

GETTING THE STORY STRAIGHT: NEWSPAPER REPORTERS' DECISION MAKING
PROCESSES IN COVERAGE OF SAME-SEX MARRIAGE AT *THE* (DURHAM)
HERALD-SUN AND *THE* (RALEIGH) *NEWS & OBSERVER*

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ABSTRACT

GRACE CAMBLOS: Getting the Story Straight: Newspaper Reporters' Decision Making Processes in Coverage of Same-Sex Marriage at *The* (Durham) *Herald-Sun* and *The* (Raleigh) *News & Observer*.
(Under the direction of Jan Yopp)

This study examines framing choices made by journalists at *The* (Durham, N.C.) *Herald-Sun* and *The* (Raleigh, N.C.) *News & Observer* in coverage of same-sex marriage between January 1, 2004 and March 1, 2005. This study uses as its starting point a qualitative content analysis that found same-sex marriage articles in *The News & Observer* tended to use a conflict frame, while articles at *The Herald-Sun* used an LGBT-celebratory frame. In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with journalists from each paper who wrote or edited stories about same-sex marriage. Journalists were asked about their decision-making processes to determine why certain frames were used at each newspaper. While “news culture” factors such as news routines influenced perception of same-sex marriage as a conflict story at both newspapers, factors at the organizational level, such as newspaper resources and locations, ultimately had the most effect on framing.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Research Topic.....	1
Purpose Statement.....	4
Literature Review.....	7
Chapter Outline.....	22
II. CONTENT ANALYSIS FINDINGS.....	23
Summary of Findings.....	23
Relevance of Findings.....	31
Research Questions for Current Study.....	36
III. METHODOLOGY.....	38
Justification of the Research Method.....	38
Conducting In-Depth Interviews.....	39
Researcher's Role.....	42
Interviewing Editors and Reporters.....	44
Transcription and Analysis.....	47
IV. RESULTS.....	48
Introduction to Results.....	48
Individual-Level Factors.....	50

Organizational-Level Factors.....	55
News Culture Factors.....	66
Summary of Results.....	86
V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.....	87
Discussion.....	87
Conclusions.....	91
VI. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	95
Implications of the Research.....	95
Implications of Results for Coverage of Minorities.....	96
Recommendations for Improved Minority Coverage.....	101
APPENDICES.....	110
Appendix A: Coding Sheet.....	110
Appendix B: Initial Contact E-mail.....	112
Appendix C: Interview Guide.....	114
REFERENCES.....	117

Chapter 1: Introduction

Research Topic

A writer for *The News & Observer* in Raleigh, in an article on same-sex marriage, dubbed it the “issue du jour” of 2004 (Curliss, 2004, B4). After the Massachusetts Supreme Court’s controversial decision in 2003 granted full marriage rights to same-sex couples, the issue came to a head nationally in the months leading up to the November 2004 presidential election. In February of that year, officials in San Francisco, New York, Oregon, and elsewhere began marrying same-sex couples as acts of protest against their states’ laws. The marriages received widespread media coverage. In May of 2004, same-sex marriage became legal in Massachusetts (Easterbrook, 2004, A14). During the months leading up to Election Day, the issue of whether same-sex couples should be able to marry became a talking point for President Bush, who supported a proposed Constitutional amendment defining marriage as strictly a union between a man and a woman. After the election dust settled, Bush had been re-elected, 11 states had passed laws banning same-sex marriage, and some political analysts were pointing to same-sex marriage as a key wedge issue that helped Republicans garner more support (Stancill, 2004, B3).

While the issue was playing out in national politics, states such as North Carolina saw local battles and reactions in 2004. In North Carolina, Republican Sen. Jim Forrester drafted a bill that, had it passed, would have amended the state’s constitution and defined marriage in

North Carolina as a union between a man and a woman (Bonner, 2004, B1). One county over from the state capital, gay couple Richard Mullinax and Perry Pike sued Durham County after their application for a wedding license was turned down (Bridges, 2004, A1). Bowing to pressure from the City of Durham and Duke University, the YMCA of the Triangle¹ changed its rules to allow same-sex couples and their children to join for the price of a family membership (Ross, 2004, B6).

As the debate over same-sex marriage has escalated, advocates for and against same-sex marriage have been up in arms, with each side trying to win converts to its cause. Media stories about gay and lesbian rights issues have tended to pit these sides against one another in polarized, conflict-driven coverage (Aarons & Murphy, 2000; Murphy & Aarons, 2001; O'Donnell, 2004) that touched on the surface rhetoric of each side but failed to delve deeply into the reasons behind the two sides' positions. As Aarons and Murphy said in their report, *Lesbians and Gays in the Newsroom: 10 years later*, "Gay marriage stories that are pitched as sharply divided extremes shouting at one another may be viewed as incomplete" (2000, p. 12-13).

In North Carolina, coverage seemed no different. In a framing study of *The* (Durham) *Herald-Sun* and *The* (Raleigh) *News & Observer* that I undertook in spring, 2005, I found that reporters from *The News & Observer* relied on a "conflict" frame in five out of the 10 stories coded. These stories pitted LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) activists against conservative sources, focused on the groups' rhetoric rather than exploring issues important to both groups, and made little use of neutral sources for analysis.

¹ The "Triangle" area of North Carolina is comprised of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill and other towns (such as Carrboro and Cary) in between the larger cities.

However, I found that *The Herald-Sun* used a conflict frame in only one of the 10 stories coded and used an “LGBT celebratory” frame in eight out of 10 stories coded. This unexpected frame was characterized by a narrative based on LGBT sources, with the story often told from an LGBT point of view, positioning readers “inside” those sources’ heads. This frame also tended either to lack conservative sources altogether or to include only one or two conservative sources. The overall effect of this frame was to privilege LGBT points of view over conservative views.

Another interesting result was the two papers’ differing reliance on issues versus events to drive stories. Generally, issue-based coverage is seen as better and more thorough because by its very nature it explores in-depth the issues relating to sources’ positions. Event-based coverage, on the other hand, is seen as less thorough, because reporters using it focus on particular events to drive their stories and thus pay less attention to the issues underlying their sources’ positions (Steele, 1997, p. 90). *The News & Observer* ran more stories that were issue-based (six out of 10 coded) but only went beyond surface exploration of issues in four stories.² *The Herald-Sun*, on the other hand, more frequently ran event-based stories (eight out of 10 coded) but explored the issues in seven stories.³ These results were surprising, given that *The News & Observer* ran issue-based stories more frequently than *The Herald-Sun*, which initially would lead one to think that *The News & Observer* would delve more deeply into the issues raised in its coverage.

Although numbers are less conclusive in a qualitative study such as the one I conducted above than in a quantitative study, the results from my framing study seemed to indicate that *The Herald-Sun* was more “gay friendly” than *The News & Observer*, which

² *The News & Observer* explored issues “some” in two stories and “deeply” in two stories out of 10 stories coded.

³ *The Herald-Sun* explored issues “some” in six stories and “deeply” in one out of 10 coded.

offered a more mainstream, “balanced” approach to covering same-sex marriage. Given that the coverage in both papers informs readers’ opinions and ideas about the issue, it is important to discover why reporters at these two newspapers often employed different frames when covering the same issue, and also to explore the factors that led reporters and editors to focus on either events or issues in their coverage. Ideally media professionals should be thoughtful about the messages they send to their readers via the stories they report. Exploring the factors that influenced reporters’ coverage of same-sex marriage could allow editors and reporters to question assumptions they might hold about coverage of the LGBT community.

Purpose Statement

This thesis will investigate the reasons behind the framing choices that reporters and editors at the two main newspapers in the Triangle area of North Carolina made while covering same-sex marriage stories in 2004 and early 2005. This study is based on a qualitative content analysis which I conducted in the spring of 2005; The content analysis examined the frames used in same-sex marriage stories at both newspapers. In the current study, a series of in-depth interviews with reporters and editors at both newspapers will investigate the reasons behind reporters’ reliance on specific frames.

Particularly in a state split between liberal “blue” areas like the Triangle and more conservative, “red” rural areas,⁴ thorough coverage of controversial issues is important so that citizens have enough information to make informed decisions, both in the voting booths and in their lives. Simon and Xenos have argued that “political argumentation in the mass media...leads to deliberative outcomes that have substantial consequences in the real world” (2000, p. 363). Media portrayals of issues can influence the ways audiences come to see

⁴ See North Carolina State Board of Elections at <http://www.sboe.state.nc.us>.

those issues. In turn, audiences' perceptions influence not only their voting but even how people conduct their lives.

Additionally, several researchers have argued that media frames can have powerful influence over audiences' understanding of issues (Entman, 1993, p. 54; Simon & Xenos, 2000, 363-376), particularly where that understanding is shifting and unstable (Nelson, et al, 1997, p. 570). Thus it is helpful to examine the ways in which journalists are framing the debate over same-sex marriage. Newspapers in North Carolina's Triangle area make for a particularly interesting study because of the diversity of opinions there: liberal and conservative; pro-gay and anti-gay; pro-same-sex marriage and anti-same-sex marriage; or pro- or anti-civil unions (Shimron, 2005, A1; Biesecker, 2004, A1; Niolet & Blythe, 2004, B1).

The ways in which media frame same-sex marriage may influence the outcome of this hot-button social issue, as both LGBT and conservative sources have recognized: "Everything we do to get images of committed gay and lesbian couples before the public, the better off we'll be," said one LGBT advocate in describing his organization's strategy in advocating for same-sex marriage (Biesecker, 2004, p. A1); similarly, one conservative advocate noted that his calling was to inform people "that there are no connections between the homosexual agenda and the civil rights movement" (Easterbrook, 2004, p. A1).

With both LGBT-friendly and conservative advocates framing same-sex marriage in different ways, newspapers are vital playing sites of the clash between these competing frames. Plummer (2004) has argued that "the problem of conflicting or competing stories is a central political issue for the future," and that the playing out of these conflicts within media such as newspapers are part of "the process through which contemporary politics are

being rewritten” (p. 26). In crafting stories about same-sex marriage, reporters reflect the shifting cultural opinions regarding the issue, and their framing of same-sex marriage and the sources surrounding it may impact readers’ opinions and their very thoughts about both.

The question, “How have local newspapers presented same-sex marriage stories to their readers?” is important if we are to determine what sorts of stories media are constructing about same-sex marriage and its advocates and opponents. In answering this question, I looked at same-sex marriage stories that ran in the Triangle’s two main newspapers, *The News & Observer* and *The Durham Herald-Sun*, between Jan. 1, 2004, and March 1, 2005. I performed a qualitative analysis of these stories from a framing perspective, examining the stories in-depth to determine what news frames reporters used when presenting same-sex marriage to their readers. The results of this framing study are summarized above and will be discussed in depth in Chapter 2.

Furthermore, it is important to understand *why* newspapers are covering same-sex marriage stories in the ways that they are, so that change, if needed, can be made. The results of this study also will be relevant to advocacy groups who seek to influence media content: If they gain a better understanding of the processes journalists go through when deciding how to frame stories, they will be better able to influence those frames. What decisions do reporters make regarding sources and story angles when they report about same-sex marriage? And what factors (in the newsroom, in society or in reporters and editors themselves) may be influencing those decisions? To answer these questions, I will interview between six and eight key editors and reporters at *The Herald-Sun* and *The News & Observer* (three to four from each paper). I will ask them questions about their decision-making processes while covering stories, and specifically about their decisions while covering same-

sex marriage stories; I also will ask them about factors that influenced those decisions. Finding the answers to these questions could reveal clues about why some frames get used more than others in stories about same-sex marriage. Conclusions reached by this study will be shared with editors and reporters at the newspapers so that they can better assess their coverage of this issue and the messages they are sending to readers. Recommendations for improvement also will be included.

Literature Review

Coverage of Gay and Lesbian Issues

Journalists have struggled for more than 50 years over how gay men and lesbians should be represented to audiences. Before the 1960s, media portrayed LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender) people primarily as deviants or criminals – if they covered them at all. Beginning in the 1960s and extending into the 1970s, LGBT activists lobbied media outlets to stop using language they considered offensive and to frame stories about homosexuality in a less critical light (Gross, 2001; Alwood, 1996).

During the 1980s, stories about LGBT people focused almost exclusively on the AIDS crisis, causing gay men to become more visible but at the same time “disappearing” lesbians from mainstream news coverage (Gross, 2001; Alwood, 1996). Additionally, coverage tended to focus on the disease’s threat to public health. In his study of the discursive strategies used by two Southern newspapers in covering AIDS and in representing gay identity and desire, Myrick found that the two newspapers marginalized gays and made that marginalization seem a rational response to AIDS and gay desire (1998, p. 75).

The “gays in the military” story emerged as the LGBT news issue of the 1990s. Steele has shown how television news media’s use of unofficial sources in covering this issue achieved technical “balance,” but served to legitimize “insider” sources opposed to allowing gays in the military. The views of “outsider” sources (LGBT activists) in favor of lifting the ban were marginalized (1997, p. 83). Gibson and Hester found in their analysis of television news coverage of the “gays in the military” issue that much coverage had a positive or neutral tone (in press, p. 2). But they also found evidence that anti-gay stories caused public support for gays in the military to decrease, while pro-gay stories did not cause support to increase (p. 16). Their results lend support to Steele’s conclusions and suggest the importance of reporters’ source choices in determining the way stories are received by audiences.

More coverage was generated in June 2003 after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down Texas’s sodomy law, affecting laws in 13 other states. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation commissioned an analysis of the content, tone, and frames used in national and local reporting of the issue. In his report for GLAAD, Haider-Markel (2003) found that frames were used infrequently, and when used they tended to offer balanced coverage of the issue. However, he also defined the “frames” in his study somewhat narrowly, using a short list of key words to identify frames (p. 81).

The issue of same-sex marriage first hit the national news in the 1990s when gay litigants challenged marriage laws in Hawaii. Afraid that same-sex marriages might be considered valid in all states, Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, stating that no state has to recognize same-sex marriages that are legal in another state. Then in 1999 the Vermont Supreme Court ruled that the state’s constitution prohibited denying LGBT

couples the legal benefits attached to civil marriage, and the state's legislature subsequently legalized civil unions for LGBT couples. Massachusetts' Supreme Court held four years later that there was no constitutionally adequate reason to deny same-sex couples the right to marry; the court gave the state legislature six months to make provisions for same-sex marriages in the state's laws (Hester & Gibson, 2005, p. 4).

While overall coverage of LGBT issues has improved over the years, lesbian and gay journalists still find it lacking. A 2000 survey conducted by the Project for the Study of Sexual Orientation Issues in the News asked 363 gay and lesbian newsroom professionals to rate coverage of lesbians and gays by news institutions and also compared these results with previous surveys conducted in 1990 and 1993. While LGBT journalists thought coverage had improved over the past decade in regards to "hot-button national stories" (such as actor Ellen DeGeneres' coming out and Wyoming resident Matthew Shepard's murder), they gave much lower marks to coverage of regional and local LGBT issues. In fact, the more "local" the subject matter was, the lower it ranked in quality of coverage (Aarons & Murphy, 2000, p. 12-13). And while media were doing better at covering dramatic, national, event-based stories, they were still falling down in coverage of local events, the daily lives and events of gay men and lesbians, and gays and lesbians of color (p. 9). Respondents also ranked the media as doing better at being "sensitive and balanced" in coverage of LGBT issues, but said they were still lacking in "completeness" of coverage, indicating that reporters still were not delving deeply into issues that mattered to the LGBT community (p. 14). In particular, the study pointed out that "gay marriage stories that are pitched as sharply divided extremes shouting at one another may be viewed as incomplete by lesbian and gay staff members" (p.

18). Among five other national LGBT-related news issues, respondents gave coverage of same-sex marriage the lowest ranking in quality of coverage (p. 13, 17).

The same research project also analyzed coverage of LGBT issues in four large U.S. daily newspapers (*The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Saint Louis Post Dispatch*, and *The New York Times*) and compared that coverage to both straight and LGBT readers' perceptions of LGBT coverage. Murphy and Aarons' content analysis of the four papers (conducted on stories written during October 1999) revealed a low percentage of local stories (most were national), a low percentage of staff written pieces (as opposed to wire stories, freelance stories, or opinions), lack of depth (about half of the stories were either three paragraphs or less in length or were reviews of movies, plays, or books), a high percentage of event-driven stories (rather than in-depth, "thematic" coverage), and a high percentage of conflict-driven stories (86 percent of LGBT-related stories involved conflict) (Murphy & Aarons, 2001, p. 16). The researchers recommended more in-depth coverage, more coverage linking events to larger issues, more local coverage, more focus on everyday issues for LGBT citizens, less focus on conflict, and more coverage of lesbian issues (p. 19).

Attempting to examine how newspapers cover the everyday lives of LGBT people, Gibson performed a content analysis of stories from the "lifestyle" sections of four U.S. newspapers. She found that very few of the gay-themed stories were about lifestyle issues specifically important to gays or lesbians; instead, the stories were more likely to deal with popular entertainment featuring gay characters (such as "The Ellen Show," "Queer as Folk," and "Will & Grace"). She also found that reviews were the most common type of LGBT-related story containing references to homosexuality (Gibson, 2004, p. 93). Overall, her

findings corroborated those of previous studies: namely, that media pay little attention to the lives and activities of the LGBT community (p. 94).

Framing

The idea of framing was first proposed by Goffman, who stated that individuals make sense out of reality through frames. His work delineated the “basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events,” and he demonstrated that the specific ways that people make sense of reality depends on their framing of reality (Goffman, 1974). Tuchman applied framing to the news process in 1978, showing that journalists use pre-existing frames as templates to shape stories they cover. She argued that frames highlight certain ideas while excluding others, creating specific “windows” through which audiences can view reality (Tuchman, 1978).

Communication theorists generally agree that framing is the process by which journalists give meaning to and shape understanding of stories (Entman, 1993, p. 52; Bantimaroudis, 2001, p. 176; Liebler, 1996, p. 54). When a journalist frames an issue or event in a certain way, he or she selects some aspects of it and makes those aspects more important to understanding the story than other aspects (Entman, 1993, p. 52). For instance, a story about a Ku Klux Klan rally could be framed either as a free speech issue or as a disruption of public order (Nelson, et al, 1997, p. 567). When journalists frame stories, they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies (Entman, 1993, p. 52; Roya Akhavan-Majid and Jyotika Ramaprasad, 2000; Nelson, et al, 1997, p. 567-568), generally reducing complex issues down to one or two central, understandable aspects (Nelson, et al, 1997, 567-568).

Framing is accomplished through key words, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that thematically reinforce clusters of facts or judgments (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The placement and repetition of certain words, phrases, images, and sources – and the omission of other words, phrases, images, and sources – cause certain ideas about a story to become more salient to audiences than alternative ways of understanding a story (Entman, 1993, p. 53; Bantimaroudis, 2001, p. 177). Through repetition, dominant frames come to seem natural or inevitable (Norris, 1995, p. 358).

Reliance on journalistic codes of objectivity and balance will not do away with frames (Entman, 1993, p. 56; Richardson, 2004, p. 76). In fact, they often reinforce journalists' reliance on dominant frames (Akhavan-Majid and Ramaprasad, 2000, p. 48-49). In their study of framing and ideology, Roya Akhavan-Majid and Jyotika Ramaprasad outlined dominant, elite, and journalistic ideologies, pointing out that journalistic ideologies often reinforce the ideologies put forth by elites, or newsmakers, in a society, which then inform dominant ideology, or the general public's understanding of issues and events. By relying on journalistic codes that prefer official sources, canons of objectivity, and news values (such as timeliness or conflict), journalists privilege elite frames and sources who have access to media while trivializing or even blocking less popular frames and less powerful sources (2000, p. 48-49). Iyengar wrote that in preferring "episodic" (event-based) coverage over "thematic" (issue based) stories, media tend to privilege establishment frames (1991). And Norris pointed out that political minorities or members of alternative social movements such as feminists or other activists may disagree with and challenge the ways that they are framed by dominant culture (Norris, 1995, p. 358).

How Journalists Use Frames

Hackett (1984) wrote that the framing of stories is not necessarily a conscious process, but the result of journalists' unconscious assumptions about the social world. Journalists may believe that they are impartial, objective reporters of the news, not realizing that they frame stories based on their personal and professional experiences and backgrounds. Indeed, journalists *must* frame news to do their jobs; if they did not, readers would be presented with a morass of facts representing unfiltered reality. Such a news report would take up volumes and would be impossible to read, let alone write, in a single news day. Obviously, then, journalists must select certain, more pertinent facts, and eliminate other facts, in order to present readers with "the news." But how does this process happen?

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) have proposed a concentric circle model for understanding the different factors contributing to framing of media content. According to this model, framing is influenced by individual factors, media routine factors, organizational factors, extramedia factors, and ideological factors. The individual level includes factors about individual journalists, such as backgrounds (gender, ethnicity, education), personal values and beliefs, and professional and ethical roles. At the media routines level, routines such as journalists' definitions of news values, objectivity, ways of finding sources, and reliance on elite media as sources all help influence story frames. The organizational level includes factors such as organization goals and hierarchical structures within the organization. At the extramedia level, factors outside of media organizations – such as sources, advertisers, government controls, and technology – influence framing. And at the ideological level, broadly held (American) ideologies – such as belief in the capitalist

economic system and free markets, the value of the Protestant ethic and of individual achievement, and the value of a liberal democracy – influence media frames.

Journalists unconsciously are subject to all of these influencing factors that contribute to their views of the world and thus the way they frame stories. Reese (2003) has written that frames also are *shared social constructs*; as such, they can easily be accessed by reporters and readers alike. According to Reese, frames must be shared in order to be useful organizing devices: When reporters frame stories, they assume that their readers will be familiar with the shared frame and will be able to interpret it in the way the writer intended (Reese, 2003, p. 15). Thus, reporters draw on shared worldviews and assumptions when they craft their frames – recalling Shoemaker and Reese’s ideological level, above.

On a practical, day-to-day level, journalists’ *routines* influence story frames. Several scholars have noted that journalists, like other professionals, rely on a number of routines to do their jobs effectively and efficiently. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) have noted that these standard news routines have been developed over time as practical responses to the day-to-day pressures and challenges of news gathering (p. 107). They add that “routines are important because they affect the social reality portrayed by the media” (p. 108). When a person becomes a journalist, he or she learns these routines and internalizes the professional values that guide their search for news (Kaniss, 1991, p. 73), having been taught these routines by older, more experienced journalists (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 111). As a result, they look at the world in a certain way – or through a certain frame. According to Altheide (1976), the “organizational, practical, and other mundane features of newswork promote a way of looking at events which fundamentally distorts them” (p. 24). And Allan (2004) noted

that media routines can help normalize and reinforce social divisions and inequalities in society by reaffirming them as natural, appropriate, and legitimate (p. 47).

Central to the news routine is the process of deciding what is “news” and what is not. Journalists use a set of “news values” to guide this decision. News values change little from journalism textbook to journalism textbook: common news values are *conflict*, *timeliness*, *human interest*, *prominence*, and *proximity* (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, p. 111). Journalists select and exclude stories for inclusion in the news based on these criteria, and they frame stories to highlight their news values.

The time schedule of daily news and the ways journalists find sources also are parts of the news routine. Kaniss (1991) has written that constraints on the media – such as the amount of time available to write a story and the amount of space available in which to print a story – will limit the number of alternate sources journalists contact for stories (p. 73); this deadline pressure encourages journalists to rely on reliable, easily accessed sources such as spokespeople and public officials (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 219-220). Thus, journalists depend on the “centralization of information in bureaucracies and the generation of facts by bureaucrats” (Tuchman, 1981; cited in Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 219). Journalists rely on information sources whom they assume to have the most knowledge and the most easily accessible knowledge; thus they contact sources according to a “hierarchy of credibility,” assuming that sources at the top of organizations will have more credible information – and will be more accessible – than sources near the bottom of an organization (Allan, 2004, p. 63). Thus, certain sources’ views of reality are privileged over others, influencing story frames.

Tuchman (1972) has written on the ways journalists have incorporated strategies aimed at achieving *objectivity* into journalism routines. These strategies include the news routine of including sources for “balance”: according to Tuchman, if one source makes a truth-claim, the reporter feels obliged to include an opposing source’s truth-claim as well. This attempt for balance allows the journalist to claim that he or she has been objective, because neither side has been favored in writing the story (p. 665). However, Tuchman pointed out that there is little link between this strategy and actual “objectivity” on the part of the reporter (p. 676): the journalist, if unable to verify the truth-claim of either source, has merely presented the reader with two unverifiable statements: “Mr. Jones said ‘X,’ while Mr. Smith said, ‘Y.’” Johnson-Cartee (2005) also noted that the practice of balancing sources can limit journalists’ perceptions of issues to include two sides only, even when most situations contain multiple and nuanced “sides” (p. 131). She also noted that Western journalists often have an “extremist orientation,” in that they often choose sources or spokespeople for balance who represent the most extreme positions on an issue (p. 131). Including “balanced” sources thus tends to lead to frames emphasizing conflict, in which two polarized sides are pitted against one another and represented as being the only two viewpoints in the debate.

In addition to newspaper routines, journalists and the frames they choose are influenced by media organizations. Several scholars have written that the fact that newspapers are businesses with the goal of making a profit shapes the way they relate to their audiences and to the businesses that place advertisements in newspapers. According to Allan (2004), advertisers provide most of newspapers’ income, and subsequently newswriters try to attract a “target audience” (largely educated, middle-class males interested in public affairs) that is of interest to specific advertisers (p. 100). Shoemaker and Reese (1996) also

noted that newspaper editors have become more audience-oriented as corporate ownership of media has increased and editors have had to think more about the “bottom line” when reporting to corporate owners (p. 161). According to Kaniss (1991), editors’ awareness of their audiences then affects the ways reporters write and frame stories. Though reporters often do not write with their audiences specifically in mind, they do write with a mind to please their editors, who control where stories are placed in the paper. Aware that editors want stories that will please audiences, reporters indirectly end up writing for newspaper audiences (p. 72), thus framing stories in ways that will attract the mainstream target audience.

Writing for target audiences also has implications for the framing of marginalized groups. Within an audience-oriented and advertiser-oriented media, Johnson-Cartee (2005) found that journalists sometimes ignore the newsworthiness of marginalized groups because of their awareness of market forces. Not wanting to offend the “dominant culture” by drawing attention to marginalized groups, journalists let their awareness of their mainstream target audiences influence their news judgment, and thus the framing of stories. Because they are not viewed within the desired sphere of newspapers’ audiences, minorities, marginalized groups, and social movements are portrayed as fringe groups with questionable legitimacy – if they are portrayed at all (p. 240).

Framing of Gay and Lesbian Issues

Yet, through framing, the media play a powerful role in determining the success or failure of social movements (Gitlin, 1980; Akhavan-Majid and Ramaprasad, 2000, p. 45). Frames can shape public opinions and perceptions of issues (Richardson, 2004, p. 75) and can determine “whether most people notice and how they understand and remember a

problem, as well as how they evaluate and choose to act upon it” (Entman, 1993, p. 54).

Framing is particularly influential when the audience has little firsthand knowledge of a subject (p. 54) and when public opinion about an issue is ambivalent and unstable (Nelson, et al, 1997, p. 570). In the continuing social debate over rights for LGBT people, both conditions apply.

Nationally, editors and reporters are finding that covering same-sex marriage is trickier than covering other kinds of stories. People on both sides of the issue complain that coverage is biased toward one side or the other. Those against same-sex marriage complain that a newspaper is promoting the “homosexual cause” by covering the issue at all, while those in favor of same-sex marriage may complain that newspapers should not validate their foes’ opinions by printing them (McNulty, 1993, p. 80).

Henry McNulty has claimed that covering LGBT issues is difficult because the media have yet to figure out what frame to apply to them. He argues that “social issues” stories generally follow two models. The first involves the “Two Reasonable Arguments” model, which is applied to issues like abortion and gun control; in using it, reporters are careful to give equal ink to sources on both sides of the debate. The second is the “One Reasonable Argument” model, used for covering civil rights stories. In this model, only one side of the argument is presented as acceptable because the other – for instance, an opinion or idea espoused by the KKK – is deemed morally repugnant. McNulty argues that it is not yet clear which model better suits same-sex marriage stories (1993, p. 80).

In the 1990s and continuing to today, two of the main ways that LGBT rights issues have been framed in public debate and in the media have been through a “morality” frame and a “equality” frame. Proponents of LGBT rights use the equality frame, arguing that gay

rights are equal rights, while opponents use a morality frame, arguing that LGBT rights threaten traditional moral values (Brewer, 2002, p. 306). In his study of the effects these two frames can have on public opinion about LGBT rights, Brewer found that study participants who received the “morality” frame were more likely to cast their opinions in terms of morality, and those who received the “equality” frame were more likely to explain their views on LGBT rights in terms of equality. He also found, though, that exposure to those frames also encouraged participants to use the language of those frames in ways that challenged the frames’ premises (p. 303). For example, some participants who received the “morality” frame used the language of morality to criticize conservative points of view. One participant said, for example, “Discrimination of any kind is morally repugnant” (p. 311). In the same way, some participants who received the “equality” frame used the language of equality to challenge the notion of gay rights as equal rights (p. 310).

In his 2003 study, Brewer further analyzed the ways that the “value frames” of equality and morality affect public opinion about LGBT rights. After analyzing survey data from the American National Election Studies, his results suggested that the extent to which political knowledge moderates the effect a value (such as egalitarianism or traditional morality) has on opinion can depend on whether public debate provides an undisputed frame or two competing frames for that value (Brewer, 2003, p. 173). He argued that an “anti-gay rights morality frame” was undisputed within public debate about gay rights during 1992 and 1996, and that a “pro-gay rights equality frame” and an “anti-gay rights equality frame” also featured prominently in public debates (p. 179-180). Brewer concluded that the undisputed morality frame had more of an effect on peoples’ opinions than did the two competing equality frames (p. 173).

Framing and the Debate Over Same-Sex Marriage

The issue of same-sex marriage has been bubbling in the public consciousness for several years. Wiggins' 2001 study looked at the frames used in letters written to *The* (Columbia, S.C.) *State* after it ran a story about the courtship and wedding of two local lesbians. Through a quantitative content analysis, he found that neither side of the debate had exclusive rights to religious or secular language, but that both sides used religious and secular language freely in forming their arguments. Thus, the writers' vocabulary was not related to their positions on same-sex marriage (Wiggins, 2001, p. 213). These results echoed Brewer's 2003 findings, which indicated that people on both sides of the debate over LGBT rights can and do use the language of the "other side" in pressing their arguments.

These frames can find their way into news stories about same-sex marriage when sources espouse certain frames over others. Writing in 2004, O'Donnell found evidence that sources used three modern "myths" when constructing arguments about same-sex marriage: the myths of evolution/revolution, of apocalypse, and of the child (O'Donnell, 2004, p. 9). But journalists also bring their own set of frames to stories about same-sex marriage: O'Donnell found that reporters tended to rely on set frames in crafting their stories (such as the "social debate over same-sex marriage" frame), and that such framing influenced source and quote choices (p. 24).

The importance of local media in framing the debate over same-sex marriage also has been discussed. In their agenda-setting study of national and local media, Hester and Gibson found that local media exerted a stronger influence over public salience than did national media when the issue – same-sex marriage – was both local and national (Hester & Gibson,

2005). This point indicates the importance of looking at how local media outlets frame same-sex marriage.

Chapter Outline

The thesis chapters are arranged as follows:

Chapter One provides an introduction to the project and a background on the history of media coverage of LGBT issues in the United States. A literature review explores related topics such as framing theory, the ways journalists use frames, framing of LGBT issues, and framing of same-sex marriage.

Chapter Two outlines the results from the qualitative content analysis study conducted in spring 2005, upon which the current study is based. Research Questions also are presented at the end of this chapter.

Chapter Three provides the methodology for the project and will detail the research to be undertaken.

Chapter Four provides an analysis of the in-depth interviews, with a focus on the decision-making processes of editors and reporters with respect to same-sex marriage stories.

Chapter Five provides a discussion of interview research results, addressing decisions journalists made that appear to have affected the frames used in coverage. This chapter also presents the paper's conclusions.

Chapter Six discusses this study's implications and makes recommendations for change in coverage of LGBT issues.

Appendices include the interview guides used in this study as well as a sample of the initial contact e-mail sent to respondents.

Chapter 2: Content Analysis Findings

Summary of Findings

In spring 2005, I conducted a qualitative, in-depth content analysis of locally generated (not wire or national) stories that focused on same-sex marriage in *The Herald-Sun* and *The News & Observer*. A search of the LexisNexis database for articles with “gay marriage” in the headline, lead paragraph, or key terms written between Jan. 1, 2004, and March 1, 2005, yielded 231 articles. Further sifting to eliminate letters to the editor and stories that did not focus primarily on same-sex marriage cut the pool of stories down to 26 stories from *The News & Observer* and 17 from *The Herald-Sun*.¹ Because of the qualitative nature of this study, even this group of 43 stories was deemed to large to achieve the depth of analysis desired. Therefore, I further narrowed my sample by grouping the stories into like categories by topic (such as local events) and by story type (such as issue-based or event-based stories). I chose at least one story to code from each category, two stories if the category was relatively large in comparison with other categories. I decided which stories to code based on the articles’ word counts, with longer articles chosen over shorter ones, assuming that longer articles would be richer in data than shorter articles. My final sample included 10 stories from each newspaper. Quantitative content analysis studies generally

¹ It should be noted that many stories relating to the presidential election in November were cut from the sample. Although many articles about election issues touched on same-sex marriage as it related to Republican or Democratic candidates, these articles were eliminated because they did not focus on same-sex marriage as the primary story topic. Future studies could investigate the framing of same-sex marriage in the context of the election; the goal of this study was to evaluate framing of the issue in general rather than specific contexts.

include much larger samples of stories; however, because of the qualitative nature of this study and the depth with which each article was explored, the sample of 20 stories was deemed large enough for the purposes of this study.

Using a coding sheet as a guide, I then analyzed the articles, looking for

- Media frames: What recurring language, themes, or ideas seemed to prevail across stories (Bantimaroudis, 2001, p. 178)?
- Sourcing patterns: What sources were used? Did any sources offer neutral analysis (Steele, 1997, p. 87-89)? Which sources seemed to get more “weight” in the story?
- Evidence of an adversarial (or conflict) frame, in which reporters pit two conflicting groups against each other, exclude non-polarized views from the media discourse, often do not investigate the issues behind the groups’ positional statements, and often do not feel the need for neutral analysis (Karlberg, 1997).
- Event-based versus issue-based coverage: Event-based stories tend toward “surface” coverage of involved issues, while issue-based stories tend to offer readers more in-depth analyses of issues (Steele, 1997, p. 90).

After coding the articles, I analyzed the coding sheets to determine what media frames and source frames emerged, and I compared the frames across the two newspapers, looking at differences in how they covered same-sex marriage stories.

Event-based versus Issue-based coverage

Articles based on issues are generally considered better than those based on events because issue-based stories by their very nature tend to delve deeper into the issues

underlying sources' positions (Iyengar, 1991). I found that articles in *The News & Observer* more frequently were issue-based: Six stories were issue-based, while four were event-based. Articles in *The Herald-Sun*, on the other hand, more frequently were event-based: Eight were event-based, while two were issue-based.²

Media Frames

Several media frames for covering same-sex marriage stories emerged from the coded articles. Most prevalent were the Conflict frame and the LGBT³-celebratory frame. Also common was the Reassurance frame, and one story made use of a Business frame.

Conflict frame. According to Karlberg (1997), the Conflict or Adversarial frame pits two conflicting groups against each other, tends to exclude non-polarized views, often does not investigate the issues behind the groups' positional statements, and often does not include analysis of issues by neutral (often academic) sources (p. 24). Because the issue of same-sex marriage has been highly charged with pro- and anti-same-sex marriage rhetoric, I coded specifically for the presence or absence of a Conflict frame.

I found that *The News & Observer* used a Conflict frame in covering same-sex marriage in five out of 10 stories coded, while *The Herald-Sun* used a Conflict frame in only one story out of 10. Overall, the Conflict frame consisted of polarized coverage, with LGBT advocates pitted against conservative sources, a focus on rhetoric rather than any deep exploration of issues behind sources' positional statements, and little use of neutral sources for analysis.

² A likely reason for this discrepancy lies simply in the fact that *The News & Observer* is a larger newspaper and likely has more resources for generating issue-based stories. In 2004, *The News & Observer's* Sunday circulation was 208,769, compared with *The Herald-Sun's* Sunday circulation for the same year of 55,163, according to *Editor & Publisher International Yearbook*.

³ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.

In almost all of the articles using the Conflict frame, reporters pitted LGBT or LGBT-friendly sources who were in favor of same-sex marriage against conservative sources who were opposed to same-sex marriage. Reporters for *The News & Observer* more frequently used sources from both sides of the conflict to balance each others' points of view within their stories: Eight *News & Observer* stories quoted sources from each side of the issue, while only one *Herald-Sun* story did so.⁴

These two groups were almost always portrayed as “two distinct, mutually exclusive” camps (Karlberg, 1997, p. 24). For example, a story package run by *The News & Observer* on Jan. 9, 2005, profiled two straight Triangle residents who had thought about same-sex marriage and come to different conclusions; the main story was accompanied by four shorter profiles, two of people opposed to same-sex marriage, two of people in support of it. The package's aim was to let people with views “closer to the middle have the floor” rather than focusing on the LGBT and conservative activists who generally are the newsmakers in same-sex marriage stories (Vaden, 2005, p. A27). Yet while the main story did allow for greater exploration of the issues underneath the sources' positions, the two sides were still portrayed as polarized. The article's ending paragraph summed up the story thus:

“Both Kesterson and Luper believe marriage can bring tremendous comfort and joy. Their own marriages are case in point: Both have been happily married, he for 35 years and she for 25. But they'll probably never agree on who should be allowed to tie the knot, and in this they represent the two camps that have slowly cemented their positions.”

(Shimron, 2005, p. A1)

⁴ Notably, the one *Herald-Sun* story that used the Conflict frame did so using a “token” balance quote from a conservative source. I coded “token” balance sources as either one conservative or one LGBT source plopped into a story relying on a sea of sources from the other side of the issue. Two *News & Observer* stories used “token” balance quotes to provide balance within stories that relied primarily on either LGBT or conservative sources.

The article emphasizes the sources' similarities, but only to point out how polarized their views are about same-sex marriage.

The story package quoted above was a rarity among the articles coded, in that the reporter explored issues underlying the sources' rhetoric. Among the coded articles, two of *The News & Observer's* stories offered nuanced points of view, while none of the *Herald-Sun* stories showed nuanced coverage of conflict. Most articles using the Conflict frame instead offered "sound bytes" that outlined sources' stances but offered no explanation for why they felt they way the did. For example, John Rustin of the N.C. Family Policy Council was quoted in a story about same-sex marriage, saying,

"Marriage, by definition, is between a man and a woman.... It is a complementary union between people of the opposite sex. It creates children and the opportunity for them to be raised in the optimum environment."

(Biesecker, 2005, p. A1)

While it is clear that Rustin believes marriage should be between a man and a woman, there is no explanation of *why* he thinks such an arrangement is the best environment for raising children. Nor is there any neutral expert source to give an opinion on the best environment for children. This was a trend among stories using the Conflict frame, as most tended not to quote neutral sources. In fact, only one *News & Observer* story using the Conflict frame included neutral academic sources.⁵

LGBT-celebratory frame. While *The News & Observer* more frequently used the Conflict frame, *The Herald-Sun* more frequently used an LGBT-celebratory frame in writing about same-sex marriage. I found use of an LGBT-celebratory frame in eight of the 10 *Herald-Sun* articles coded and in three of the *News & Observer* articles. The LGBT-celebratory frame is characterized by a narrative that is based on LGBT sources – that is, the

⁵ Three legal experts were quoted in a story about the legal obstacles that same-sex marriage faces in North Carolina. See Matthew Eisley, "Gay vows face legal obstacles," *The News & Observer*, 31 March 2004, p. B1.

story's main sources and main points of view are LGBT or LGBT-friendly. This telling of the story from an LGBT point of view often had the effect of positioning readers "inside" the LGBT sources' heads. For example, in a *Herald-Sun* story written about Richard Mullinax and Perry Pike, a Durham couple who sued Durham County for a marriage license, the reporter narrates the story in a manner that follows the couple around the courthouse, focusing on the couple's actions, feelings, and supporters. In narrating the process by which they applied for the marriage license, the reporter wrote that, "Mullinax said he was having trouble writing. 'It's like I've got two feet at the end of my arms,' he said" (Bridges, 2004, A1). This focus on the emotion Mullinax was feeling is typical of the LGBT-celebratory frame in that readers were invited to sympathize with him.

Additionally, this frame either lacked opposing (conservative) sources altogether or outweighed those sources with LGBT sources. Source weight was coded by looking at the placement and number of quotes given to particular groups of sources – in other words, the "weight" given to LGBT, conservative, or other groups of sources within each story. In the above example, only a brief section of the story was devoted to an opposing conservative source. Similarly, an article in *The News & Observer* about same-sex couples signing contracts with each other included only brief "token" balance quotes from two conservative sources. Their views were outweighed, however, in number and in placement: They come after several LGBT sources and are followed by several more (Ataiyero, 2004, A1). The effect of this frame thus is to preference LGBT points of view over conservative viewpoints.

Several sub-frames also fell under the LGBT-celebratory frame. These included the "same-sex couples are no different from straight couples" frame (which emphasized the committed, loving relationships of same-sex couples), the "same-sex marriage is like

interracial marriage” frame (which compared laws against same-sex marriage to laws against interracial marriage), and the “courageous LGBT activist” frame (which portrayed LGBT activists such as Richard Mullinax and Perry Pike as courageously standing up to an unfair system and “fighting the good fight”).

Reassurance frame. Three stories from *The News & Observer* and one from *The Herald-Sun* used a Reassurance frame. In contrast to the LGBT-celebratory frame, the Reassurance frame weighted conservative or mainstream sources over LGBT sources and tended to emphasize a) the legal obstacles barring same-sex marriage in North Carolina, and b) the fact that most people in North Carolina are against allowing same-sex marriage. The effect of this frame was to say to readers, “Don’t worry, gays won’t be able to get married here any time soon.”

For example, the headline of a March 17, 2004, article in *The Herald-Sun* read, “No local challenge yet on gay marriages.” While many news stories are based on events, this article was based on the *lack* of an event. The lead continues in the reassurance vein, saying, “No one locally has challenged the state law against gay marriage by asking for a license, but if they did, they would be turned away, said the registers of deeds for Durham and Orange counties” (Shultz & Kirkpatrick, 2004, C1). Both the headline and the lead seem crafted to reassure readers as to the status of same-sex marriage in North Carolina.

Sources in the story reinforce the Reassurance frame. The reporter cites two registers of deeds who outline the laws in North Carolina and say that they must abide by state law. The story then quotes an LGBT advocate, who says he knows of no organized plans in North Carolina to challenge the state’s ban on same-sex marriage. This statement – that there is no

organized LGBT resistance in North Carolina – reinforces the idea that same-sex couples will not soon be able to marry in this state.

Similarly, a story in *The News & Observer* reassures readers of the same thing by examining the many legal obstacles to same-sex marriage in North Carolina. The article quotes three legal experts (all of whom disparage the idea that LGBT activists have any legal legs to stand on), outlines state laws against same-sex marriage, and again quotes registers of deeds who say that they must follow the law. The lead also trivializes Richard Mullinax and Perry Pike, calling them “The gay Durham duo” (Eisley, 2004, p. B1). And while the article includes Mullinax and Pike’s lawyer, her viewpoint is outweighed by the other mainstream sources. One legal expert asks, for instance, “Why would the legislature write a law requiring a register of deeds to issue a marriage license to people who may not legally marry (Eisley, 2004, p. B1)?” The cumulative effect of the reporter’s choices of language, quotes, and sources is to highlight the mainstream view that same-sex couples will not soon be able to marry in North Carolina – as opposed to highlighting, for example, the LGBT view that more people approve of same-sex marriage today than did five years ago, so eventually people will come to approve of same-sex marriage in North Carolina (Easterbrook, 2004, p. B1).

Business frame. Finally, one story in *The News & Observer* used a Business frame to discuss same-sex marriage. This story, which ran in the “Life” section, was about the new niche fashion market that caters to gay and lesbian couples wanting to get married. Sources interviewed included owners of wedding-related businesses (such as dress and jewelry stores) as well as fashion experts, LGBT representatives, and a lesbian couple. Coming at same-sex marriage entirely from a business angle, the story completely bypassed the usual controversy associated with the issue. “The legalization of gay marriage could be a financial

windfall for wedding-related businesses,” the reporter states. One boutique owner stated her openness to doing business with same-sex couples, saying, “I’m in the business of selling dresses” (Guzman, 2004, p. E1). The story’s Business frame diminishes the controversial aspects of same-sex marriage, instead highlighting the money that could be made by savvy marketers.

Relevance of Findings

If we measure “good” journalism by holding stories to a standard of balance, and if we measure balance by diversity of voices (Karlberg, 1997), then *The News & Observer* clearly wins out over *The Herald-Sun*. Articles in *The News & Observer* more frequently quoted sources from a variety of backgrounds and were careful to give voice to opposing viewpoints, even in stories that focused almost exclusively on sources from “the other side.”

But do such balancing strategies really result in “good” journalism? As already noted, *The News & Observer* made much more frequent use of the Conflict frame, which tends to polarize coverage and shut out more moderate views falling outside that polarization. Acknowledging this tendency in stories about same-sex marriage, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation stated,

“...reporting that remains mired in simplistic, predictable “pro-gay”/“anti-gay” dualisms does a disservice to readers seeking information on the diversity of opinion and experience within our community.... There continues to be a need for journalists to distinguish between opposing viewpoints on gay and lesbian issues and the defamatory rhetoric that fuels prejudice and discrimination. While defamatory comments may be newsworthy, they should no longer be used simply to provide ‘balance’ in a news story.”

(GLAAD Media Reference Guide, p. 1)

When the Conflict frame was used, coverage did indeed fall into “pro-gay”/“anti-gay” dualisms. Additionally, the tendency of both papers at times to use “token” quotes to provide

balance within stories points to a less-than-thorough approach to covering the issues. A paper could approach “good” journalism when it uses the Conflict frame and thoroughly covers both sides (assuming there are only two sides); if the same paper runs an article almost exclusively about LGBT sources and then throws in a quote from a conservative source merely to fulfill “balance” standards, what service does the paper do readers, other than to alert them to the presence of a controversy?

For example, a story that ran May 18, 2004 in *The News & Observer* localized the legalization of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts by focusing on a party thrown by Triangle LGBT people celebrating the event. While much of the story focuses on the event itself and the views of people at the party, the reporter also used a quote from Bill Brooks, president of the N.C. Family Policy Council. Brooks predictably expressed his disapproval of same-sex marriage, saying, “I don’t know if I can think of too strong a word.... It’s a travesty. It’s sad. It’s a miscarriage of justice” (Easterbrook, 2004, A14). In a story that focuses on an LGBT celebration, what reason can the reporter have had for including Brooks – who certainly was not at the party – other than to provide “balance”? This concern with the journalistic convention of balance – which of course feeds into the Conflict frame – lends itself to stories that purport to be about the events surrounding and the issues underlying same-sex marriage but which are in fact about the conflict surrounding the issue. Often quotes that seem to add balance to a story are in fact “only answering back their own concerns” (O’Donnell, 2004, p. 24).

Journalists’ habits of quoting the newsmakers – generally, the outspoken advocates for or against an issue such as same-sex marriage – also feed into the Conflict frame and should be probed by journalists looking to offer more insightful coverage. As O’Donnell

points out, the authority of sources in stories about same-sex marriage should be probed. In O'Donnell's example, a story about a gay man whose son was born to a surrogate mother, the reporter quotes sources who comment on the surrogacy process, and then quotes two conservatives who comment on the morality of the arrangement and the welfare of the child. As O'Donnell says,

“The authority of Muehlenberg and Tomlinson as experts in this matter must also be questioned. If the concern was really about child welfare, then surely a paediatrician or child psychologist would have been a better choice to achieve a strategic balance. But this story is not really about the rights of the child, it is about a contentious social debate. The journalist has chosen to stay within the ‘established terms of the problematic at play’ (Hall, 1982:81) with reference to moral and religious authorities rather than treat this as an emerging new story of family.”
(O'Donnell, 2004, p. 24)

In the *News & Observer* story cited above, it is questionable whether “strategic balance” was even necessary: after all, the story's headline, “Wedding party reaches Triangle,” was ostensibly about an LGBT celebration, which Brooks certainly did not attend (Easterbrook, 2004, p. A14). Yet the reporter's reliance on the Conflict frame necessitated Brooks' inclusion as balance.

In contrast, a story in *The Herald-Sun* on Feb. 13, 2004 covered a party hosted by the Triangle Freedom to Marry Coalition, an LGBT activist group formed around the issue of same-sex marriage. The reporter notably did not include conservative sources to balance the story: the article was instead exclusively about the party itself. The reporter did, however, interview partygoers about their reasons for supporting same-sex marriage. While some rhetoric was quoted, other meaningful reasons behind the rhetoric also emerged: for instance, Perry Pike said that marriage to him signified legal benefits such as Social Security, as well as the ability to adopt children and raise a family (Buse, 2004, p. B1).

This is not to say that the LGBT-celebratory frame is necessarily “better” journalistically than the Conflict frame – after all, there is something to be said for including opposing viewpoints when appropriate. But it is interesting that the articles in *The Herald-Sun*, which tended to focus only on one “side” of the debate at a time, were often able to explore the issues in greater depth than stories that used the Conflict frame. This is especially interesting when one considers that *The News & Observer* more frequently ran issue-based stories than did *The Herald-Sun*,⁶ which would initially lead one to think that *The News & Observer* would delve more deeply into issues. Yet in coding how deeply reporters delved into issues behind sources’ positional statements, I found that *The News & Observer* explored issues “some” in two stories and “deeply” in two stories, while *The Herald-Sun* explored issues “some” in six stories and “deeply” in one. Thus *The Herald-Sun* was more often able to provide some depth to its coverage, despite only doing so deeply once.

In looking at both the LGBT-celebratory and the Reassurance frames, both seem to indicate some sort of bias in news coverage, either by paper or by particular reporters. Three *News & Observer* stories used the Reassurance frame and three used the LGBT-celebratory frame, while only one *Herald-Sun* story used the Reassurance frame and eight were LGBT-celebratory. Although numbers mean less in a qualitative rather than quantitative study, it seems that *The Herald-Sun* is more “gay friendly” than *The News & Observer*, which offers a more mainstream, “balanced” approach to covering same-sex marriage.

The Business frame, although only used in one story, is intriguing because it bypasses the controversial aspects of the same-sex marriage story and instead focuses on the monetary gains to be had if same-sex marriage is legalized. On the one hand this frame could be seen

⁶ In coding for event-based versus issue-based coverage, I found that *The News & Observer* more frequently ran issue-based stories (six of 10 were issue-based), as opposed to *The Herald-Sun*, which more frequently ran event-based stories (eight of 10 were event-based).

as trivializing: It reduces the complex issues about which people are passionate to a matter of money, discussing what gay people are *buying* rather than investigating their struggles with the issue. Yet this frame could also be seen as positive from an LGBT point of view, for it treats same-sex marriage and homosexuality as a non-issue: from a business point of view, money is money, be it straight or gay.

As Gitlin noted, media's regular approach to controversial issues that are contested at an elite level is to "*process* social opposition, to control its image and to diffuse it at the same time, to absorb what can be absorbed into the dominant structure of definitions and images and to push the rest to the margins of social life" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 5). By treating same-sex marriage as a business story, the reporter in this case could in fact be normalizing the issue for readers and rendering it less threatening. Indeed, one of the story's main sub-frames is the "same-sex couples are no different from straight couples" frame. See, for example, a quote from Chantelle Fisher-Borne about dresses that she and her partner wore for their commitment ceremony: "It's just a personal decision about what people feel comfortable with. I don't think it's any different from anyone else" (Guzman, 2004, p. E1).

In summation, I found the Conflict frame in five out of 10 stories coded for *The News & Observer* and in one story out of 10 in *The Herald-Sun*. Writers for *The Herald-Sun* tended to instead use an LGBT-celebratory frame, found in eight out of the 10 stories, while three *News & Observer* stories used this frame. Less prevalent frames included the Reassurance frame, used in three *News & Observer* stories and one *Herald-Sun* story, and the Business frame, used in one story from *The News & Observer*. The papers also differed in their focus on event versus issue coverage: Six of the 10 stories coded from *The News & Observer* were issue-based, while two stories from *The Herald-Sun* focused on issues. However, articles in

The Herald-Sun were more frequently able to explore the issues behind their sources' positional statements: Seven *Herald-Sun* stories explored these issues, while only three *News & Observer* stories delved behind their sources' standard rhetoric.

Research Questions for Current Study

Building on the qualitative content analysis of stories from each newspaper, for the current study I conducted in-depth interviews of six editors and reporters from *The Herald-Sun* and *The News & Observer* (two reporters and one editor from each newspaper) who either covered same-sex marriage or who helped edit or direct coverage of same-sex marriage. Although the sample size for this study is quite small, because of the participants' specialized knowledge of the internal workings of their newspapers, the sample size is sufficient to uncover the decision-making processes relating to coverage of same-sex marriage at the two newspapers. While the results of this qualitative study are not generalizable, they will be informative to media professionals covering same-sex marriage, other LGBT issues, and minority groups in general.

The research questions for the current study are:

RQ1: What factors at individual (reporters and editors) levels shaped coverage of same-sex marriage at these newspapers?

RQ2: What factors at organizational (newsroom and newspaper) levels shaped coverage of same-sex marriage at these newspapers?

RQ3: What perceived societal influences do reporters and editors see as helping to shape coverage of same-sex marriage at their newspapers?

In answering these research questions, I focused on uncovering the reasons for the two most dominant frames at each newspaper. At *The News & Observer*, the conflict frame was the most common frame for same-sex marriage stories, while at *The Herald-Sun*, the most

common frame was the LGBT-celebratory frame. Uncovering the reasons behind these dominant ways of framing same-sex marriage would help me discover what factors influenced the newspapers to frame this issue so differently.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Justification of the Research Method

The results from the qualitative content analysis, carried out in spring 2005, informed the design of the current study. Results of the content analysis indicated that *The News & Observer* more frequently used a polarized “conflict” frame to shape stories about same-sex marriage. Stories written with the conflict frame tended to pit pro-gay and anti-gay sources against each other and emphasized the two sides’ differences. On the other hand, *The Herald-Sun* more frequently framed stories about same-sex marriage through a “LGBT-celebratory” frame. This frame emphasized the points of view of pro-gay and pro-same-sex marriage sources, often telling the story from those sources’ points of view.

The process of writing news stories is complex, involving conscious and unconscious framing decisions by both editors and reporters. In-depth interviewing was chosen as the best method for understanding the decisions that editors and reporters made when writing about same-sex marriage because interviewing allows the researcher to step into the mental world of the individual and discover how he or she makes sense of their experiences (McCracken, 1988, p. 9.) According to Seidman (1998), the primary way a researcher can investigate an institution or a process is through the experience of the individuals who make up the organization or carry out the process (p. 4). Thus, the best way to understand the reasoning of editors and reporters is to step into their experiences of being editors and reporters. While

other qualitative methods, such as ethnography or participant observation, may have allowed the researcher to step more effectively into the participants' experiences, thought was also given to respecting the participants' hurried schedules as news professionals. According to McCracken (1988), time scarcity and a concern for privacy are two things that mark the long interview as such a valuable means of inquiry, for interviews allow the researcher to "capture the data needed for penetrating qualitative analysis without participant observation, unobtrusive observation, or prolonged contact" (p. 11).

Conducting In-Depth Interviews

Both Seidman (1998) and McCracken (1988) emphasize the importance of asking open-ended questions when conducting in-depth interviews (Seidman, p. 9; McCracken, p. 25). The goal of the interview is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience for the researcher (Seidman, 1998, p. 9). Thus, it is important that the researcher be as unobtrusive as possible during interviews, asking exploratory questions that prompt participants to explain their experiences in their own terms rather than supplying terms for the participant (McCracken, 1988, p. 21-22). For instance, if a participant were to explain that he or she decided to "go get blasted" one night, an unobtrusive way for the researcher to respond would be to say, "What do you mean by 'blasted'?" In contrast, an obtrusive way to respond would be to say, "Do you mean 'intoxicated'?" The former method allows the participant to define the experience in his or her own terms, whereas the latter approach imposes the researcher's own logic and categories onto the experience (p. 35). Seidman (1998) concurs, stating that it is important that the researcher avoid leading questions that imply an expectation of a certain response (p. 69).

At the same time, it is important that the researcher exerts some control over the interview so as not to end up with a shapeless mass of information at its close. McCracken (1988) provides the following guidelines for constructing a questionnaire to guide the interviews:

- Begin with a set of biographical questions that allow the interviewer to ascertain the simple details of an individual's life (p. 34)
- Ask nondirective, "grand-tour" questions that get participants to tell stories or explain processes (p. 35); the interviewer could also ask the participant to *reconstruct* a significant experience or process, for instance, "Take me through a day in your work life" (Seidman, 1998, p. 69).
- Use "floating prompts" throughout the interview that focus on key words and ask the respondent to elaborate. By constructing a list of key terms identified in the literature review and then listening for their use during the interview, the researcher can prompt the participant to explain further by simply repeating the term in an interrogative tone or by asking him or her to explain what they mean by the term (p. 35).
- Use "planned prompts" when categories identified in the literature review do not emerge spontaneously during the interview. Common planned prompts include *contrast prompts* (e.g., what is the difference between x and y?); *category questions*, which ask participants how they identify different aspects of the topic under discussion; *special incident questions*, which ask participants to recall exceptional incidents in which the research topic was implicated; and *auto-driving*

prompts, which asks participants to respond to stimuli such as a picture or video and provide his or her own account of what he or she sees there (p. 35-36).

Using these techniques to construct the questionnaire allows the researcher to rely on it to guide the interview, thus freeing the researcher to listen carefully to what is being said (p. 39). McCracken advises against the kind of “active listening” that plays a participant’s meaning back to them (e.g., “what I hear you saying is...”) because of the obtrusive nature of this sort of listening (p. 21). He does, however, emphasize the importance of listening carefully. The researcher must listen for many things during an interview: for key terms, implications or assumptions that need clarifying, topic avoidance or incomprehension (p. 39-40). Seidman states that researchers must listen on at least three levels: first, to the substance of what the participant is saying, making sure that the researcher understands the substance; second, for the participant’s “inner voice” (as opposed to a more public, “outer voice” that reflects an awareness of an audience); third, to the interview process (i.e., how much time has passed, the participant’s energy level, or nonverbal cues he or she may be offering) (p. 63-64).

In following up on “floating prompts” or other verbal cues that need elucidating, it is helpful for the researcher to take a few notes during the interview. By jotting down key words or a phrase, the researcher can return to the key word once the participant has reached a stopping point in his or her story. Instead of interrupting in the middle of the story for clarification, the interviewer can then gently guide the interview back to the key word or phrase, saying, for example, “A few minutes ago you mentioned X. Can you tell me more about what you meant by that?” (Seidman, 1998, p. 64).

Once the interviews have been conducted and audio taped, they can then be transcribed, with careful attention being paid to both verbal and non-verbal material. Because transcriptions will become the basis for the interview analyses, care should be taken to include coughs, laughs, sighs, pauses, outside noises, and interruptions that are recorded on the tape. This careful recreation of the interview will allow a more nuanced view into the participant's view of his or her world than words alone would provide (Seidman, 1998, p. 98-99).

In analyzing the interview transcripts, both McCracken (1988) and Seidman (1998) recommend first reading through the transcripts and sorting out or marking the important material from the unimportant material (McCracken, p. 44; Seidman, p. 100). The results of this first culling, which focuses on major themes that emerge from the interviews, can then be re-read and further grouped and analyzed into refined observations (McCracken, 1988, p. 45). Once major themes have been identified, the researcher can review these observations, identifying connections between them and bringing the themes together to form conclusions (p. 46).

Researcher's Role

Because the researcher is in effect the "research tool" used during the interviews and in the analysis of transcripts, it is important to acknowledge what effect the researcher may have on the interview. The interaction between the researcher and the participants is inherent in the nature of interviewing (Seidman, 1998, p. 16). As the "research tool," researchers will always affect the outcome of the interview. Yet this is not necessarily a bad thing: As McCracken states, "the investigator cannot fulfill qualitative research objectives without

using a broad range of his or her own experience, imagination, and intellect in ways that are various and unpredictable” (p. 18). By drawing on his or her own experiences, the researcher can more effectively plumb a participant’s remarks, respond to assumptions with probing questions, and elicit a deeper, more nuanced view of the participant’s world (p. 19). However, such closeness with the process or culture being studied can create blindness as well as insight (p. 11-12), making it important that the researcher create a certain amount of distance between herself and the subject under discussion – for instance, by using the “floating prompts” technique described above (p. 23-24).

Because it is likely that my own background informed the interviews I conducted and the conclusions I drew from them, it is important that I outline my perspective as a qualitative researcher. As former journalist at a newspaper published twice a week in southern Virginia, and as a student of print journalism at the master’s degree level, I have become familiar with the stresses and time constraints placed on professional journalists in the field. I also should note that though I am a straight woman, I have many friends who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, and I myself am in favor of allowing people of the same gender to marry. I also attend church with several gay and lesbian couples who have had commitment ceremonies. In addition, as a journalism student in the professional print track at UNC, I covered issues relating to same-sex marriage several times during 2004. Thus I have spoken with several of the same sources quoted by participants in their stories about same-sex marriage, and I also have experience in making framing choices regarding same-sex marriage stories.

I was careful to remain aware of my internal biases and preferences as I conducted my research. I identified myself as a journalism graduate student to participants, but I was

careful not to reveal my feelings about same-sex marriage because I did not want to make participants defensive in any way. Additionally, as participants were all news professionals who strive to keep their personal opinions out of news coverage, I felt they would find my feelings in favor of same-sex marriage as irrelevant as their own in regards to this research study.

Interviewing Editors and Reporters

For this study, eight participants were recruited via e-mail and telephone contact. According to McCracken (1988), eight participants is a sufficient number of respondents in an in-depth interview study: using the “less is more” principle, he explains that the goal of qualitative research (“mining” the terrain rather than surveying it) lends itself to longer work and greater care with a few people rather than more superficial work with many people (p. 17). Seidman (1998) explains that the qualitative researcher is not trying to generalize to a broader population, but trying to present the experience of the people he or she interviews in “compelling enough detail and sufficient depth that those who read the study can connect to that experience, learn how it is constituted, and deepen their understanding of the issues it reflects” (p. 44). Qualitative research offers glimpses at “the complicated character, organization, and logic of culture” (McCracken, 1988, p. 17).

The participants were recruited on the basis of their involvement in coverage of same-sex marriage at *The Herald-Sun* and *The News & Observer*. Reporters were recruited based on the number of stories they had written about same-sex marriage, while editors were recruited based on their editing of same-sex marriage stories. A simple story count was sufficient to establish which reporters to contact, while a phone call to the managing editor of *The News & Observer* was necessary to establish which editors would be the best to recruit.

In the case of *The Herald-Sun*, one of the reporters recruited also was an editor who edited stories about same-sex marriage during 2004.

Reporters and editors were sent an initial contact e-mail explaining the study and asking for their participation as interviewees. See Appendix B for a copy of the initial contact e-mail. Several responded directly to the e-mail indicating their willingness to be interviewed; others were telephoned several days after the initial e-mail and asked if they would be willing to participate. Two reporters and one editor from each newspaper ultimately were recruited to take part in this study.

With one exception, the interviews were carried out in person at the participants' choice of location and time. Two reporters from *The Herald-Sun* had left the newspaper and moved on to employment in other states since the close of the content analysis I conducted last spring. One of those reporters returned to Durham for a vacation during the time that I was conducting interviews; that interview was conducted at a Durham bar. The other reporter's interview was conducted over the telephone. The two editors were both interviewed at their offices; one reporter for *The News & Observer* was interviewed in the newspaper's break room, while I interviewed the other *News & Observer* reporter at a Durham coffee shop.

Questions were crafted to uncover the thought processes that reporters and editors used when thinking about covering same-sex marriage stories. Because framing often is an unconscious process (Entman, 1993, p. 52), having reporters and editors reconstruct their thought processes was seen as a good way to discover unobtrusively the reasons certain frames might have been used. First, general questions about the news production process were asked, such as, "Can you walk me through the process of how a story goes from an idea

to print?” and, “How do you find sources when you’re covering a story?” Other questions were aimed at the participants’ experiences of covering the gay and lesbian community, such as, “When you write a story about the gay and lesbian community, what sources do you think about contacting?” Still other questions were aimed at uncovering the participants’ experiences of covering same-sex marriage stories in particular. Some of these questions were open-ended, such as, “Tell me how you ended up covering same-sex marriage,” and “Tell me how you got the idea for this particular story; what was the story angle you had in mind for it?” Other questions more pointed, aimed at eliciting specific information from the participants, such as, “Does your newspaper have any policies regarding how gay and lesbian issues should be covered?” and “Did your newspaper do any planning regarding how same-sex marriage would be covered?” While these questions were less open-ended than McCracken (1988) and Seidman (1998) recommend, the information they obtained was crucial to reconstructing participants’ experiences of covering same-sex marriage at their particular newspapers. See Appendix B for a sample Interview Guide.

Participants initially were told that interviews would take approximately an hour to an hour and a half of their time. However, because participants were active news professionals and had only a small amount of time to spare from the daily work of news production, several expressed concern over the planned length of the interviews. This factor caused the researcher to remain conscious of the time throughout the interviews, limiting them to about an hour in length.

Transcription and Analysis

The interviews were recorded on audio tape, and the researcher transcribed each interview afterward. During transcription, careful attention was paid to including both verbal and nonverbal sounds that were recorded on the tape. Participants were given pseudonyms and generic titles (e.g., “an editor at *The News & Observer*”) in the transcripts so as not to compromise their privacy. After transcription, some participants were contacted for follow-up interviews for clarification of answers. These interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted approximately 10 to 30 minutes. The follow-up interviews also were transcribed.

Transcriptions were then analyzed using *Atlas.ti* qualitative analysis software. After reading the transcripts through once, I developed codes based on themes which emerged from the interviews. I then coded the transcripts using *Atlas.ti*, grouping similar statements together. After coding, the software was used to generate code reports which grouped similar statements together. These statements were thus grouped together for inclusion in the results section.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction to Results

Two reporters and one editor from each paper were interviewed for this study. While their names have been changed to protect their privacy, journalists interviewed agreed to be identified by title in this study. Journalists interviewed included

- Tom Fisher, a former reporter for *The Herald-Sun*
- Bill Bradley, a reporter for *The News & Observer*
- John Ashbrook, a former editor for *The Herald-Sun*
- Mary Kingsolver, an editor for *The Herald-Sun*
- Sarah Smith, a former reporter for *The Herald-Sun*
- Tracey Hawkins, a reporter for *The News & Observer*

During interviews, the journalists were asked questions related to their coverage of same-sex marriage. Some questions specifically focused on the different frames employed by journalists at each paper. As found in my content analysis study, stories about same-sex marriage in *The News & Observer* frequently were written with a conflict frame, while stories in *The Herald-Sun* often employed an LGBT-celebratory frame.

This study's research questions attempted to address the factors that may have contributed to the largely unconscious process of framing these stories in particular ways. Specifically, the research questions asked about individual-level factors (factors rooted in the

journalists themselves), organizational-level factors (factors related to the specific newspapers journalists worked for), and societal-level factors (those factors stemming from wider society and culture).

After coding the transcribed interviews, I found that while it is possible to group the factors influencing framing choices into these three categories, in reality, the factors are inter-related and at times blurred the lines between these three categories. The ways in which these factors interrelate will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Factors at the Individual level include journalists' perception of the same-sex marriage issue as primarily a conflict story, the amount of time that journalists at each newspaper had to report on same-sex marriage, and journalists' backgrounds.

Factors at the Organizational level include those specific to the two papers' newsrooms: differences in the newspapers' resources, newspapers' perceptions of "balance," newspaper locations, editors' awareness of their readers as consumers, and editors' unease with papers' reputations.

When grouping factors into the "societal-level factors" category, I found that the factors that fit that category related not to society at large but more particularly to the sub-culture of news media. These "News Culture" factors include the journalistic conventions of source finding and definitions of newsworthiness, a factor that I have labeled the "Cult of Balance" (i.e., journalists' dedication to striving for balance and objectivity in reporting), newsroom structures, and the schedule of daily news reporting. Factors at the News Culture level trickle down and affect factors at the other levels.

Individual-Level Factors

Reporters and editors make up the wheels and cogs of newspapers. Reporters work beats, stay in touch with sources, and pitch stories, while editors guide reporters and make decisions affecting the newspaper's policies and direction. Because editors and reporters have a direct impact on the content of news stories, differences among journalists as individuals influence the ways stories are framed differently. In the case of same-sex marriage stories at *The Herald-Sun* and *The News & Observer*, journalists' ideas about same-sex marriage as a conflict story, their differing amounts of available time per story, and their backgrounds all affected the ways same-sex marriage stories were framed.

Conception of Same-Sex Marriage as a Conflict Story

Conflict is a prime news value – one of the eight major news values that students are taught in journalism school (news values will be discussed in more depth in the section on News Culture factors, below) (Shoemaker and Reese, p. 111). In the case of same-sex marriage, the issue became more newsworthy in Durham and Raleigh when local advocates staged events emphasizing this conflict. For instance, News & Observer reporter Tracey Hawkins explained how one Raleigh event became newsworthy: “A church in Raleigh...had a day-long session on homosexuality...It became newsworthy because there were going to be some people picketing outside.” While a church conference on homosexuality in and of itself was not worth writing about, because LGBT advocates showed up to confront conference participants with signs, the resulting conflict made the story newsworthy.

Journalists' conception of same-sex marriage as a conflict story also may have had something to do with the way local journalists look to national news media to help define newsworthiness. The issue's prominence in the national news helped drive local audience

interest and thus its newsworthiness (see “Journalistic conventions: definitions of newsworthiness,” below). Because the issue was largely framed in the national news media as a conflict-based story, it is reasonable to assume that local media picked up this national level conflict frame and carried it into local stories. Shoemaker and Reese have written that news organizations act as sources for one another. Large, respected, nationally marketed media often set the news agenda for smaller news organizations (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, p. 189). When discussing the newsworthiness of same-sex marriage, reporter Bill Bradley said,

“The fact that there was this sort of confrontation going on between members of the gay community who wanted to get married, people in courts and politicians who didn’t agree with that, that sort of made it news. It was something that was being played out visibly in city hall and San Francisco, and through the courts. So there was news to report.”

The fact that Bradley mentions national conflicts, such as the court battles in San Francisco, in explaining the issue’s newsworthiness, indicates that in his own thinking about same-sex marriage, the national conflict was at the in the foreground of his mind. Thus it makes sense that he would think of the story as a conflict story when localizing it.

With conflict being such a prime news value, it makes sense that a story that can be shown to involve conflict will get more media play than if it did not involve conflict.

“Conflict is good for stories,” said Bradley. “If you have a story where there’s a lot of conflict and it’s visible, it’s going to stand a better chance of getting on A1. And every reporter wants to get on A1.”

Conflict, then, is good for stories, and it also is good for reporters’ careers, because repeated stories on the front page raises a reporters’ reputation. Working with this notion, it is reasonable to assume that reporters will be more likely to go after a story that involves

conflict – and more likely to frame a story as conflict-based rather than use a frame that does not emphasize the conflict.

Journalists' conception of same-sex marriage stories as primarily conflict stories influenced their framing choices. As I will discuss, journalists are particularly committed to including balanced sources in their stories when those stories involve controversy. Feeling that they must include sources from "each side" of the issue (as if there were only two), journalists writing about controversial subjects often wound up pitting sources from two polarized sides of the issue against each other, leading to the conflict frame.

Journalists' Reporting Time

Another factor that seems to have played into the papers' framings of same-sex marriage is the amount of time that reporters had available to work on their stories. Because the papers' amounts of resources and numbers of reporters differed, journalists at *The News & Observer* and *The Herald-Sun* did not have the same amount of time to work on their stories. Journalists' differing amounts of time, depending on which newspaper they worked for, contributed to there being different frames for same-sex marriage at each paper.

Reporters at *The Herald-Sun* seemed to have been more pressed for time than were those at *The News & Observer*. John Ashbrook, formerly an editor at *The Herald-Sun*, said that he frequently would cover stories in addition to his editing responsibilities. "It's a small paper," he said, "and so frequently we wouldn't have enough people, and I would...write a story so that reporters didn't have to write two or three. Just sort of morale – keep the stress a little bit lower." For a long, in-depth story that former *Herald-Sun* reporter Sarah Smith wrote about two gay men who had sued Durham County for a marriage license, Smith said:

“How much planning went into the story? Not very much. I mean, we covered it. It was a Monday, and it ran on a Tuesday.”

Reporters for *The News & Observer*, because they were spread less thinly, seemed to have had more time to craft the stories they wrote about same-sex marriage. Tracey Hawkins, a *News & Observer* reporter, described the amount of planning and reporting she went through for a story she co-wrote about same-sex marriage opinions in the Triangle:

“I’d say we started planning it shortly after the election? Which was November, whatever, 3rd or something? And probably I’d say by the end of November I was already talking to my sources...And then [by December] we kind of finished the story, and it sat for a while.”

The story, which did not run until early January, involved at least a month of work by two reporters – a stark contrast to Smith’s *Herald-Sun* story involving only one day of planning.¹

With less time to report on their stories, journalists at *The Herald-Sun* appeared to have focused primarily on covering events as they came up. For instance, former *Herald-Sun* editor John Ashbrook wrote a same-sex marriage story on public art erected in a Durham park by local LGBT activists. In describing the story, he said, “This is definitely the ‘quick hit’ type story. Go out there, try to take a ten minute ride, go ride, look at it, come back to the office, do it in a hour, then read all the stories you have to read for that night’s copy. You know, move on to something else.” Asked about the editors’ ability to plan stories in advance, Ashbrook said, “There wasn’t a lot of long-term planning about anything. It was very much a scrappy, ‘What’s going on today, what can we do for next weekend?’”

¹ The two stories also differ in amounts of planning in part because one was event-based and the other issue-based. However, the fact that *The News & Observer* ran an in-depth issue-based story about same-sex marriage when *The Herald-Sun*’s coverage was limited to event coverage also is indicative of their different amounts of resources. This topic will be discussed further in the section on Organizational-level Factors.

Journalists' Backgrounds

A journalist's background and point of view can influence the way he or she covers the news. Johnson-Cartee has written that it is impossible for reporters to expunge their backgrounds and experiences from their minds when they report stories. "The notion of humans...being objective is ludicrous," she writes. "Subjectivity is the nature of humans, and no amount of professional training and experience will change that (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 113). Califano and Simons concur, saying,

"There can be no such thing as an objective press. This is so because there is no way an editor or a publisher can squeeze the inculcation of a lifetime from a reporter or an editor. And these inculcations – parentage, regionalism, education, friends, religion, experiences, ad infinitum – subliminally shape every story and subliminally suggest what a reporter leaves in or omits from a given story."

(Califano and Simons, 1979, xvi; cited in Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 113-4.)

On the other side of the spectrum, though, Weaver and Wilhoit (1991) have said that the effect of journalists' demographics on news content is probably minor, given the importance of organizational routines and constraints on journalists (p. 25; cited in Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, p. 78).

In this study, the journalists interviewed were not asked about the ways that their personal backgrounds, interests, and opinions affected their coverage of same-sex marriage. However, several respondents acknowledged the value of having gay and lesbian staff members at the newspaper, saying that those staff members' backgrounds provided a valuable perspective when journalists covered gay and lesbian issues. For instance, *News & Observer* reporter Tracey Hawkins said of LGBT journalists,

"They bring their own perspective, their own sensitivities to an issue that we may not have. The people who are straight may just not...*realize* that this is an issue for other people, or that there's consequences to certain statements, that may have negative repercussions, or stigmatize certain people, cause them grief."

Herald-Sun editor John Ashbrook, an out gay man, also acknowledged the added perspective LGBT journalists bring to the newsroom, saying that his sexual orientation made him more sensitive to stories regarding gays and lesbians. He noted one instance in which he had given a reporter guidance and insight based on his own knowledge of gay and lesbian issues:

“We had a story in the paper this weekend about HIV in the black community, and, I talked to the reporter, because she didn’t do enough to get into the whole issue of the down low.² And I thought, ‘You’re really leaving something out if you don’t address that.’ The story didn’t do enough of that. So there’s still a little bit of that perspective that I lend.”

Having LGBT journalists in a newsroom provides the journalists there with increased perspective *because* journalists’ backgrounds influence the way they see the world. However, this attitude of acceptance among journalists – of viewing journalists’ backgrounds as benefits rather than liabilities – is not consistent, as I will outline in the section below on the “Cult of Balance.”

Organizational-Level factors

Newspapers, like any business, are entities unto themselves, and differences and quirks inherent to them affect the way they frame stories. *News & Observer* reporter Bill Bradley said of the news production process,

“Each sort of news organization, news structure has their different opinion about what’s news....It just depends on the paper, on what the editors, on the sort of the tone that the editors are trying to set for the paper, and what they think readers want. So it just depends on who you’re working for.”

Factors at the organizational level that influenced framing of same-sex marriage stories included factors particular to each newspaper, in particular the newspapers’ resources,

² The “down low” refers to a practice among some African-American men of secretly having sex with other men while also maintaining sexual relationships with women.

their concepts of “balance,” their different locations, editors’ awareness of readers as consumers, and editors’ unease with the newspapers’ reputations.

Newspaper Resources

Sarah Smith, a former reporter for The Herald-Sun, pointed out a key difference between the two newspapers which likely effected their use of different frames: their differing amounts of resources. “The Herald-Sun is a smaller paper, with a smaller staff, and less resources,” Smith said. “We don’t have news researchers, we don’t have clerks, and we don’t have people to come help us make coffee.”

As already noted in the above section on journalists’ amount of time, *The News & Observer* and *The Herald-Sun* are financially different animals. *The News & Observer* is a larger paper with more financial resources, and thus more reporters. The 2003 edition of *Bacon’s Newspaper Directory* listed *The News & Observer’s* weekly circulation as 162,869 and its Sunday circulation as 208,407 (*Bacon’s Newspaper Directory*, 2003, p. 846). *The Herald-Sun* is a smaller paper, with fewer resources, less money, and fewer reporters to cover stories. Its weekly circulation was listed in the same edition of *Bacon’s Newspaper Directory* as 51,831, with Sunday circulation reaching 58,741 (p. 832).

Journalists at *The Herald-Sun* were struggling to make ends meet with the small number of reporters available, said Ashbrook. When I asked him why *The Herald-Sun* did not have a minorities beat, he said:

“We didn’t have enough people. We didn’t have enough people to cover the things we needed. I had suggested and proposed a cultural affairs beat, which would pick up Latinos, and other minority groups, cultural groups, but I couldn’t get that approved. It’s like a lot of papers, the size of the Metro Desk, the reporters had shrunk. I think we’d lost 40 percent of our positions in five years.... So, we weren’t going to be adding beats. It was the opposite: We were trying to figure out how we could cover everything we could with fewer people.”

The News & Observer, in contrast, has the usual newspaper beats and also has the resources for beats such as a “demographics” beat and a religion beat.³ In fact, at the time of the interview with editor Mary Kingsolver, the paper was in the process of adding staff positions. She said, “We have a family beat; another person is coming. We’re about to hire a new family relationship beat.”

The newspapers’ amounts of resources affected framing by trickling down to the individual level and affecting the amount of time reporters had to work on their stories. Because *The News & Observer* employed more journalists, reporters there had more time in which to write stories, and so they were more frequently able to write issue stories. Journalists at *The Herald-Sun*, on the other hand, were spread more thinly and had less time, so they more frequently wrote about events as they arose.

Newspaper Concepts of ‘Balance’

Another factor that seems to have contributed to the newspapers’ use of different frames is the fact that they seem to have different concepts of how the journalistic need for balance in stories should be applied. Specifically, it appears that editors at *The News & Observer* emphasized balance more than did editors at *The Herald-Sun*.

According to editor Mary Kingsolver, balance is something that editors at *The News & Observer* pay a lot of attention to. She said, “We talk a lot about our credibility. We talk a lot about, ‘Will people trust what we put into the paper?’ We talk a lot about balance.” Equating balance with the paper’s credibility as a news source, the editors emphasize to reporters that balance is something to strive for.

This is especially true with issues involving conflict. Kingsolver noted that when issues are seen to involve conflict, reporters take extra care to include balance. “When there’s

³ I spoke with both the demographics reporter and the religion reporter as part of this study.

something that we know there's controversy, we *do* take more time with it. And that's because we have to, to achieve the balance that we have," she said.

In addition, editors specifically emphasized the need for balance in stories about same-sex marriage. Reporter Bill Bradley said,

"I had always striven to get in the other side when I was writing about this issue, but I guess one of the editors felt that in some of the stories, that the side that was opposed to gay marriage wasn't being given room to express their opinions. And so he...mentioned in a Day Note⁴ that in this issue we should strive to get in that other side."

With reporters getting the pointed message from editors that stories about same-sex marriage should absolutely include "the other side," it is no wonder that stories written at *The News & Observer* tended to include sources from each side of the debate – often resulting in the conflict frame.⁵

Journalists at *The News & Observer* also seemed to conceive of acceptable balance as being balance within a particular story. Said Bradley: "What I try to do is make sure that I have, if it's a divisive issue, that I have both sort of views expressed....I try to make sure that, you know, both, the views on both sides of the issue are expressed so that they're in the story in some way." Because journalists at *The News & Observer* tended to include balanced sources in each story, their stories tended to manifest the conflict frame.

This idea of balance within individual stories was less emphasized at *The Herald-Sun*. Although journalists there wholeheartedly recognized the need for balance in their stories (see below section on the "Cult of Balance"), their concept of what constitutes "balanced coverage" was different than that at *The News & Observer*.

⁴ Bradley explained that day notes are "notes that the editors write every day, essentially summing up the paper, talking about what we did in the paper, how the coverage was, what was good, what was bad."

⁵ In my content analysis study, I coded these balanced stories as having a conflict frame, because they tended to (a) portray the story as having only two sides, (b) portray those two sides as polarized with no common ground, and (c) pit the two sides against each other.

First, *Herald-Sun* reporter Sarah Smith suggested that balanced coverage of an issue did not have to mean including equal numbers of sources from each side in every story. “If it was an event story, then you don’t really balance out each story. You balance it out by the amount of coverage you give each side,” she said. Instead of having to include an equal or near-equal number of sources from each side of the issue to achieve balanced coverage, Smith instead sees balance as something a paper can achieve *across* several stories rather than within individual stories.

Second, Smith also suggested that when a reporter covers an event, he or she should focus on covering the event at hand, making sure to represent faithfully that event:

“When you cover a story, when you talk to the people who are there, and what happens there, that’s what you’re covering. And you try to include background. But you can’t have a balanced story every time, because that way, you know, it’d be half of what story you’re covering, and the other half of the opposition, instead of covering it event by event. It wouldn’t really be about that event.”⁶

At *The Herald-Sun*, journalists focused on faithfully covering events. Editor John Ashbrook also cited this idea of faithfully covering events rather than including an equal number of opposing views in every story. He said:

“You should always try to do good reporting and good sourcing, but sometimes getting another point of view just for the sake of getting another point of view might be artificial. Just like when you go to a...gay pride parade, or an anti-abortion protest, or a Cindy Sheehan rally, and there’s 800 people *for* something, and there’s 20 people opposed. Well how much ink do you give those 20 people? Years ago you’d probably give them a lot of ink. Now maybe you give them a paragraph. You know, I think you give it in proportion to the presentation.”

Reporter Tom Fisher also echoed this idea:

“*The Herald-Sun* I presume will cover the gay pride march. Now if there’s a gigantic anti-gay protest that disrupted the parade, or that someone staged a huge event to try to counteract it, maybe a very conservative religious...we would cover both things in

⁶ Smith also noted that more pro-same-sex marriage events happened in Durham than anti-same-sex marriage events, suggesting that may also have had something to do with the presence of the LGBT-celebratory frame in stories.

the same story. But if you're just having a gay pride march, we're going to cover the gay pride march."

While reporters at *The News & Observer* felt they absolutely needed to include balance in their stories about same-sex marriage, reporters at *The Herald-Sun* felt that they should focus on faithfully covering the events that arose. *Herald-Sun* journalists' different ideas about balanced coverage – balance *across* a number of stories about the same topic rather than balance *within* individual stories – seems to have played into allowing them to focus on faithfully covering those events as they arose. This different concept of balance likely contributed to the LGBT-celebratory frame appearing in more of their stories.

Because the two newspapers had different concepts of what constitutes acceptable "balance," each paper framed same-sex marriage differently. *The News & Observer* editors emphasized balance, particularly in regards to same-sex marriage. Stories were technically more balanced – something that I coded as the conflict frame because of the stories' tendencies toward polarized sources and focus on rhetoric rather than deeper exploration of issues. Because *The Herald-Sun*, in contrast, focused more on reporting the events at hand – and because those events were mostly pro-same-sex marriage – those stories tended to have a more "gay friendly" cast, which I coded as the LGBT-celebratory frame.

Newspaper Locations and Audience Appeal

Both *The News & Observer* and *The Herald-Sun* are locally oriented papers, and both write primarily for their respective audiences. *The Herald-Sun* is more local, focusing on the Durham community, and Durham and Orange counties. *The News & Observer* circulates in the Triangle community and a large part of eastern North Carolina. Because the two papers have different audiences, they consider different stories newsworthy.

According to Sarah Smith, events happening in Durham were more newsworthy for *The Herald-Sun* than they would have been for *The News & Observer*. She said,

“We were a very Durham paper. So, if there’s an event in Durham, *The News & Observer* may not cover it, because, you know, it’s a Raleigh paper....We should cover meetings in Durham, we should cover events in Durham. If it happened in Durham, we want to have it in the paper.”

News & Observer journalist Tracey Hawkins noted that the differences between the two newspapers’ locations likely contributed to the differences in the kinds of stories that ran at each paper:

“I would also say that Durham and Raleigh are different communities. Durham is a much more liberal community than Raleigh, and Raleigh, being the capital of North Carolina and a government town, is much more acutely conscious of...you know...Durham went for Kerry, and Raleigh went for Bush. They’re different communities. So in the sense of we’re representing different people...it’s a portrait of the community, which is different.”

Because of the communities’ demographics, it appears that pro-same-sex marriage events dominated the newsworthy same-sex marriage events in Durham, while in Raleigh there was a higher representation of anti-same-sex marriage events.⁷ Former *Herald-Sun* reporters Sarah Smith and Tom Fisher both indicated that this may have been the case: Smith said, “As I remember, I think there were a lot more gay and lesbian, pro-gay marriage events in Durham, as opposed to non- [pro-gay marriage] events...because there’s a lot of gays and lesbians that *live* in Durham.” Fisher echoed this idea, saying, “There’s a large gay community here. We can’t put a number on it, but we just know.”

Editors’ Awareness of Readers as Consumers

Communication professionals learn that to communicate effectively, they must write

⁷ For instance, Rev. Patrick Wooden of The Upper Room Church of God in Christ in Raleigh emerged as a conservative advocate against same-sex marriage, leading protests and appearing as a source in news stories (see Yonat Shimron, “United to Smite Homosexuality,” *The News & Observer*, June 28, 2004, p. A1). There seemed to be no similar conservative counterpart in news stories about Durham.

with their audience in mind. When, as is often the case, a media outlet is also a business – in the business of selling newspapers and advertising space – the practice of writing for a particular audience becomes not just a good communications strategy, but also good business sense. Journalists – especially editors – must be aware of their readers as *consumers* if they are to sell newspapers and advertising space. According to Underwood (1988), the increasing trend in the United States toward corporate-owned media has caused editors to behave more and more like managers of corporations, keeping profit and audience expectations in mind (p. 23; cited in Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, p. 161). Similarly, Kaniss (1991) has noted that editors accountable to corporate owners must keep the bottom line in mind when making news decisions (p. 72). If journalists do not write with their readers in mind, readers will be less likely to pick up that newspaper, resulting in loss of money for the newspaper and potentially loss of jobs for journalists.

To help ensure that readers buy the newspaper, editors keep an ear out for what their readers are interested in; in part, this knowledge of their readers' interests informs their decisions about newsworthiness. *News & Observer* editor Mary Kingsolver said that local reader interest helps guide editors' decisions about what stories get written. When discussing newsworthiness, she said, "We are taking clues from the people who read the paper as much as possible, trying to take a clue: Is that what it is that we think they're interested in?"

Johnson-Cartee (2005) has written that in some situations a journalist's view of market forces may influence his or her decision to ignore a marginalized group, even if he or she evaluates the group or its cause as newsworthy. Because journalists view these groups as being outside their target "mainstream" audience, they fear alienating that mainstream audience by drawing attention to marginalized groups. Johnson-Cartee notes that one

noteworthy example concerned coverage of gays and lesbians, who until the AIDS epidemic were not considered a legitimate group to cover (p. 240).

Strikingly, this phenomenon could be found at *The News & Observer*. For instance, the two reporters interviewed at *The News & Observer* both indicated that editors there were aware of their readers as consumers. They indicated that awareness affected editors' news judgments about gay and lesbian issues. Strikingly, both *News & Observer* reporters in separate interviews used the word "squeamish" to describe editors' feelings toward stories about gay and lesbian issues. Bill Bradley said:

"I get the sense that there are some editors who are a bit squeamish about it [LGBT issues]....It is my sense that...with an issue like this, they do tend to keep in mind what the reader, how the reader's going to react in terms of this issue. I mean, there's no denying that our readers tend to be older, and perhaps a bit more conservative than others. And, so I think that they [the editors] are conscious of how coverage of this issue is going to play out among them [the readers]....And I'm sure the editors are sort of wary about unnecessarily writing about something that may cause readers or prompt readers to turn their backs on the paper, or cancel their subscriptions."

Similarly, Tracey Hawkins said,

"It's a sensitive issue. I remember when I started writing about gay and lesbian issues within the church, it was not something that was necessarily good. It was something that the editors were sort of very squeamish about. And they've become increasingly less so over the decade, the past decade, especially since it became such a big issue in the presidential elections."

Hawkins also noted that editors were very careful about deciding when to run the story that she co-authored about same-sex marriage opinions in the Triangle. Though the story was written in November and early December, it did not run in the paper until early January. Hawkins explained that the editors decided to hold the story until after the Christmas holidays so as to avoid offending any of their readers.

"All this has to be understood within the context of this very controversial photo that

ran in *The News & Observer*.⁸ And that *The News & Observer* got *so*, I mean it got *so* much criticism over that photo, that anything having to do with gay and lesbian issues got double scrutiny. And they knew that they wanted to approach this issue, but they were very sensitive of offending the public by running it on one of the Sundays before Christmas. So, the decision was made to run it...the first week of January, I think it was.”

Editors at *The News & Observer* seem to have been walking a fine line in this situation between writing about a newsworthy issue and catering to their audience. Though their news judgment said “write about this issue,” that judgment was tempered by their awareness of their readers as consumers who could turn their backs on the paper.

Editors’ Unease with Papers’ Reputations

Editors’ awareness of their readers as consumers interacts with another organizational-level factor: editors’ unease with their newspapers’ reputations. Journalists at both newspapers indicated that their papers struggled with a reputation among readers of being “biased,” and that each newspaper was combating its reputation of bias by adhering to journalistic principles of balance.

First, *The News & Observer* has a reputation of being a “liberal” paper, Hawkins said, and editors at the paper have been trying to combat that image:

“The paper’s traditionally, I’ll say, been very aware that it has a reputation as being a liberal newspaper. And it’s trying to combat that in some ways. So when I was covering gay and lesbian issues within the church, I had the distinct feeling that I was being told to be very, very selective in writing about that. And to write about it *only* when it became *really*, really – you know, an issue that cannot be avoided.”

Had editors ever actively discouraged her from writing a story about gay and lesbian issues?

Hawkins replied, “I’d say there were probably times when I was discouraged, yeah.” Editors’

⁸ *The News & Observer* ran a story on Oct. 21, 2004, about the ways gays and lesbians discuss their sexual orientation with their families. Running on the front page of the “Life” section, the story featured a photo of two gay men sitting on their bed together. The photo received so much negative attention from readers that the newspaper’s public editor, Ted Vaden, wrote an article addressing readers’ objections to the story and defending the newspaper’s coverage of gay and lesbian issues.

awareness of and unease with the paper's liberal reputation, thus, had an effect on how and whether gay and lesbian issues were covered.

One reason editors could be uncomfortable with the paper's reputation could stem from their awareness that more conservative readers might be less likely to buy a "liberal" paper. Hawkins said,

"People in the community know that the Daniels family⁹ was and probably still is very active in Democratic politics. The guy who bought the paper was a Democratic Party loyalist and was very proud of that. So it's always had that reputation.... Over the past 20 or 30 years, as the state has become more conservative...as North Carolinians became increasingly Republican, you wound up with this kind of weird situation where you have this supposedly liberal newspaper and a community that's become vastly Republican....I think that there's a sensitivity to that at the paper, that I've noticed, that I've picked up on."

According to Hawkins, editors at *The News & Observer* are sensitive to their conservative readers, and they consider those readers' potential reactions when presented with the possibility of writing about gay and lesbian issues.

In contrast, editors at *The Herald-Sun* grapple with a reputation of being too conservative. Reporter Tom Fisher said that he was aware of the newspaper's reputation in Durham. "I was talking about a reputation [that] *The Herald-Sun* had in Durham, particularly from the left, that we were...biased toward the right," he said. "Some of that stuff is holdover from 40 or 50 years ago...It just, it had a reputation for being biased toward the right." Later in the interview, Fisher indicated that one way editors might be combating the paper's conservative reputation was through language choice. When asked about language policies at the newspaper relating to gay and lesbian issues, he explained the newspaper's policy toward "politically correct" language:

⁹ Josephus Daniels bought *The News & Observer* in 1894 for the purpose of funding the state's Democratic Party. The Daniels family owned the paper until 1995, when the family sold the paper to the McClatchy Company. See <<http://www.newsobserver.com/443/story/200547.html>>

“[At] *The Herald-Sun*, you use the term ‘black,’ to refer to someone who’s black. So you’re black and white. Because if you call someone ‘African-American,’ they might be black but not from Africa. It’s just – and things start to take on political tones. And ideological tones. And you don’t want to do that as a newspaper. That’s when newspapers run into trouble. That’s why everyone says *The New York Times* is so liberal. And you look through *The New York Times* and it’s like all these little signposts, words...in their coverage. And then you can find the same on conservative sides....It attacks your credibility.”

The interviews indicated that journalists at *The Herald-Sun* were aware of the ways that language choices conveyed certain ideas about the newspaper to readers. Because language policies are institutional decisions made by editors, editors at *The Herald-Sun* probably were trying to represent their paper as an unbiased news vessel through their use of neutral language.

News Culture Factors

Interviews with journalists at both *The News & Observer* and *The Herald-Sun* indicated some aspects of being journalists that all respondents identified with and some they took for granted. I have labeled these factors as being part of “News Culture.”

When a person becomes a journalist, he or she is taught certain ways of gathering the news and of reporting it that are more acceptable than other ways. These givens – such as the criteria for “newsworthiness,” the conventions of finding sources, and the practice of including sources from “both sides” of an argument or issue – are seen as goals to strive for, and they are assumed to be the way journalism should be “done.” These “standard operating procedures,” as Kaniss (1991) calls them, guide journalists’ day-to-day tasks. As reporters learn what is expected of them as journalists, they become indoctrinated into News Culture and its “standard operating procedures,” which assure journalists that they will be able to efficiently fill the news hole every day (p. 73).

These routines impact framing because they shape the ways journalist think about, gather, and report news stories. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) have said that journalistic routines have developed as a necessary response to the pressures and expectations journalists face; examining these routines is important, they emphasize, because routines help explain how media content is shaped (p. 118). Importantly, Entman (1993) has written that the habits and conventions of mainstream journalism – such as including balance in stories – do not eliminate frames (p. 53). And Akhavan-Majid and Ramaprasad (2000) state that often these habits play into the reproduction of dominant frames (p. 48-9).

In this study, News Culture factors that influenced writers' framing of same-sex marriage include journalistic conventions of source finding and definitions of newsworthiness; newsroom structures; the schedule of daily news reporting; and a factor which I have labeled the "Cult of Balance" (i.e., journalists' practice of striving for balance and objectivity in reporting).

Journalistic Conventions: Definitions of Newsworthiness (News Values)

Journalists' news routines also include guidelines on how to determine "what's news" from what's not news. Journalists learn early on that certain things are more newsworthy than other, and these decisions are guided by a set of "news values" that are institutional to mainstream News Culture. Shoemaker and Reese (1991) have written that journalists often lack significant feedback from their audiences about what stories they would most like to read; to deal with this lack of feedback, audience needs have been incorporated into the "stable, enduring craft forms" of news values which have become fairly predictable over the years. In fact, most introductory journalism textbooks vary little in their catalogue of news values (p. 110-111). According to respondents, the issue of same-sex marriage hit on many

of the elements of newsworthiness that cause journalists to write news stories.

First, something is newsworthy if it is something that many people are interested in. Mary Kingsolver, an editor at *The News & Observer*, put it well when she said,

“What makes it newsworthy is that people were talking about it. Although there was not a lot happening here, there was clearly interest in North Carolina... it was clearly something that people were watching, talking about, voicing opinions on....If people are interested, they’re talking about it, they’re asking questions – that’s news.”

Tom Fisher, a former reporter for *The Herald-Sun*, also indicated that reader interest was a main reason – and a valid reason – for writing a news story. “It’s something that our readers are going to be interested in, either from the gay rights side, or from the non gay rights side, and certainly the big swath in the middle. I mean, everyone is sort of interested in that issue.”

In fact, Kingsolver explained that *The News & Observer* specifically defines newsworthiness according to what its readers are interested in. Kingsolver also said that in trying to determine what readers are interested in, editors look to national news forums in addition to listening to their own readers. “We listen to the radio talk shows to hear what people are talking about on the talk shows and figure out, ‘Okay, is this, how urgent, how much chatter is there?’” Reader interest, then, is a prime news value.

Same-sex marriage was of great interest to many Triangle residents because of another news value it had: impact. Many people felt that same-sex marriage affected them. Kingsolver continued, “Same-sex marriage affected people....They felt that they had something at stake, either because of their religious beliefs or because of their human rights work, or their general belief that the Constitution required that certain things happen a certain way.” Sarah Smith, a former reporter for *The Herald-Sun*, agreed:

“I think it was a policy that would affect a lot of people. In their eyes...people who were opposed to it felt like it would encroach on what they defined as marriage, then people who were for it felt like everyone deserves [equal rights]. So it was a policy

that a lot of people felt like it affected them. And so I think that is what ultimately made it newsworthy.”

Another key factor in making same-sex marriage a newsworthy issue was its national scope. Tom Fisher, a former reporter for *The Herald-Sun*, said, “I mean, obviously, you and I know why that’s newsworthy. There’s a national debate going on about who can legally be married, and all the benefits that go along with being married, and gay couples want those benefits, too.” Kingsolver, in discussing why same-sex marriage eventually stopped being newsworthy, said, “Things kind of died down. The controversy, the discussion died down after people stopped seeing ceremonies on TV, and it just became a quieter issue here. The level of interest and intensity changed.”

Because people were seeing same-sex marriage on the news nearly every night, they were interested in it, and thus it became an issue newsworthy enough to localize. Elite media often set the agenda for smaller, “derivative” news media, with journalists at derivative media organizations such as *The Herald-Sun* and *The News & Observer* beginning their days by picking up *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* to see what news stories are hot (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 230-231).

Same-sex marriage also was newsworthy because it involved *conflict*, a key news value to journalists because of its ability to create drama and draw readers (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 126-127). Tracey Hawkins, a reporter for *The News & Observer*, described what made one same-sex marriage story newsworthy by saying, “A church in Raleigh...had a day-long session on homosexuality. This was Crossroads Fellowship Church in Raleigh, a non-denominational, fairly conservative church. It became newsworthy because there were going to be some people picketing outside.” The presence of LGBT-friendly protesters made this church event something worthy of coverage.

Stories written about same-sex marriage often involved this kind of visible conflict event – such as a court case or protest – that makes for good news copy. Bill Bradley explained:

“The fact that there was this sort of confrontation going on between members of the gay community who wanted to get married, people in courts and politicians who didn’t agree with that, that sort of made it news. It was something that was being played out visibly in city hall and San Francisco, and through the courts.”

In Durham, the issue became especially newsworthy when two local gay men decided to challenge the North Carolina law by requesting a marriage license: John Ashbrook, a former editor for *The Herald-Sun*, said, “It became newsworthy as soon as Richard Mullinax indicated that he was going to challenge the law by going and applying for a marriage license or certificate...at the Register of Deeds office.” Clearly, local conflict events – often staged by local advocacy groups whose intention was to draw news coverage – fit the newspapers’ definitions of newsworthiness and provided an easy way for journalists to localize a hot national story.

As events began happening locally, the news value *proximity* came into play. “If something has proximity, if it happens in your town, it’s more newsworthy than if it happens three towns over,” explained Ashbrook. This news value also means that Durham events carried more newsworthiness for *The Herald-Sun*, while Raleigh events were more newsworthy for *The News & Observer*. Sarah Smith explained: “If there’s an event in Durham, *The News & Observer* may not cover it, because, you know, it’s a Raleigh paper....It doesn’t have the same news value for *The News & Observer*...because it happened in Durham....We were *The Herald-Sun*, and we covered Durham, so it *did* have a higher news value.” Local events’ proximity to each newspaper affected those events’

newsworthiness for each paper, and thus the way they were framed and covered by each paper.

The event-oriented nature of the same-sex marriage issue also fed into its newsworthiness. Event stories are the bread and butter of daily journalism, and both newspapers – and indeed most media organizations – rely on event stories more than issue stories. “Newspapers are driven by action,” said *News & Observer* reporter Tracey Hawkins. “What are people doing?” As noted above, these local conflict events provided an easy way for journalists to localize the same-sex marriage story for their readers.

In summation, same-sex marriage was deemed a newsworthy topic in the Triangle because it was an issue many people were interested in; many people felt it affected them; it had visibility nationally; it involved conflict; and local events made it more visible locally.

Journalistic Conventions: Source Finding

Journalists’ ideas about finding sources are part of News Culture; as journalists learn how to report the news, they learn certain routines for finding sources that make their jobs easier and help them deal with the time pressures of daily journalism. The ways reporters find sources are part of how journalism is “done.” Importantly, interviews with journalists at each newspaper made it clear that the ways they found sources contributed to the ways they framed same-sex marriage stories.

For both issue-based and event-based stories, journalists at each paper contacted sources who were the most *visible* and *vocal* about same-sex marriage. For instance, Bill Bradley, a reporter with *The News & Observer*, stated that when he wrote stories, he kept using the leaders of two local advocacy groups as sources. He said:

“One of the reason why I kept going back to the same groups in these stories is because locally, they were the two groups that really were the most vocal and were

sort of the most visible....They're the ones who had the most to offer, the most to say about this issue, so that's probably one of the reasons I kept going back to these two groups."

Scholars refer to the practice of using the same sources over and over again as source standardization (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 219). When this occurs, alternate sources and voices necessarily are left out of the framing process (p. 234). Similarly, John Ashbrook, formerly an editor at *The Herald-Sun*, also said that journalists find sources by starting with those who are most visible. "You start with the people who are public. You start with the town councilman who's gay, or you start with the organizations that have formed up, like North Carolina Equity Project, or whatever it's called, Equity NC."¹⁰

Once reporters have contacted the most visible and vocal sources, if they plan to delve deeper into the story (and depth depends on other factors, such as reporters' amounts of time, discussed above), they ask those sources for referrals to less obvious sources. Ashbrook continued, "You start with the public, and then you sort of winnow your way down from there. You ask people, 'Who do you know, who do you know, who do you know?' So you filter your way down from the public sphere to the more private sphere." The sources reporters first contact are the most public sources – heads of organizations, visible activists, public officials – with less obvious sources being contacted through those primary sources. Because journalists must find information efficiently in order to do their jobs, they depend on centralized sources of information that often are bureaucratically organized (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 219).

For event-based stories, journalists also tended to use sources who were at or involved with the event. Bill Bradley, for instance, covered a party thrown by gay and lesbian

¹⁰ The correct name for this organization is Equality NC.

people celebrating the advent of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts. To find many of his sources, he said, “I went there and just sort of started talking to people who were there.”

Yet when covering these same-sex marriage events, journalists also at times called sources on the other side of the issue in the interest of achieving balance in their stories. Sarah Smith, a former reporter at *The Herald-Sun*, covered a story in which she followed two gay men around the Durham County courthouse as they filed suit against the county for not granting them a marriage license. She said, “I thought about, ‘Well if I’m going to go on this, I need to make sure that I get some type of opposition.’ And I went ahead and looked up Sen. James Forrester¹¹ and had his number ready when I returned.” Because reporters conceived of same-sex marriage as a conflict story, and because the Cult of Balance emphasizes balancing sources in conflict stories, reporters often contacted sources who were on the “other side” of the issue.

Regardless of journalists’ need for balance in these stories, the default sources for journalists writing about same-sex marriage were those people who made themselves most visible, accessible, and vocal about the issue – i.e., LGBT activists and conservative activists. For instance, Bradley described the decision-making process that led to his story about a gay and lesbian celebration of same-sex marriage. In explaining why he chose this particular group’s event to write a story about, Bradley said,

“We could’ve easily led the story with the reaction from the conservative group, the Family Policy Council. And we may have. I mean, if they had organized a sort of protest that night, that was large, to sort of draw attention to their opposition to this decision, we may well have led the story with that. Or if not, it may have been up high. The reason we led the story with the celebration was because it was visible. I mean they had gathered at this coffee shop specifically to celebrate this decision.”

¹¹ North Carolina state senator who sponsored the state’s Defense of Marriage Act, which states that North Carolina does not recognize marriages between people of the same gender that have been performed elsewhere.

Because the gay and lesbian activists were more vocal and visible in this case, Bradley focused his story on them.

The journalistic convention of choosing the most vocal and visible sources is a method of dealing with the time pressures journalists face on a daily basis. Fico has written that the more constraints a reporter operates under, such as deadline pressure, the narrower the range of sources relied on for stories (cited in Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, p. 118). Because of the time and space limitations of daily journalism, reporters also are more likely to include sound bytes or rhetoric from the most visible and vocal sources rather than to delve deeply into their reasons behind their positional statements (this issue to be discussed in more depth in the section on “Structure of daily news stories,” below).

Journalists’ reliance on these sources in turn affected the framing of same-sex marriage at each paper.

Newsroom Structures

As I have already written in the section on “Newspaper concepts of ‘balance,’” editors at The News & Observer and The Herald-Sun seem to have emphasized balance differently to their staffs. At The News & Observer, journalists emphasize having balance within individual stories, while journalists at The Herald-Sun talk about balanced coverage being across several stories about the same subject. The ways these differing ideas of balance affected framing of same-sex marriage has already been discussed. The hierarchical structure of the newspapers’ newsrooms – with editors in a position to guide or dictate decisions to reporters – contributed to the ways same-sex marriage stories were framed by creating an environment in which editors’ ideas about the ways stories should be reported ruled the newsroom.

Reporters interested in career advancement know that it does them no good to cross editors, the ones largely in charge of that career advancement. In fact, reporters have an interest in *not* challenging editors' ideas. *News & Observer* reporter Tracey Hawkins said,

“Typically, for me, I generate my own story idea and go to the editors and tell them, ‘This is what’s happening.’ They either declare an interest in it or they don’t. If they do, then I proceed and write the story, and interview people, do the research, and write the story. If they’re not interested...you know, I can try to convince them again, but most times I just move on to the next thing.”

Hawkins said she was in that position “occasionally. Most of the time I have a good sense of what they would like to see. So I don’t usually have those kinds of conflict on a regular basis.”

In the interest of job security, then, journalists learn to avoid conflict by anticipating what kinds of stories will make their editors happy. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) have written about the subtle ways in which power is exercised in the newsroom, noting that whenever journalists “deduce what their supervisors want and give it to them, de facto control has been exercised” (p. 170). Notably, when asked whether they had ever had ideas for stories about same-sex marriage shot down, every reporter (including Ashbrook, an editor who also wrote stories) said, “No.” This response suggests that reporters had learned to anticipate what types of stories editors wanted to see. In this manner, few outright conflicts occurred within the newsroom; when those conflict situations did occur, the top-down structure of newsrooms encouraged reporters not to challenge their editors' ideas.

Editors' ideas about balance, newsworthiness, and story coverage trickle down to the reporters' level and become manifested in the stories as frames. For instance, editors at *The News & Observer* emphasized balance within stories, resulting in reporters writing stories containing nearly equal numbers of sources from the two perceived sides of the same-sex

marriage controversy (i.e., the Conflict frame). Editors at *The Herald-Sun*, on the other hand, emphasized faithful coverage of events, resulting in reporters writing stories that focusing on sources at individual events without necessarily including an equal number of opposition sources who were not at the event (i.e., the LGBT-celebratory frame).

Thus, the hierarchical newsroom structure helps explain why Organizational-level factors such as “Newspaper concepts of ‘balance’” and “Editors’ unease with newspaper reputations” contributed to the framing of same-sex marriage stories.

Schedule of Daily News Reporting

Finally, the schedule of daily news stories helped contribute to differences in story frames at each newspaper. The turnaround for daily news stories is extremely fast: Most stories at daily papers like *The News & Observer* and *The Herald-Sun* develop within one day. Said *News & Observer* editor Mary Kingsolver, “[For] a working news story...a great many of our stories, it’s just news. We have to get it in the paper.”

This daily news schedule puts time pressure on reporters, whose ability to find alternate sources may be limited. When deadlines loom, time pressures cause journalists to cut short their search for sources (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, p. 119). This time pressure seems to have been more keenly felt at *The Herald-Sun*, where fewer reporters were available to cover stories and thus individual reporters had less time to cover their stories. Having less time may have contributed to same-sex marriage stories with the LGBT-celebratory frame that focused largely on LGBT and LGBT-friendly sources and included few conservative sources. In contrast, reporters at *The News & Observer* seem to have had more time to cover their stories simply because there were more reporters working there, and each reporter had fewer daily assignments. Reporters who have more time to contact

opposition sources and include them in stories wrote same-sex marriage stories with a Conflict frame.

Additionally, when reporters write stories on a tight time schedule, they tend to rely on the most reliable and easily accessible sources (Kaniss, 1991, p. 73), which in the case of same-sex marriage were the most visible and vocal sources. In the case of same-sex marriage, the most visible and vocal sources were the conservative and LGBT advocates. Reporters' reliance on these polarized but readily available sources contributed to the use of the Conflict frame at *The News & Observer* and the LGBT-celebratory frame at *The Herald-Sun*.

Space limitations of newspaper stories further limit the amount of depth and nuance a story can contain. If an editor gives a reporter a certain number of column inches for their story, paragraphs containing nuance and explaining the deeper reasons behind those polarized sources' positional statements can wind up getting cut – or not being written at all.

The “Cult of Balance”

One tenet to which all respondents held – and indeed, to which all journalists are trained to hold – is the idea that journalists should be fair, balanced, and objective in their reporting. Practically speaking, this goal involves always including the “other side” in a story and making sure that alternate voices are included. This “Cult of Balance” is a journalistic norm, and it influenced framing of same-sex marriage stories by shaping journalists' ideas about how to gather sources and report news. Both Tuchman (1972) and Johnson-Cartee (2005) have written about the “strategic rituals” of objectivity and balance that journalists invoke to protect themselves from the risks of the trade (e.g., libel suits, cancelled subscriptions). Johnson-Cartee states that presenting “both sides” of an issue has become

institutionalized in journalism as a field and is now “simply required” of reporters (p. 130). Having become an institutionalized part of news culture, balance is a quality journalists take for granted as a necessary component of news stories.

As defined in this study, the Cult of Balance states that: (a) including balance and alternate points of view in stories is very important and is a hallmark of “good” journalism (especially when the story involves conflict); (b) balance is equated with a newspaper’s credibility as a news source; (c) journalists’ backgrounds and interests should not influence coverage; and (d) mainstream journalists should not be “advocates” for any particular group because mainstream journalism is very separate from editorial writing, opinion, or “advocacy” journalism. It is worthwhile to consider the four parts.

- *Including balance in stories is seen as good journalism.*

As already discussed in the above section on “Newspaper concepts of balance,” journalists at both newspapers were quick to emphasize the need for balance in news stories. Journalists are taught early in their careers the mantra of “balance, balance, balance” (Tuchman, 1972), and this news culture reality was reflected in the comments of respondents, who all pointed to the value of including “the other side” in news stories. For instance, former *Herald-Sun* reporter Sarah Smith said, “I think in any communication model you want to...make sure that you have the opposition.” Former *Herald-Sun* editor John Ashbrook concurred, saying, “It’s something you need. You need to bring in people who have an alternative point of view.” Including balance in news stories is a convention of news culture; it seen as the way journalism should be “done”: the fact that all respondents spoke favorably about including balance in news stories indicates the pervasiveness of the Cult of Balance in journalism as a field.

News & Observer reporter Bill Bradley emphasized the point that “good” journalism includes balance. As to why same-sex marriage stories in *The News & Observer* were more balanced than stories at *The Herald-Sun*, he replied,

“Why they had more balance? Because we’re better journalists. [laughter] No, I don’t know. You know, again, I think it’s important and, I think you have to get that in a story like this. I mean, no matter what your opinion is on the subject, I think you have to get that balance.”

Bradley’s joking reply that *News & Observer* stories were more balanced because they are better journalists is telling: With the joke he states that more balanced stories are the result of better journalism, thus, balance equals good journalism.

Furthermore, reporters believe balance is particularly necessary in stories about controversy. Bradley said, “We always try to get a balance. But again, when it’s an issue as divisive as this, it’s sort of obvious that you need...to get in both points of view.” Journalists are trained to include balance in stories involving conflict as a way to protect themselves and their newspapers against libel suits and unhappy readers (Tuchman, 1972, p. 665).

- *Balance is equated with newspaper credibility.*

As also discussed in the sections on “Newspaper concepts of balance,” and “Editors’ unease with newspaper reputations,” above, journalists seemed to equate balance and the appearance of objectivity in news stories with the newspapers’ credibility among readers. For instance, *News & Observer* editor Mary Kingsolver said,

“We talk a lot about our credibility, we talk a lot about, “will people trust what we put into the paper?” We talk a lot about balance....We are not an advocacy journal. We’re not an advocacy newspaper.... We discourage one source stories about anything [laughter], just going out and talking to somebody and letting them have their say, is something that we discourage strongly. So, so what you’re seeing is that consciousness that we don’t advocate, and that consciousness that most people, most of our readers want to hear different voices.”

Kingsolver and other journalists at *The News & Observer* value balance because of their belief that it enhances their credibility among readers. The logic appears to be that if a news story portrays only one side of a story, the newspaper will be seen as advocating for that side. Thus if a news story contains at least two viewpoints on the same issue, reporters can claim that they are treating the issue fairly and objectively (Tuchman, 1972, p. 665). And if journalists can claim to be reasonably objective, then readers should trust the newspaper as a credible news source.

As noted in the above section on “Editors unease with papers’ reputations,” former *Herald-Sun* reporter Tom Fisher indicated that the appearance of objectivity in news stories helps bolster newspapers’ credibility among readers. When asked whether *The Herald-Sun* had any policies about the language reporters should use when writing about gay and lesbian issues, he replied,

“With all those things, like, ‘is it pro-life, pro-choice?’ they say, ‘No, call it abortion rights, and pro-life,’ or whatever it was. But you just decide on something that becomes your style....You’re trying to send a message that you’re being as dispassionate as you can about it... Things start to take on political tones. And ideological tones. And you don’t want to do that as a newspaper. That’s when newspapers run into trouble. That’s why everyone says *The New York Times* is so liberal. And you look through *The New York Times* and it’s like all these little signposts, words...in their coverage. And then you can find the same on conservative sides....It’s just, you know, it attacks your credibility.”

According to Fisher, journalists try to “send the message” to readers that they are dispassionate and objective about the stories they cover. One way journalists send that message is through the language they use, with “dispassionate” words favored over language that is seen as value-laden.

It appears that journalists at both newspapers were trying to use the Cult of Balance (i.e., the appearance of objectivity) to enhance their credibility in the eyes of their readers. If

readers see that stories are balanced and that reporters are dispassionate, they will be more likely to trust the newspaper as a credible news source, and thus be more likely to buy the newspaper.

- *Journalists' backgrounds should not influence coverage.*

Another aspect of the Cult of Balance states that journalists' backgrounds should not influence their coverage of stories. When asked about the influence that LGBT editors and reporters had on the way gay and lesbian issues were covered, several journalists seemed uncomfortable with the idea that the backgrounds or interests of journalists affect newspaper coverage.

Editor John Ashbrook, an out gay man, said that he was more sensitive and aware of stories about gay and lesbian issues because of his background. He said, "We always covered gay stuff...I made it a point to cover gay stuff, sort of put it on the radar when I was in Chapel Hill [at *The Chapel Hill Herald*] and continued it over there [at *The Herald-Sun*]." However, after acknowledging the effect that his background has had on his sensitivity to seeing gay and lesbian issues covered, Ashbrook also made sure to point out that he had put many other things on his radar as well:

"I made a lot of things covering a priority. I made coverage of Latino issues a priority. Like creating a bilingual page. I created a Spanish supplement. I made coverage of health and fitness a priority. I created a section on exercise. So there were a lot of things that I did. I was into ideas, and changing things, and adding things, and just putting more into the paper."

Later on, Ashbrook also made sure to point out that although he was more sensitive to stories about gay and lesbian issues, he still covered those stories according to the standards of mainstream journalism:

“Being gay, too, of course made me aware of issues more strongly, just the way it would covering Jewish issues....[I had] a heightened sensitivity to some of those issues, and a greater interest in making sure they got covered....But once you decide to cover it, you still cover it within the...standards, within the confines of daily journalism. You know, it’s not point of view journalism. It’s not alternative journalism.”

Just as Ashbrook made sure to point out that his background did not unduly bias his coverage, former *Herald-Sun* reporter Tom Fisher articulated that reporters’ backgrounds should not influence their coverage at all. When talking about the papers’ coverage of minorities in general, he said, “That seems to be an institutional decision to have a black reporter covering the black community. It shouldn’t matter...I don’t think it helps. You just have to be a good reporter.” When asked whether having an LGBT reporter cover gay and lesbian issues helps improve coverage, he replied, “No. You know what helps, is simply getting contacts. That’s all it helps.” Though Fisher acknowledged that minority reporters may be better able to connect with their sources, in his opinion, good reporters should be able to cover all types of stories, regardless of background. In this view, it should not matter what background a reporter has because that background should neither be a help nor a hindrance to coverage.

Tracey Hawkins, a reporter for *The News & Observer*, also noted that reporters should strive to keep their backgrounds and opinions from influencing the way they cover stories. Discussing the story about same-sex marriage which she co-authored with another reporter, she said,

“I had some personal problems with the reporter who did the other half of the story, who I felt was *so* pro-gay marriage that she had a very difficult time finding someone who was not heavily invested in the issue....It made me not want to work with her again. Because...it was very difficult for her to let go of her own views and let the people talk.”

Here, Hawkins points out again that reporters' backgrounds should not influence the stories they write, implying that reporters should be merely conduits through which the news flows and through which "the people talk."

- *Journalists should not be "advocates" for any group, because mainstream journalism is separate from editorial writing, opinion, or "advocacy" journalism.*

The Cult of Balance also says to journalists that they should not advocate or write for any particular group in their stories. *News & Observer* reporter Bill Bradley, when asked whether he thought about gay and lesbian readers of the newspaper, said, "I'm not writing for any particular group. I try not to. In fact, if I did that, the story would be terrible. You just can't do that as a reporter." Bradley's response implies that writing with the LGBT community in mind would constitute advocating for them in a way that is unacceptable to mainstream journalism, which subscribes to the Cult of Balance.

The Cult of Balance also states that there should be a strict divide between mainstream news stories and editorial writing, opinion, or "advocacy" journalism.¹² Former *Herald-Sun* reporter Tom Fisher said,

"We have black reporters send us their clips, and they include columns, and their columns are very racially charged columns, and you know that you don't want this person as a reporter. Just the same was as if a Jewish reporter was writing a lot about Zionism, or I'm Catholic and I was writing a lot about the Papacy....That's not what newspapers are about. Leave that to the editorial writers or the columnists."

Journalists, then, are not supposed to write their opinions. If they do, their ability to be objective is called into question. Similarly, when asked for her opinion on why same-sex

¹² Editor John Ashbrook explained the difference between mainstream journalism and advocacy or alternative journalism: "Alternative journalism is where you are writing for a purpose, you are writing to effect the debate, to direct the debate. Whereas mainstream journalism...of course you are trying to affect the debate, but only to the extent that you're informing people, and giving people information so that they can make their own choices. There's not as much difference as some people think. But part of going and seeking alternative sources, seeking as many voices as you can, trying to find the voice of opposition, making sure that you're writing about something because there's a reason to, there's a timely issue – those are all hallmarks of mainstream journalism."

marriage stories in *The News & Observer* more frequently contained an equal number of sources from each side of the issue, editor Mary Kingsolver said,

“We talk a lot about balance. And so what some people would see as conflict, we see as balance. We are not an advocacy journal. We’re not an advocacy newspaper....The editorial page is completely separate from the news operation now....As part of our ethics policy, reporters are not allowed to suggest editorials to the editorial staff. We don’t attend their meetings. Sometimes they’ll have, an editorial will have someone coming in who wants to make a pitch to the editorial board, and they’ll let us sit in, and we’ll sit in on the meetings, but we don’t participate in any discussions about what the editorial will say. So we’re not an advocacy newspaper. We’re a general interest newspaper, and we work pretty hard to not advocate for anything, or have any sort of appearance of advocacy.”

In this quote, Kingsolver appears to equate “less balance” with advocating for a particular group. Though asked about balance in stories, Kingsolver spoke at length about the paper’s policy of dividing the news operation from the editorial operation. In her mind, it seems that including balance in stories is equated with objectivity and thus credibility, while she equates less balance with editorializing, advocacy, and opinions creeping into coverage.

These quotes illustrate that the divide between mainstream journalism and editorial writing or advocacy is important to journalists, who feel that their opinions should in no way color their reporting of stories. The Cult of Balance states that journalists should be dispassionate and objective, not opinionated.

The Cult of Balance’s impact on frames:

My interviews revealed ways that the Cult of Balance worked in the minds of respondents. Subscribing to the Cult of Balance, journalists believed they should include opposing sources for balance in their stories about same-sex marriage. While the Cult of Balance says that writers should include balance in any news story, the need for balance is particularly emphasized when an issue or story involves conflict. Bill Bradley, for example, wrote a story about a party thrown by Triangle gays and lesbians to celebrate same-sex

marriage in Massachusetts. In that story, he included a quote from a representative of a local conservative organization. Bradley explained why he included that source, even though the source was not at the event:

“This decision in Massachusetts was divisive. I mean there were a lot of people who didn’t agree with it, and who did not want same-sex couples to be given the right to marry. So I called him up because I’d talked to him before, and I know that his group is opposed to it...just sort of allow him to express his viewpoint.”

Similarly, former *Herald-Sun* reporter Sarah Smith wrote a story about a local gay couple who sued Durham County for a marriage license. In describing her thought process for finding sources, she said, “I thought about, ‘Well if I’m going to go on this, I need to make sure that I get some type of opposition,’ and I went ahead and looked up Sen. James Forrester and had his number ready when I returned.” The Cult of Balance in both of these cases said to the reporters that including conservative sources was important because alternate viewpoints should be included in stories, especially in stories involving controversy.

As one of the main tenets of mainstream journalism, the Cult of Balance shaped the ways that journalists thought about same-sex marriage as a dichotomous conflict story. Because journalists are trained to get views for and against the issue at hand, they tend to include sources representing the two most polarized opinions, excluding sources with more nuanced views that may be more representative of public opinion (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 131-132). This view enhances the likelihood of the conflict frame.

Because editors at *The News & Observer* emphasized balanced coverage within stories and particularly balanced coverage within same-sex marriage stories, the Cult of Balance appears to have had a stronger effect on stories written at that newspaper, resulting in more instances of the conflict frame. While journalists at *The Herald-Sun* also subscribed to the Cult of Balance (as many of the above quotes illustrate), editors’ emphasis on balance

within stories seems to have been mitigated by the fact that they were trying to run a newspaper with a dwindling amount of reporters and resources. While journalists at *The Herald-Sun* clearly believed that balance was important to good journalism, out of necessity they appeared to have focused often on covering the events at hand and including sources mainly from those events, rather than striving to include an equal number of sources from the opposing side of the issue. Thus, the Cult of Balance appears to have had a weaker effect on stories written at that newspaper.

Summary of Results

In summation, this study found that factors at Individual, Organizational, and News Culture levels effected the ways journalists at each newspaper framed same-sex marriage. Factors at the News Culture level – journalistic conventions of source finding and news values, hierarchical newsroom structures, the tight schedule of daily news reporting, and the “Cult of Balance” – are factors that influence virtually all mainstream news journalists. Some of these factors trickled down to influence factors at the Organizational and Individual levels.

Organizational factors that influenced framing were newspaper resources, newspapers’ conceptions of ‘balance,’ newspaper locations, editors’ awareness of their readers as consumers, and editors’ unease with papers’ reputations. Some of these factors, such as newspaper resources, also affected factors at the Individual level.

Factors at the Individual level that influenced framing included journalists’ conceptions of the same-sex marriage issue as primarily a conflict story, the amount of time that journalists at each newspaper had to report on same-sex marriage, and journalists’ backgrounds.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

Discussion

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) have proposed a concentric circle model of influences on media content, explaining influences on content through a series of levels, starting at the individual level, and then progressing through the media routines level, the organizational level, the extramedia level, and the ideological level. All of these factors, they claim, influence framing of media content.

Many of the factors identified in this study as influencing framing of same-sex marriage resonate with factors discussed in Shoemaker and Reese's model. This study identifies factors at the individual, organizational, and News Culture levels; likewise, Shoemaker and Reese identify factors at individual, media routines, and organizational levels; they also include factors at an extramedia level (factors outside the media) and an ideological level. Factors which resonated the most with this study included factors in Shoemaker and Reese's media routines level, organizational level, and extramedia level.

Shoemaker and Reese wrote that media routines (analogous to this study's News Culture) have been developed as practical responses to pressures and demands journalists face every day (p. 106-108). News values (definitions of newsworthiness), for instance, were developed out of a need to give audiences stories they want to read without journalists having a source of constant audience feedback. Lacking feedback from audiences, journalists

developed news values to have predictable, trustworthy ways of providing readers with stories of interest to them (p. 110). In the current study, journalists' definitions of newsworthy influenced journalists to think of same-sex marriage as a conflict story.

The media routine of objectivity also has been developed in response to risks that journalists face in their daily work – namely, the risk that journalists will be accused of bias. Audiences want reliable, credible information, yet often journalists are unable to confirm the truth-claims of sources because of swiftly approaching deadlines. To cope, journalists have developed the news routine of balancing opposing truth-claims against each other (p. 112-113; see also Tuchman, 1972). This news routine allows journalists to claim objectivity, even though the argument that these balancing strategies produce objectivity is “circular and self-serving,” according to Johnson-Cartee (2005, p. 133; see also Tuchman, 1972, p. 676). In this study, we have seen how journalists' reliance on the Cult of Balance influenced the framing of stories with the conflict frame, particularly at *The News & Observer*.

Journalists' methods of finding sources also influence framing. In their discussion of the extramedia level of factors influencing media content, Shoemaker and Reese state that sources have a large effect on media content. Without sources, they write, there would be no news (p. 178). However, they note that the ways in which sources are accessed by media influence framing. Not all sources have an equal chance of being contacted by journalists: Elites have a larger chance of being sources than non-elites, organizational sources more chance than individuals, and officials more chance than non-officials (p. 180-181). Allan (2004) has written that the journalistic routines of source finding involve relying on bureaucratically structured information sources: heads of organizations, spokespeople, or those sources who make themselves visible to journalists about particular issues. Because

journalists need to find reliable information quickly, they rely on elites over non-elites and organizational heads over individuals (p. 62-63).

In this study, journalists' reliance on those sources who were most visible and vocal sources about same-sex marriage influenced their reliance on LGBT advocates and conservative advocates for story content. Johnson-Cartee (2005) also noted journalists' "extremist orientation," that is, journalists' tendencies to choose sources representing the most extreme positions on an issue (p. 131-132). In this study, journalists' reliance on pro- and anti-same-sex marriage advocates influenced their use of the conflict frame.

Journalists' reliance on news routines hearkens back to what Entman (1993) wrote about news routines and framing. He noted that journalists' reliance on codes of objectivity and balance do not eliminate frames (p. 56). As we have seen, *News & Observer* journalists' reliance on "balance" in their stories was a large factor in producing the conflict frame. Akhavan-Majid and Ramaprasad (2000) concurred, adding that relying on journalistic routines that prefer official sources, canons of objectivity, and news values often privilege elite frames and trivialize less popular frames.

The dominant frame in the case of same-sex marriage appears to have been the conflict frame. Reliance on media routines influenced journalists at *The News & Observer* to frame same-sex marriage with the conflict frame. Notably, journalists at *The Herald-Sun* also relied on those same media routines, and they also conceived of same-sex marriage as a conflict story. Their framing of same-sex marriage with the LGBT-celebratory frame appears to have been in part a result of the newspaper's location but largely a result of financial constraints on the newspaper. Given more resources and reporters, it is quite possible that

reporters there would have contacted more opposition sources for their stories on same-sex marriage, thus producing a conflict frame.

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) have written that the more constraints are placed on journalists – such as time and space available for writing – the narrower the range of sources journalists will contact (p. 118-119). Similarly, Kaniss (1991) noted that time constraints on journalists limit their ability to contact alternative sources (p. 73). Fewer resources at *The Herald-Sun* limited the amount of time that *Herald-Sun* reporters could spend writing each story, thus fewer sources were contacted.

The newspapers' locations, combined with journalists' definitions of newsworthiness and with their awareness of their readers as consumers, defined which events each newspaper wrote about. Simply put, the newspapers wrote stories that were newsworthy for their own communities: *The Herald-Sun* wrote about Durham events because the Durham community was its target audience, while *The News & Observer* wrote about Raleigh and Wake County events. Additionally, the editors of each newspaper were aware of their audiences as consumers and directed reporters to write for those audiences.

Furthermore, because of the hierarchical structure of newsrooms – with editors having “subtle, unquestioned control” over reporters – reporters tend to learn what kinds of stories and story frames editors like and then give them those stories and angles (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, p. 169-170). Editors have more awareness of the effect of readership on the newspapers' bottom lines (p. 160-161), so they keep the newspapers' mainstream target audiences in mind (p. 190-192; see also Allan, 2004, p. 100; see also Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 240). Reporters are aware of the need to please their editors because editors control where their stories are placed in the paper. Thus, reporters end up writing stories for their editors

and for the mainstream, target audience (Kaniss, 1991, p. 85). As seen in this study, reporters at *The News & Observer* and *The Herald-Sun* tended not to challenge their editors' ideas about presentation of same-sex marriage stories or the need to include balance in same-sex marriage stories, nor did they propose any stories about same-sex marriage that fell outside preconceived "boxes" about how the issue should be presented to their audiences.

While journalists' conception of same-sex marriage as a conflict story and their amounts of time did affect framing of same-sex marriage, their individual backgrounds seem to have had little influence over frames. Weaver and Wilhoit (1991) wrote that individuals' characteristics might not affect content due to the strength of other factors such as media routines and organizational factors (p. 25; cited in Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, p. 78). However, the lack of information gathered in this study about reporters' individual backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences may indicate a limitation of this study. It would be interesting in future research to explore ways in which reporters' beliefs, backgrounds, and opinions may have influenced framing of same-sex marriage.

Conclusions

Ultimately, factors at the News Culture, Organization, and Individual levels had amounts of influence on the framing of same-sex marriage at each newspaper. While factors at the News Culture level were quite strong, Organizational-level factors ultimately had the most influence on framing at each newspaper. Individual-level factors had the least amount of influence on framing within the limits of this study.

As noted in Chapter 5, News Culture factors – especially the news routines of source finding, news values, and the Cult of Balance – had very strong effects on how reporters

thought to frame same-sex marriage. In particular, reporters' news values which prioritized conflict as a strong news value influenced all of the reporters in this study to think of same-sex marriage as essentially a conflict story. Even reporters at *The Herald-Sun* spoke of same-sex marriage in terms of the conflict around the story, mentioning the importance of "getting the other side," if not within individual stories then across coverage of the issues as a whole. The Cult of Balance also influenced journalists at each paper to think about same-sex marriage in terms of polarized conflict.

However, as we have seen, journalists did *not* frame same-sex marriage in terms of conflict at both newspapers. Although the News Culture-influenced Conflict frame was apparent in stories at *The News & Observer*, at *The Herald-Sun* the LGBT-celebratory frame was used more often. The main reason for the difference in framing at the two newspapers can be found in factors at the Organizational level.

At the Organizational level, *The News & Observer* and *The Herald-Sun* are rather different newspapers. As we have seen, *The News & Observer* was a larger paper with more resources and more reporters, while the smaller *Herald-Sun* was struggling to make ends meet with fewer reporters and dwindling resources. Because *The News & Observer* had more resources and more reporters, each reporter had more time to craft stories and contact alternate or balance sources; additionally, including balanced sources within individual stories was emphasized at *The News & Observer*. All of these factors at the Organizational level further influenced reporters at this paper to use the News Culture-influenced Conflict frame.

At *The Herald-Sun*, in contrast, reporters' use of the Conflict frame was mitigated by Organizational factors there. Because *The Herald-Sun* was a smaller newspaper with fewer

resources and reporters, reporters there had less time to spend on individual stories and thus less time to contact balancing sources. Perhaps because of these constraints, journalists' concepts of balance at *The Herald-Sun* emphasized "balance" as having balanced coverage across several stories on a topic rather than balance within individual stories. Thus, stories tended to be mostly about one "side" at a time. All other things being equal, it is likely that *Herald-Sun* reporters would have used the Conflict frame to report their stories. However, because reporters there had less time to craft stories, they tended to use the LGBT-celebratory frame rather than the Conflict frame.

The papers' different locations and demographic focuses also impacted their differences in framing. Because there is a more obvious out gay community in Durham than in Raleigh, *The Herald-Sun* had more gay-friendly same-sex marriage events to cover than did *The News & Observer*, again leading to the LGBT-celebratory frame at *The Herald-Sun*. And with more conservatives living in Raleigh, *The News & Observer* had more polarized or conservative same-sex marriage events to cover, leading to more of an emphasis on the Conflict frame at that paper.

Factors at the Organizational level also influenced factors at the News Culture level. Because the papers were different organizationally – having different resources and locations – their journalists interpreted differently the news routines of finding sources and managing the daily news schedule. The Cult of Balance also was interpreted differently according to differences in newspaper resources, as noted above. And the papers' definitions of newsworthiness were different because of the papers' different locations and audiences. These News Culture factors, while exerting strong influences on framing, were themselves influenced and mitigated by factors at the Organizational level.

Interestingly, Individual-level factors had the least effect on story frames. With the exception of journalists' amounts of time – influenced heavily by the Organizational-level factor of newspaper resources – factors having to do with journalists themselves were almost completely overridden by News Culture and Organizational-level factors. While this study did not explore journalists' backgrounds in depth, the findings of this study indicate that those backgrounds were less influential on story frames than the News Culture-influenced and organizationally influenced routines that journalists at each paper are trained to follow. Future studies should investigate the effects that journalists' individual backgrounds may have had on story frames.

In summation, media routines such as methods of source finding, definitions of newsworthiness, and the Cult of Balance influenced journalists at both newspapers to think of same-sex marriage as a conflict story. At *The News & Observer*, the newspaper's location and its amount of resources, as well as editors' emphasis on balance within stories, played into these News Culture factors and increased the likelihood that reporters would use the conflict frame. At *The Herald-Sun*, the newspaper's location, its amount of resources, and editors' emphasis on faithfully covering events mitigated the strength of the conflict frame, leading reporters to more frequently use the LGBT-celebratory frame instead.

Chapter 6: Implications and Recommendations

Implications of the Research

The overall dominance of the Conflict frame indicates that the issue of same-sex marriage in 2004 fit into the Conflict/Definition Phase of framing. Miller and Riechert (2003) have outlined four phases of the framing process. In the Emergent Phase, an issue is propelled into the news by an event or events that are newsworthy, and the content of stories focuses on the triggering event rather than the underlying issue (p. 111-112). In the Conflict/Definition Phase, stakeholders¹ compete for media attention and framing power. This conflict between stakeholder groups is the main driving force of the news: The conflict provides drama and draws readers to newspapers, and it also motivates stakeholders to increase their efforts to shape media content (p. 112). In the Resonance Phase, one frame resonates with the public and becomes dominant, forcing competing frames to adopt the language of the dominant frame in order to have a say in the conversation at all. And in the Equilibrium or Resolution Phase the winning frame becomes so dominant that it seems “natural,” while competing frames are delegitimized (p. 113).

In the Triangle – and indeed, across the country – the stakeholders in the debate over same-sex marriage were the LGBT activists and conservative activists who continually produced newsworthy events to draw attention to their side of the argument and influence

¹ Miller and Riechert (2003) define stakeholders as “individuals and groups in the policymaking process that stand to win or lose as a result of a policy decision” (p. 110).

media content. The fact that these polarized groups continually competed for media attention through pseudo-events – protests and lawsuits designed to attract media attention (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, p. 187) – indicates that framing of same-sex marriage was in the Conflict/Definition Phase of framing during the period of this study. Local activists were competing with one another for media attention and for framing power over the issue, and the resulting conflict between the groups was a key news value in drawing media attention and providing drama for readers. Because neither the LGBT activists nor the conservative activists seem to have gained the upper hand in this debate, it will be interesting to see whose frame becomes the dominant way of thinking about same-sex marriage as the issue develops beyond the scope of this study.

Implications of Results for Coverage of Minorities

Because of the pervasive influence of organizational priorities (i.e., profit) and of news routines privileging dominant viewpoints and sources, it often is difficult for journalists to include minority groups effectively within mainstream news. Because of the profit orientation of newspapers, journalists learn to approach news coverage with certain assumptions about their target audiences in mind. Journalists such as those writing for *The News & Observer* and *The Herald-Sun* generally think of their audiences as the white, middle-class, well-educated target audience, generally most like themselves, like most of their newsroom colleagues, and most attractive to advertisers – though it is unlikely journalists consciously make this latter connection (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, p. 190-192). As Shoemaker and Reese (1996) have said, “Newspapers have traded a wide coverage of all types of households for deep penetration in the target audiences most attractive to

advertisers – high-income professionals, whom journalism professor Conrad Fink calls the ‘champagne crowd’” (p. 191-192).

These assumptions about audiences often make it difficult for mainstream journalists to include minority groups in newspaper coverage because those minority groups are not considered part of the “desired public sphere of their audience” (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 240). As Allan (2004) has written, the mainstream assumption that journalists “report the truth” (i.e., objective versions of reality) is complicated by the question: “Whose truth?” (p. 46-47). In mainstream journalism, journalists generally consider “the truth” to equal *mainstream* truth, the truth with which mainstream audiences will identify. This “truth” – or view of reality – is comprised of certain assumptions about the social world with which journalists expect their mainstream readers to identify. These assumptions about the social world necessarily shape the content of news stories (Allen, 2004, p. 85).

In this study, several journalists indicated that the LGBT population was not considered part of mainstream journalists’ “sphere of audience.” For instance, when asked whether he thought about gay and lesbian readers when writing stories, *News & Observer* reporter Bill Bradley responded, “I’m not writing for any particular group...In fact, if I did that I’d probably, you know, the story would be terrible.” Without consciously thinking about it, though, Bradley likely does writes for a group: the mainstream audience targeted by *The News & Observer*.

Johnson-Cartee (2005) has written that mainstream journalists sometimes even will ignore the newsworthiness of minority groups because of their awareness of their target audiences and because they do not want to offend them by drawing attention to those fringe groups (p. 240). One example of this phenomenon has been coverage of gays and lesbians,

who were not considered worthy of news coverage until the late 1980s (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 240), when it became clear that the AIDS epidemic was not confined to the gay population but was a threat to the general population (Gross, 2001, p. 101-102). For an example closer to home, consider the editors at *The News & Observer* who at times have been “squeamish” about covering news about gay and lesbian issues.² Because the primary mission of newspapers is to make money, with other goals such as serving the community being secondary (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, p. 144-147), editors and reporters at times end up tailoring their news judgment to assign and write stories appealing to (or at least not upsetting to) their mainstream audiences.

The use of news values to define “what’s news” also has implications for minority coverage. With journalists approaching “news” and news values with a mainstream audience in mind, the conflicts or problems which qualify as newsworthy often will be the conflicts or problems of the white, middle-class, well-educated target audience. Therefore, minorities will be covered when they are part of a problem for the mainstream – or when they make enough noise (e.g., through protests or rallies) to warrant media attention. Furthermore, because a “newsworthy” event (i.e., an event newsworthy to mainstream audiences) is required to propel an issue into the news (Miller and Riechert, 2003, p. 111), many issues and problems important to minorities may languish uncovered by mainstream news organizations. The AIDS epidemic, for instance, was extremely newsworthy to the LGBT community for years before it was covered consistently by mainstream media because it was not considered newsworthy to mainstream audiences (Gross, 2001, p. 102).

² See page 61 of this study.

In this study, former *Herald-Sun* editor John Ashbrook noted that relying on straight news values can complicate coverage of minority groups:

“Typically, newspapers cover things where there are problems. You know, [with] Latinos, there’s not enough ESL teachers. Latinos don’t understand the court system, Latinos are crowding our hospital emergency rooms because they’re low-income and don’t have insurance. So there’s all that interaction with all the things you already cover: the schools, the government, courts. With Asian-Americans, it’s not like that. You don’t have Asian-Americans going to jail, lingering on the streets looking for day jobs, or, that kind of thing. But, you also don’t have that group in your paper often enough to fully reflect your community.

Relying on straight news values which focus on problems and conflict to spark news coverage may not be a good strategy for coverage fully reflective of communities and their issues – particularly if sub-groups such as Asian Americans or the LGBT community are not obvious to mainstream society.³ *News & Observer* reporter Bill Bradley doubted whether there could ever be an LGBT beat because of the LGBT community’s lack of alignment with news values:

“I don’t know if it could be a full time beat. I just don’t know how much news the gay community generates here. My impression in the past few years has been not a lot. There’s just not a lot of news to be found there. I mean, that’s not to say that their issues aren’t important. I get the sense that their issues tend to be, you know...tend to be relatively the same. It’s not very often you can find a new way to write about some of these issues.”

Because the issues important to minorities such as the LGBT community do not often generate “news” in the mainstream sense, mainstream reporters generally do not regularly cover these communities.

When minority groups *are* covered, they often will be framed through the eyes of the mainstream, in ways that make sense to the mainstream – not necessarily in ways that

³ Further complicating the matter, Asian Americans also have tended to be “more insular,” noted Ashbrook, another reason reporters have difficulty including them in coverage. Because gay men and lesbians are a self-identified minority and have no readily discernable physical characteristics to mark them as “gay,” reporters could encounter similar problems covering this community.

resonate with the minority groups themselves (Akhavan-Majid and Ramaprasad, 2000, p. 45). Such coverage often includes the preconceived stereotypes or frames of mainstream society (Norris, 1995, p. 358). Akhavan-Majid and Ramaprasad (2000) noted that it is journalists' news routines that often reproduce dominant, mainstream frames while trivializing or even blocking the less popular frames of less powerful sources (p. 48-49). In this study, the frames suggested by LGBT sources at times were unintentionally trivialized by reporters.

For instance, *News & Observer* reporter Bill Bradley wrote a brief news story about a poll conducted by a research company for *The News & Observer*, WRAL-TV, and WUNC Radio. The poll asked, "Should North Carolina and the U.S. Constitutions be amended to prohibit gay and lesbian couples to marry, or is it enough to prohibit marriage by law without amending the Constitution?" The poll found that 56 percent of respondents favored prohibiting gay marriage through an amendment, 38 percent disagreed, and six percent were not sure. Bradley's lead framed the story to emphasize those who were opposed to same-sex marriage, saying, "A new poll suggests that most North Carolina voters would back" a state constitutional ban on same-sex marriage. Bradley could have framed the story emphasizing the ambivalence of public opinion by stating that slightly more than half of North Carolinians would support a constitutional ban. Or, he could have chosen a frame emphasizing the change in public opinion over time. Indeed, at the end of the story, Bradley included a quote from a local lesbian, who framed the poll results to emphasize that more North Carolinians now are in favor of same-sex marriage than were during a previous poll.

Though Bradley did well to include this alternate point of view, it should be noted that by placing this alternate frame at the end of the story, he decreased the chances that

audience members would read it. As any journalism student knows, the information most important to a news story is placed near the top so that readers can stop reading halfway through with the assurance that they have read the most important facts. The placement of the alternate, LGBT framing of the situation near the bottom of the story grants her comment less weight, and it privileges the points of view of those opposed to same-sex marriage, whose comments were placed closer to the beginning of the story. While the story achieved “balance” by including the alternate LGBT point of view, it also privileged the mainstream view that most people North Carolinians oppose same-sex marriage.

Recommendations for Improved Minority Coverage

The unconscious mainstream orientations of many journalists point to the value of employing minority journalists at mainstream media organizations. Approaching their work with different backgrounds and assumptions about the world, minority journalists can help shift the thinking of the newsroom from mainstream, white, middle-class coverage toward viewpoints that include the news and issues important to many different groups of people.

For example, former *Herald-Sun* editor John Ashbrook, when asked about the value of employing minority journalists, related how employing an African American reporter had helped *The Chapel Hill Herald*⁴ improve its coverage of an African American event. For many years, he said, the town of Chapel Hill had held a street fair called Apple Chill. And for several years, young African American men had held an after-fair parade in which they drove up and down the street with motorcycles and cars; this after-fair also was covered by the newspaper. Ashbrook said,

⁴ *The Chapel Hill Herald* is the Chapel Hill branch of *The Herald-Sun*. Ashbrook served as editor there before moving to *The Herald-Sun*.

“[In] the white newsroom, we used to cover it primarily in terms of the problems it caused: traffic, and potential for violence...But when we had a black reporter in *The (Chapel Hill) Herald* newsroom...he was like, “Hey, that’s just profiling. That’s what people do. They’re just showing off, they’re just showing their cars.” And for him it was like a whole different perspective...So yeah, maybe we don’t just talk to the police, and we talk to the people who are causing problems, maybe we talk to some people to find out how they feel about their cars and their motorcycles and their dogs. You know, cover it a different way. Maybe it nudged us to an editorial position, that said, “Hey town, instead of trying to legislate it, why don’t you embrace it, and make it part of the event?”

As a result of having a minority reporter’s perspective in the newsroom, the newspaper’s coverage of this event shifted from a mainstream, white perspective to one more inclusive of minorities. Employing more minorities in newsrooms, then, is one way to improve coverage of minority groups.

However, newspapers must do more than simply employ members of diverse groups. For minority reporters to speak out about issues and stories, they must feel that their ideas and opinions about minority issues will be respected and taken seriously. For instance, *News & Observer* editors Mary Kingsolver stated that several out gay editors at the newspaper were very respected. She said that when gay and lesbian issues became newsworthy, these editors’ opinions were sought out and their judgment about coverage taken into account. The value of having an open and inclusive newsroom, then, is clear.

Newspapers can take several other steps to encourage inclusive newsrooms. First, newspaper management could provide diversity training for journalists. Such training could help journalists become more aware of the ways they could include diverse voices in their stories and also ways they could counteract their own unconscious biases. As such, providing diversity training would amount to investing in improved coverage of the community. As already noted, having diverse opinions in the newsroom helps news coverage more closely reflect the true diversity of communities.

Diversity training also would help reporters be more aware of the need to include diverse sources within their own beats. Because reporters are responsible for staying in touch with sources on their beats, focusing on developing a diverse group of sources would increase the likelihood of more minority sources within their stories and learning of issues newsworthy to diverse sources. Diversity training for editors would ensure that they would emphasize to reporters the need to include diverse sources, a subtle influence on reporters in the hierarchical structures of newsrooms where reporters want to please their editors.

When reporters are aware of diverse sources within their beats, they also will be more likely to engage in *mainstreaming* of diverse sources. Mainstreaming is the technique of including diverse sources' ideas, opinions, and stories in news coverage without emphasizing their minority status. For instance, a Valentine's Day story that profiles several couples could include a profile of a gay or lesbian couple without emphasizing the social conflict surrounding homosexuality. Mainstreaming is one way to include diverse viewpoints and ideas in the newspaper without resorting to stories that emphasize conflict and repeat polarized rhetoric. *News & Observer* editor Mary Kingsolver mentioned that one way she hoped to include diverse voices in newspaper coverage was by encouraging reporters to think about diverse groups when conceiving story ideas. For instance, she envisioned the newspaper's new Families Beat reporter writing stories inclusive of gay and lesbian families and how they lived their lives in the Triangle.

Second, newspapers also could develop a beat specifically for coverage of diverse groups. However, newspapers should be careful in designing this beat. Kingsolver noted that, in her experience, traditional "minority" beats tended to limit coverage of minorities to one reporter only. "Nobody else wrote about minorities," she said. Additionally, she warned that

“minority” beats tended to be confining, limiting that reporter to a narrow definition of minorities (i.e., race issues). As an alternative, she recommended *The News & Observer’s* method of having a “demographics” beat. The demographics beat is broadly defined, she said, and allows that reporter to engage with many different groups and stories, such as immigration, gay and lesbian, and racial issues. At the same time, though, reporters in all beats should include diverse sources in their stories so that coverage of minority groups is not “ghettoized” or confined to only one reporter’s beat.

Third, journalists also could try to alter their ideas and assumptions about their audiences. Rather than thinking just of the “mainstream” audience, journalists could strive to think about the sub-groups that comprise their audience. Kingsolver noted that many subcultures comprise her newspaper’s audience and that some groups get more coverage than do others. “They do tend to pay more attention to the subculture of the Baby Boomers who came of age in the ‘60s and ‘70s,” she said. “So you have to be conscious that there are others out there, and they can make the case for the same kind of attention.” Importantly, Kingsolver noted, reporters and editors should strive to remember that often “something that’s of interest to a smaller group of people still is a news story.”

Fourth, with journalists writing with an awareness of their audiences, it also would be helpful for journalists – particularly editors – to show publishers the value in covering diverse groups. While publishers are focused on the bottom line and profit, editors and reporters—while aware of the business side—must continue to focus on coverage reflective of the community as a whole rather than just the traditional mainstream audience model. John Ashbrook noted that when *The Herald-Sun* made coverage of Latinos a priority –

through a free, Spanish-language newspaper supplement produced once a week, coverage of Latino issues improved throughout the newspaper. Ashbrook explained,

“It would be a place where you provide a public service, but also it would enrich the daily coverage of Latino issues because you would develop sources, you would develop more expertise. Every time you send someone out to cover Dia de los Muertos, they would be happy to explain what Dia de los Muertos was, and once you got past that, you’d be getting deeper into the culture. And in fact we did that, and it led to wonderful stories by having this page. It led to stories in all sections of the paper, which made the paper much more reflective of what was going on.”

This public service orientation does not always have to manifest itself as free newspaper supplements to specific groups. If journalists simply commit to being aware of different groups and to covering stories and issues important to them, coverage of under-represented groups likely would improve in all sections of the newspaper.

News & Observer reporter Tracey Hawkins also recommended ways that reporters can attempt to delve more deeply into the issues that underlie their sources’ positional statements and rhetoric. With any story, it is easy to let sources stick with their “10 favorite words,” she said, but when news stories simply repeat rhetoric, “you can’t really get to the heart of things. You can’t really understand anything.” To help readers better understand the issues important to those involved in news stories, Hawkins said that she tries to talk with her sources about the things that are important in their lives. “You want to try to get at what’s driving people. What is it that, about their lives, that means the most to them, and how do they make their decisions accordingly?... You try to get people to talk about what’s important in their lives.” Talking with sources about the things important to them can reveal more depth. If included in news stories, this depth could help inform readers’ ideas about issues in a more meaningful manner than simple pro and con conflict stories that focus on the polarized positional statements of two sides.

This method admittedly could take more time than simply reporting the oft-repeated rhetoric that sources can rattle off in five minutes. Thus, time-strapped reporters with fewer resources may find this recommendation difficult to implement. However, if reporters strive to keep this interviewing technique in mind and use it whenever possible, coverage could still be improved in depth and thoughtfulness.

Fifth, reporters and editors also might achieve more depth in their stories if they were to shift their ideas of what constitutes “balanced coverage.” While *The Herald-Sun*’s ideas about balanced coverage – balance *across* several stories, not within individual stories – appears to have been born out of necessity produced by financial constraints, this method of balancing coverage did – at least in the case of same-sex marriage – allow for more in-depth treatment of issues important to sources.⁵ Because reporters at *The Herald-Sun* rarely included equal numbers of opposition sources for “balance” in their stories about same-sex marriage, but instead focused on covering one “side” at a time, their stories were able to delve more deeply into the issues pertinent to that side (i.e., through the LGBT-celebratory frame which privileged LGBT points of view and at times positioned readers “inside” LGBT sources heads).

In contrast, the idea of balanced coverage as being balanced *within* individual stories presents the problem of one “side” necessarily being privileged over the other because one point of view must always be presented first and another second. As noted previously, same-sex marriage stories written at *The Herald-Sun* explored sources’ issues in seven out of the 10 stories examined, while *News & Observer* same-sex marriage stories explored issues in

⁵ Admittedly, most *Herald-Sun* same-sex marriage stories examined in this study focused on pro-same-sex marriage sources rather than anti-same-sex marriage stories. It would be interesting, in future research, to examine stories focusing on anti-same-sex marriage sources and to compare how deeply those stories delved into sources’ issues as compared with how deeply stories about pro-same-sex marriage sources delved into issues.

three out of 10 stories.⁶ If journalists were to shift their ideas of “balance” toward a model emphasizing balance *across* a number of stories, they might be able to delve more deeply into issues of importance to sources. Furthermore, both positions should be outlined at the beginning of the story, rather than waiting until further into the copy to bring up the alternative view.

Sixth, journalists writing about controversial conflict stories also could focus on contacting sources with information relevant to the issues rather than relying on dualistic, pro-con sourcing techniques. In his study of the modern myths used in news stories about same-sex marriage, O'Donnell (2004) noted that journalists used the “strategic ritual” of balance (Tuchman, 1972) to claim objectivity; but he found that journalists’ quoting of conservative sources for balance merely emphasized the conflict surrounding the situation without giving the audience any real information about the issue. For instance, in his study, O'Donnell analyzed a news story about a gay man who had had a son with the help of a surrogate mother. The reporter quoted the gay father and others who were asked to comment on the process of surrogacy; then, conservative sources were invited to comment on the morality of the arrangement and the welfare of the child. O'Donnell observed that the authority of the conservative sources as experts in child welfare should be questioned. “If the concern was really about child welfare then surely a paediatrician or child psychologist would have been a better choice to achieve a strategic balance,” he noted.

If journalists become aware of the need for credible information to confirm or deny sources’ truth-claims, they might be able to report the news with greater depth and give readers real information, rather than simply parrot the rhetoric of sources for and against

⁶ In my initial qualitative content analysis of 10 stories from each newspaper, I found that *The Herald-Sun* explored issues “some” in six stories and “deeply” in one story, while *The News & Observer* explored issues “some” in two stories and “deeply” in one story.

certain issues. Former *Herald-Sun* editor John Ashbrook noted the importance of contacting credible sources such as legal experts when reporting about controversial topics. He said,

“It’s one thing for a person with a point of view to say, ‘We need to have the right to marry because of X, Y and Z.’ It’s another for a person without an axe to grind, an impartial observer, to say, “This is what the law says, and this is how the law is applied differently to married versus unmarried couples.” So you want to provide information from as many sources as you can, and, including sources who are not part of the debate.”

News & Observer editor Mary Kingsolver also said that including credible sources with legitimate information marked the difference between stories that focused on conflict and stories that delved more deeply into issues. “You can always go out and just find somebody who’s going to say something critical,” she said. “You can always do that. But then you have to ask yourself...what do they bring to the table that you think people should listen to them?”

Shifting editors’ and reporters’ assumptions about balance, sourcing methods, reporting methods, and their audiences will take work and time. Diversity training for journalists could begin the process of shifting journalists’ mindsets from one that view audiences as mainstream and monolithic toward a conception of audiences as varied, diverse, and multicultural. While some strides have been made in the last two decades, all media, including newspapers, need to do more to increase the diversity of newsrooms. With more diverse voices contributing to the conversations shaping news coverage, journalists will have more resources and points of view to draw upon. More opinions and ideas will be shared, and different ways of looking at the world will have a greater chance of reaching readers.

If the goal of newspapers is to inform readers, then coverage containing alternate frames would go a long way toward challenging readers and their preconceived notions about societal structures and norms. If journalists change the ways in which they view the world, then they may be able to frame stories in more inclusive and insightful ways. Readers then

could be better informed and make decisions based on a variety of viewpoints. If journalists strive for objectivity, they should be open to alternate frames and to not privilege, however unconsciously, dominant viewpoints. The recommendations outlined here could help reporters and editors be more open to and inclusive of the views of all minority groups.

Appendix A: Coding Sheet

Qualitative Content Analysis Study of Newspaper Articles, Spring, 2005

Newspaper: _____
Reporter(s): _____
Title: _____
Topic: _____
Date: _____
Page: _____
Word count: _____

Conflict frame

Is the idea of conflict between two (or more) groups mentioned in this story?

Is the idea of conflict emphasized in this story? Is conflict the main point?

Are many, nuanced points of view represented, or is the conflict presented as polarized?

Event v. Issue-based

event = anything that is happening once, for first time, where story written for “timeliness”

Is an event the main reason this story was written? (Does discussion of the event and players involved drive this story?)

Is exploring an issue the main reason this story was written?

Does the reporter delve into the issues behind the different sides’ positions?

Are unexpected viewpoints presented?

Sources

What sources are used?

Why do these sources seem to have been chosen?

Are sources from many sides of the issue quoted (not just two for “balance”)?

Do any sources offer neutral analysis?

Which sources seem to have been given more weight in the story (by placement or number)?

Do all of the sources “fit” in the story? Would other sources have been more helpful?

Topics / Language / Quotes

How is the story structured?

What other topics and/or facts have been mentioned in this story? (Are these being mentioned repeatedly across stories?)

What themes, images, arguments emerge from story that you’ve seen in other stories?

Other things of note?

What’s been left out?

Appendix B: Initial Contact E-mail

Getting the Story Straight? Coverage of same-sex marriage by the (Durham) *Herald-Sun* and the (Raleigh) *News & Observer*
PI: Grace Z. Camblos

Dear Mr./Ms. X:

I am a graduate student at the University of North Carolina's School of Journalism and Mass Communication, and for my master's thesis I am investigating ways that the Durham *Herald-Sun* and the Raleigh *News & Observer* covered same-sex marriage during 2004 and early 2005. Because you were (a reporter who covered same-sex marriage at your paper during the time period I am studying) (an editor at the paper during that time and responsible for coverage of local issues), I would like to interview you for my study.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact my faculty advisor, Prof. Jan Yopp, or me; you will find contact information for each at the end of this e-mail.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113, or by e-mail to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.

If you agree to be interviewed, I'd like to set up a time within between Sept. 26 and Oct. 15 to meet with you. The interview would take between one and two hours, and I would be happy to conduct it at a time and place convenient to you.

During the interview, I would ask you about factors and decisions contributing to your newspaper's coverage of same-sex marriage stories during 2004 and early 2005. I would record the interview using an audio recorder and later transcribe the interview. In order to protect your privacy and the integrity of the data, I would use a pseudonym and a generic title to identify you and describe your role at the newspaper in both the interview transcript and in the final thesis report.

After the initial interview, I might also ask to contact you for a brief follow-up interview for the purpose of clarifying answers. This follow-up interview would last 10 to 30 minutes, and it could possibly take place via telephone.

If you are willing to be included in my study, please e-mail me back at grace@unc.edu. I will call you at your office within the next several days to make sure you received this e-mail. Thank you for your time!

-Grace Camblos

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Appendix C: Interview Guide

Getting the Story Straight? Coverage of same-sex marriage by the (Durham) Herald-Sun and the (Raleigh) News & Observer

PI: Grace Camblos

The term “gay” will be assumed in the interview to include gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people.

Can you walk me through the process of how a story goes from an idea to print?

Reporters: How do you find sources when you’re covering a story?

Follow-up: When you’re writing a story about the gay community, what sort of sources come to mind?

When you’re writing a story for the paper, do you feel like you have to balance sources against each other?

Follow-up: If so, is that always the case, or just with some stories/issues? What makes the difference?

How do you decide if something is “newsworthy”?

Follow-up: What does the term “newsworthy” mean to you?

How did you end up covering same-sex marriage?

Your stories:

Do you remember where you got the idea for this story?

What would you say the story angle for this piece was?

How did you figure out what sources you wanted to contact?

Were there any sources you thought about getting that you couldn’t get?

In this story, what sort of things did you have to leave out due to time and space constraints?

How would you compare the amount of coverage same-sex marriage has gotten in 2005 to the amount it received in 2004?

Follow-up: Why the difference?
How do you decide when an issue isn't newsworthy anymore?

In general, are your paper's stories more based on events, or on issues?

Follow-up: Why?
What kind of long-term planning happens in the newsroom?

Does the paper have any policies on how minorities should be covered?

Follow-up: Do you think the paper considers gay people when it thinks about minority coverage?
In general, is your paper's minority coverage more proactive (involving planning) or reactive?

Do you, or does the paper, cover gay issues regularly?

Follow-up: What other minority beats does the paper have?
Do you think gay issues should constitute regular beat?

Are there any newsroom policies on how gay stories should be covered?

Follow-up: Are there policies on the kinds of language reporters should use when covering gay stories?

Editors: What sort of planning did you do when you were thinking about how the paper would cover same-sex marriage?

Follow-up: What issues did you consider?

What percentage of your readership is gay?

What percentage of your readership is liberal? is conservative?

Follow-up: How does awareness of those reader blocs affect what stories get written?

Have there been any story ideas about gay marriage that have been shot down?

Follow-up: What were they?
Why were they shot down?

Do you think most people at the paper are comfortable covering stories about the gay community?

Follow-up: Do you know what percentage of the newsroom staff is gay?
How does that affect what stories get covered?
Are people here pushed to cover stories they're not necessarily comfortable with?

How comfortable are you covering stories about the gay community?

How comfortable are you, personally, with the idea of allowing people of the same gender to marry?

Follow-up: Do you think this point of view informs your coverage of the issue?

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