the 1996 mean for domestic violence citations remained at .57, less than one reference per article. The 1999 mean dropped

Table 4. Shifts in Lead Source Patterns 1999–2002

Lead Source	Articles Using Lead Source (% of N)		
	1996	*1999*	*2002*
Police or court-related	28.6	19.2	24.8
Domestic violence adocate or activist	0.0	30.8	40.3
Victims's family, neighbors, coworkers	28.6	7.6	6.4
Bystander – no relation to victim or perpetrator	7.1	11.5	9.0
Perpertrator's family, neighbors, coworkers	7.0	0.0	9.0
Total	*N = 14*	*N = 26*	*N = 109*

Note: N = number of articles with quotes.

Figure 1. Trends in Lead-Source Citations

Police – - – - – Advocates —— Bystanders ·········· Victim's family, friends, neighbors, coworkers – – –
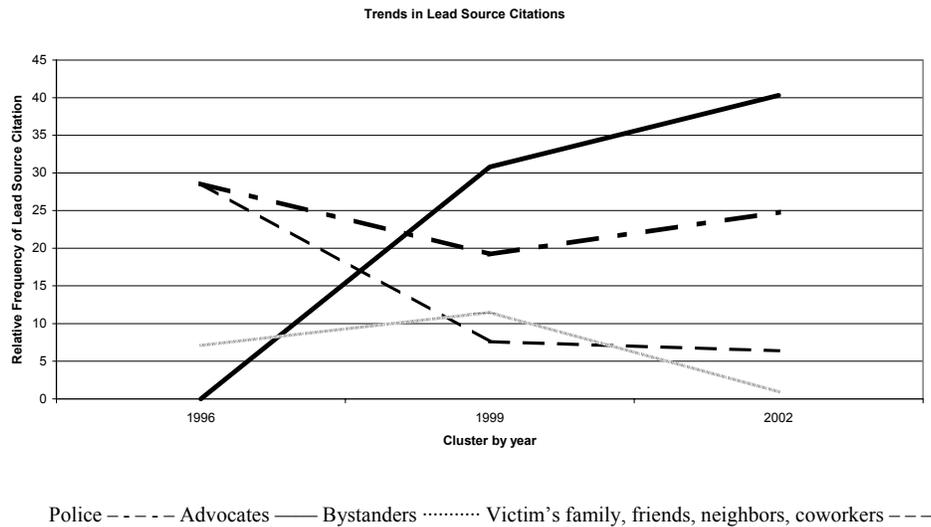
to .25, a minor decrease. In other words, when advocates are removed from the 1999 sub-sample, reporters average one reference to domestic violence in every four articles. Thus, most domestic violence language in the 1999 cluster—five references per article on average—was attributable to advocate sources. For the 2002 cluster, however, the mean number of domestic violence citations grew to 5.75 per article—even with advocates removed from the sample. Thus, by 2002, reporters and nonadvocate sources had increased use of domestic violence language ten-fold (.57 in 1996 to 5.75 in 2002) (t(41.9) = 6.3, p = .001).

In sum, our findings suggest that by the third cluster of murders in 2002, reporters adopted the newsgathering practices suggested by the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence in several critical ways. Articles identifying the murder of intimate partners as domestic violence rose. Sources representing domestic violence advocates increased in both relative and absolute terms as did reporters' use of police and other expert sources. And while reporters continued to use neighbors, family, friends and co-workers as sources judiciously, they curtailed their use of casual bystanders. As a result, bystander and family sources dropped in frequency. In perhaps our most notable finding, even when advocate sources were removed from the sample, reporters and nonadvocate sources had increased their use of domestic violence language ten-fold between 1996 and 2002.

Table 5. Shift in Nonadvocate Use of Domestic Violence

Custer 1–1996	*Cluster 2–1999*	*Cluster 3–2002*
Mean = .57	Mean = .25	Mean = 5.75
N= 14 articles	N = 16 articles	N = 44 articles

DISCUSSION

Over seven years, Rhode Island domestic violence advocates achieved media standing, moving from obscurity to become routine sources for Rhode Island reporters. RICADV, working with MRAP, strategically negotiated this rise in media standing. When the 1996 murders occurred, RICADV did not have the capacity to respond. By 1999, RICADV had established a solid communications infrastructure that helped it navigate its media market; its systems facilitated rapid responses to crises and working relationships with reporters were growing. Building on MRAP's initial analysis of domestic violence murder coverage, RICADV opened dialogs with reporters.

As RICADV consolidated its communications infrastructure and built relationships, it became a routine source. Whereas, domestic violence advocates were invisible in newspapaer coverage of the 1996 murders, domestic violence advocates were the most prominent sources in the 1999 coverage. As sources changed, frames changed.

By 2002, RICADV's efforts in the Rhode Island media market over the previous six years had shifted the public discourse; nonadvocate sources, police for instance, and reporters themselves had begun to adopt domestic violence language. With broader constituencies framing domestic violence as a social issue, the state's residents and political leaders were readied for the RICADV-led Seven-Point Plan that reformed state policy vis-à-vis domestic violence. The use of domestic violence language by sources other than domestic violence advocates, therefore, suggests a broadened awareness of domestic violence and a culture shift supporting the proposed political change.

RICADV's expanded ability to transform comparable unforeseen events—murders—into media opportunities and ultimately political opportunities suggests that conceptualizing opportunity primarily as external is insufficient. As Klandermans (1992) and others suggest, seen from a longitudinal perspective, the process is more interactive and allows for conscious collective actors to expand their power. RICADV's intentional decision to develop a media strategy resulted in its hiring skilled staff who developed its internal and external communications capacity. This helped RICADV take advantage of existing media opportunities. These media opportunities, well utilized, built media standing. Reporters came to trust RICADV, deeming its events "must-attend."

As its media standing grew, RICADV's ability to negotiate broader media opportunities grew beyond its original boundaries of the Rhode Island media market. RICADV has already shared its approaches with 37 states. Its public awareness campaigns have been adopted nationally for three years and it is now working with a national coalition to replicate its communications systems nationally.

If RICADV had over-emphasized the very real structural barriers to gaining media standing, it would not have taken its first steps. If it had under-emphasized the structural barriers, it would not have sustained a seven-year labor—a sprinter ill-prepared for a test of endurance. Believing that it could make its accounts count, RICADV worked incrementally to strengthen its capacity to respond to unfolding events.

Its ability to navigate the Rhode Island media market helped RICADV deepen its network of relationships with allies and reporters (Diani 2000). As RICADV proved useful, reporters' estimation of the group as a valued news source—its media standing—grew. To the concept of media opportunity, therefore, the concepts of media capacity and media standing add recognition of the advantage of the organizationally stable collective actor over individuals and less formally organized challengers.[18]

A collective actor's media standing is not so easily lost as to be called "volatile," nor are existing hegemonic structures so impermeable that collective actors must wait for opportunity as if it were a state lottery. While individual, isolated challenges to corporate mass media rarely succeed, a collective actor operating strategically and reflexively over time can accrue media standing if it builds sustainable communication infrastructure and relations

suited its media market(s).

This study also suggests the importance of locating structural challenges at local, state, or national levels depending on the collective actor's level of development. In our case, a statewide collective actor successfully breached structural barriers in a state-level media market. Had RICADV, as a state-level collective actor new to media organizing simply entered the national media fray without attention to analyzing market structures or its resources, they would have found the barriers facing them insurmountable. Breaking structural critiques of the corporate-dominated media arena into its component markets makes local, state, and regional challenges viable. Replicated, challenges in individual media markets provide the infrastructure to sustain a national challenge. Thus, our work moves us to define opportunity not as residing in structure or agency but in historical conjunctures—strategic fits that allow the intentional collective actor to craft a challenge to relations of domination suited to its resources and historical position.

While in our case, the right fit was a regional challenge in a regional market by a regional actor, the question of scale is historically variable. In the early stages of a social movement, smaller collective actors working on a limited scale may dominate. If theorists ignore how these early stages accrue to catalyze political sea changes, the theories they manufacture may miss how collective actors identify strategic opportunities appropriate for their historical moment. They may present institutionalized power as impenetrable rather than understanding that social relations and processes are vulnerable to challenge and change over time.

We have noted that by 2002, RICADV used the third cluster of domestic violence murders not only as a media opportunity, but to launch a successful political initiative, the Seven Point Plan. As political leaders look to the media to reach their constituents, media opportunity becomes inextricably linked to political opportunity. While here we emphasize media opportunity, political opportunity forms the ever-present background that, like an M.D. Escher drawing, shifts to the foreground with the blink of an eye. Since RICADV's 2002 media strategy represented one of many strategies used to pass the Seven-Point Plan—legislative lobbying, grassroots mobilizing, coalition-building—we hesitate to conjecture too broadly regarding the impact of media standing on political opportunity apart from a full analysis of the campaign.

CONCLUSION

Social movements and their participating collective actors start with seemingly impossible goals—to create macro shifts in social structures. By organizing strategically with support from agency-laden institutions, collective actors gain tensile strength over time—despite pressure from existing structural arrangements, they find opportunities and turn them into bigger ones. For an intentional, reflexive strategic actor, a little meeting on creaky chairs in a musty, echoing church basement can represent an increase in opportunity, its participants respected allies. In challenging hegemony lived (Williams 1977), in learning and growing from experiences even on a small scale, a collective actor creates tantalizing tastes of counter-hegemony lived.

Critical to the collective actor's growth is the formation of a strategy and infrastructure that will guide and support action over time; intentional actors, social movement organizations channel the limited resources of many to mount focused challenges to existing structures. The reflective collective actor grows as it reflects on its experience, a process in which theorists may be useful.

This article represents the collaborative reflections of RICADV and MRAP working within a one media market to nurture internal and external communication capacity and leverage that growth into broader media standing and opportunity. That reporters bestowed media standing on RICADV fits our historical times. In the wake of the civil rights movement

and other counter-hegemonic movements and now, with the rising tide of conservative mobilizations, reporters recognize social movement organizations as recurring players in American life.[19] U.S. residents today may not be startled to hear their nation labeled a "social movement society" (Meyer and Tarrow 1998).

The 1996 launching of *Mobilization* signaled a parallel emergence of social movement studies as an institutionalized field of social science. Ironically, social movement theorists may work with social movements less than reporters. While reporters recognize social movements as permanent features of American society, social movement theorist remain relatively isolated from activists, an isolation all the more troubling because activist-theorist collaborations might provided insights into outstanding theoretical tangles (Flacks 2005; Croteau 2005). To illustrate the opportunities such collaborations present, we offer our experience. In the coming decade of *Mobilization,* this opportunity beckons all takers.

ENDNOTES

[1] Reported to RICADV in a 2002 phone survey of all state coalitions (unpublished 2002).

[2] MRAP adapted Aldon Morris's movement half-way house model (1984).

[3] In this project, Charlotte Ryan served as lead researcher and Michael Anastario coordinated data entry and analysis. Karen Jeffreys organized the collective interviews and supervised RICADV interns, Mao Yang and Sarah DeCataldo who compiled the media sample.

[4] We use man intentionally; 8 of 9 perpetrators were men.

[5] Mapping influences is beyond this paper's scope, but team members routinely drew lessons from the civil rights movement, Freirian participatory movements, and women's movements especially Black Feminism.

[6] Collective actors also recognize this tension. The 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic, for instance, announces that the rebels (the Provisional Government), "waited for the right moment" to declare independence, but also explains that the uprising created "the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government."

[7] While this paper focuses on RICADV's work in mainstream media, RICADV's full communications strategy embraced interpersonal communication, alternative and opposition media, direct action, and many other tactics that shifted with the audience targeted.

[8] The dialogic approach parallels participatory communication models emerging in the global South that include access to media as an indispensable element of "the right and power to intervene in the social order and change it through political praxis" (Freire1994: 12).

[9] We aggregate references to RICADV and other groups working against domestic violence in Rhode Island all of whom signed a formal media protocol with RICADV that specified which groups would lead in which circumstances. As part of protocol, RICADV provided communications infrastructure and training for all.

[10] In contrast, some state coalitions cover two or more media markets, and a handful cover portions of states.

[11] Rhode Island's 1988 Domestic Violence Prevention Act, General Laws 12-29-1 et al., defines domestic violence murder as involving household members or family (including former lovers and spouses).

[12] A media protocol specifies roles and responsibilities in responding to a reporter's calls.

[13] Studies of U.S. social movements underestimate the legacy of past movements in part because U.S. movements themselves inconsistently distill inter-generational and inter-movement legacies.

[14] In defining domestic violence murder, we follow the above-cited Rhode Island General Laws 12-29-1.

[15] Coded phrases included domestic violence, domestic abuse, domestic violence murder, battering, restraining order, domestic violence unit, etc. Not included were, "violence, abuse, murder" if the words appeared in isolation from the word, "domestic." Mention of domestic violence advocacy organizations and shelters was also coded.

[16] The first source cited was coded as "lead." Sources quoted in the first three or last paragraphs or quoted for at least one paragraph were labeled, "key." Any remaining sources, often not identified, were coded, "secondary." Analysis of key and secondary sources showed no countervailing patterns.

[17] Given that our purpose here is to provide a description of the sub-sample, we did not conduct a T-test.

[18] Social movements typically include free-floating radicals as well as transient organizational formations that piggyback on institutional gains wrought by more established groups. RICADV created coalitional formations that helped it share communications resources with less organized groups.

[19] How conservative mobilizations in the United States over four decades leveraged initially limited communications capacity into national and international capacity warrants detailed attention.

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