Fishing in the Media: Mainstream Print News and the Commercial Fishing Industry in Texas

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Oyster fishers 'up a creek,' Say cancellation of season means hardship for coast.
–Lanterman and Bonavita, August 28, 1987 (Houston Post)

Angry shrimpers jam ship channel.
–The Houston Post, July 23, 1989

Decision on TEDs delayed, Judge criticizes shrimper tactics.
–Wiessler, July 29, 1989 (Houston Chronicle)

Judge: Foes of shrimpers have a case, Ruling on hold as naturalists talk of boycott.
–Lewis and Lanterman, July 29, 1989 (Houston Post)

All fishing banned in the bay, Disaster area declared by governor.
–Moran and Tichich, August 2, 1990 (Houston Chronicle)

Quotidian news headlines announce three significant economic-environmental events in the Galveston-Houston region. Anthropologists (Appadurai 1990; Liechty 1995; Yang 1997, 1999) and critical mass media theorists (Grossberg et al. 1998; Hall et al. 1978; Kellner 1995) contend that mainstream mass media play a significant role in the ideological construction of meanings and material relations of power in contemporary societies. In the United States, we live in a society where mass media have taken on a significant role in defining the contours of local and national environmental issues. Access, utilization, and regulation of marine resources have become so intertwined with mass media representations that widespread perceptions of fishers by outsiders are a factor in increased public pressures for more stringent commercial fisheries management (Maril 1995:163, 173-174; Smith and Jepson 1993:44-45).

To better understand widespread perceptions of commercial fisheries production we might first inquire: What kinds of representations do mainstream presses contribute to the mass media saturated public forum in which contemporary environmental governance regimes are debated and shaped? But in order to accurately evaluate these available texts, we must take a further step and relate these mass media representations to the economic, environmental, and political relationships that structure both fisheries production and the social material conditions of production for fishers. Using the empirical case of commercial fisheries harvesters working in the Galveston Bay region of Texas, I examine the narratives, images, and cultural themes about commercial fishers found in the regional mainstream print press. And I take that analysis one step further by situating these representations in the material and ideological context of both fisheries production and local, state, and national conflicts over marine fisheries resources. As does Weeks in this issue, I contend that better understanding of the role of mass media in environmental conflicts requires systematic examination of the meanings available in the public forum while critically attending to the goals of the meaning makers.

Critical mass media theorists (Curran and Gurevitch 1996; Grossberg et al. 1998; Hall et al. 1978; Kellner 1995; Yang 1997, 1999) investigate contemporary mass media production processes. They focus attention on the economic, political, and ideological relationships and practices through which the published products are generated. At a more intimate level of investigation, ethnographers working in newsrooms study the quotidian practices of reporters and editors engaged in the production processes (Eliasoph 1997; Soloski 1997). All of these efforts serve as important reminders that the streams of printed (and televised) products available in the public forum embody relations of power and are anchored in specific configurations—cultural, political, and economic relationships—even before they are introduced into the public forum. Although my work draws on critical analyses of mass media, this piece is neither an ethnographic nor a political economic analysis of the mainstream corporate production processes that generate a stream of published products. Rather this piece analyzes and evaluates the available and changing stream of published products as those representations relate to the political economy of fisheries production and ongoing conflicts over marine resources. I proceed while maintaining a critical awareness that the stream of published representations does not stand outside of

its own conditions of production. My aim is to bring together an analysis of texts and images, which is motivated by cultural studies, and a political economic ethnography of the industry that is portrayed in those mass media representations.

The voices, omissions, images, cultural themes, and literary devices through which fisheries producers, production, and environmental issues are represented in the mass media contribute to relationships of power between competing marine resource users in obvious, as well as subtle, ideological and material ways. Smith and Jepson (1993) systematically documented the mass media's contribution to the social and economic effects of negative cultural stereotypes about commercial fishers in Florida. Fishers experienced ostracism, destructive stress, and material abuse as a direct result of press coverage. Eventually they were banned from accessing the marine resources that were the foundation of their livelihoods. The Florida case demonstrates how mainstream print presses serve as important sources of negative information about the commercial fisheries industry for readers who have little or no personal daily contact with that industry. Destructive and comprehensive as negative stereotyping proved to be in the Florida case, I suggest that mainstream print representations play a more subtle, complex, and fundamental role in the public forum than just that of contributing to negative, or even positive, stereotypes.

Mainstream print press representations of the various segments of the commercial fisheries industry that circulate in the public forum are created through the strategic use and omission of key voices, and through the deployment of certain historically and culturally specific themes. In the print articles and images analyzed in this paper, the theme of local, regional, and state economic well-being and the theme of conservation are central to the news coverage of the conflicts over marine fisheries resources. But such themes must be understood as grounded in the economic, environmental, and political relationships that constrain some kinds of marine resource production and enable other kinds of production. Culturally specific themes can mask and reinforce fundamental social and economic inequalities in access, utilization, and regulation of marine resources. Subjecting the stream of available images, narratives, and cultural themes to a critical accounting in light of the economic, political, and social relations of power in which access, utilization, and regulation are anchored, illustrates the contradictions and ambiguities of seemingly straightforward themes such as economic well-being and conservation.

This paper[1] is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Galveston Bay region conducted between October 1983 and November 1984 (Sullivan 1988), as well as subsequent anthropological investigations in the region. Ethnographic field investigation included long open-ended interviews with harvesters (men and women), representatives of other marine user groups, and government personnel. It also included observation on commercial fishing trips, in bait and seafood shops, and at public hearings.

Specifically for this paper, I collected all *Houston Chronicle* and *Houston Post* articles and editorials about commercial fisheries production published from January 1987 through December 1994. All printed representations of commercial fishing were recovered using keyword searches for fishing, commercial fishing, oystering, crabbing, shrimping, and finfish as well as fisher, oysterer, crabber, shrimper. The articles were separated according to the section of the paper from which they came, and whether or not they were news articles or columns or editorials. The pieces were arranged chronologically and counted. Then recurring topics and themes were isolated and tallied, and the names and professions of the people who were quoted and/or pictured in each article were recorded and tallied for each year. Fisheries producers were further categorized by their social and economic role in fisheries production. The images accompanying the pieces were also catalogued and analyzed. The resultant information was used as the basis for mapping the changing contours of print news coverage as well as for the finer-grained critical analysis of representations of the commercial industry.

The first section of this paper describes fisheries production and the social terrain of conflict over marine resources. The second section sketches the contours of regional print news reporting about commercial fisheries production. In the third section, I subject the mainstream print representations to a finer-grained, critical anthropological analysis elucidating whose voices are heard, images are seen, whose are not, and the cultural themes about commercial harvesters which are invoked in the print news. I conclude by reflecting upon the relationship between mass media representations of commercial fisheries production and the political economy of fisheries production.

Conflicts over Marine Resources and Commercial Fisheries Production

Since the Second World War an impressive amount of coastal and upstream real estate, industrial, and agricultural development has visibly altered Texas coastal and marine ecosystems, especially in the Galveston-Houston area. The marine resources of the Galveston Bay complex evince a long history of subsistence, recreational, and commercial exploitation, but the numbers and kinds of user groups have grown exponentially since 1945. Fisheries regulatory agencies have also grown with increased use and competition. Within this arena of dynamic environmental, economic, social, and regulatory changes, commercial fishers persist.

A myriad of interwoven political and economic struggles has impacted commercial fisheries production in the last 55 years. The most salient struggles include conflicts between: (1) environmentalists, regulatory agencies, and harvesters over species preservation; (2) the inside and near-shore outside waters harvesters who shrimp and the Gulf Shrimping Fleet over access to shrimp resources; and (3) the politically astute and economically powerful recreational fishing industry and commercial fishers over physical space in the ecosystems and fish species.

The most prominent regional, national, and international struggle to date has been over the required use of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs)[2] on mechanized shrimp trawls (see Durrenberger 1992; Margavio and Forsyth 1996; and Maril 1995:166-177). The struggle over the installation and use of TEDs waxed and peaked between 1989 and 1991. The news coverage analyzed here spanned that climax. Mandatory TED use was extended to inside waters in 1993. In 1999, the relationship between sea turtle strandings, mechanized shrimp trawling, and TED usage, remains politically contested. However, court rulings in favor of the environmentalists' position curtailed the most virulent opposition. A struggle over defining, assessing, and mitigating the impact of commercial fisheries by-catch on marine ecosystems developed in tandem with the conflict over sea turtles strandings and TEDs.

The required use of TEDs has driven segments of the commercial industry to form unexpected, if often ephemeral, political alliances. This has been the case for the Gulf Shrimping Fleet and the inside and near-shore outside waters harvesters who oppose TEDs. Different segments of the industry, who commercially shrimp, share a history of political and economic competition which grew stronger after changes in the management of the Gulf of Mexico fisheries in the mid-1970s (Maril 1995:148, 157-164; Sullivan 1988:68-69). With mixed degrees of commitment, these two competitive segments of the industry have pooled their resistance to the imposition of TEDs regulations. In spite of the TEDs alliance, vociferous members of the Gulf Shrimping Fleet continue to advocate the closure of all Texas bays to commercial shrimping, publicly arguing that this is a means of conserving juvenile shrimp stocks. Harvesters, who shrimp in the inside and near-shore outside waters, would be deeply impacted by such a closure.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Texans were embroiled in a public regional battle over commercial finfishing in the inside and near-shore outside fisheries where commercial and sport-fishers competed for both physical space and specific fish species (Maril 1995:149-157; Sullivan 1988:143-144, 162-165). The conflict was truncated when the commercial harvesting of redfish (red drum) and speckled trout was banned in 1981. However, sport-fishing groups continued to press for the elimination of all commercial gill and trammel net fishing by publicly advocating conservation of threatened finfish stocks. In 1988 all gill and trammel nets were banned in Texas marine waters. In 1993 all freshwater commercial netting was banned. Sport fishers and environmental groups continue to push for bans on menhaden purse seines, shrimp trawls, and red snapper long lines. Commercial bait shrimpers supply sport-fishers with live bait, further complicating relationships between the sport and commercial fishing industries.

In the mid-1970s a number of people relocated from Vietnam to the United States. In the Galveston Bay area, a number of immigrants took up commercial fisheries harvesting, wholesaling, and retailing. They concentrated their activities in the inside and near-shore outside waters due to U.S. State Department immigration restrictions. A great deal of tension arose because of increased numbers of economic competitors (not all of whom were Vietnamese), stricter regulatory regimes (Sullivan 1988:65-74), misinformation, and cultural and ethnic differences in language, work style, issues of personal space, and money management (Starr 1981). Although an undercurrent of tension persists, the Vietnamese community and other less-visible Asian groups are now a significant part of the commercial fisheries industry, especially in the Galveston Bay area. Maril found that by the late 1980s, a greater degree of acceptance of the Vietnamese had begun to emerge in Texas (1995: 201-237). However, as demonstrated in my analysis, a silence in the Galveston-Houston mainstream print media persists with regard to the Vietnamese presence in the commercial fisheries.

As this short discussion of the conflicts over marine resources indicates the commercial fishing industry in Texas is neither a socio-economically homogeneous nor a politically monolithic block of producers. My political economic analysis of the commercial harvesting industry is grounded in theoretical ideas about how petty commodity producers are integrated into capitalist economic formations. A constellation of political economic features is used to identify the different categories of producers and investigate the relationships entangling these different producers in the encompassing web of industry production and market relations, governmental regulatory regimes, and environmental conflicts over access to and utilization of resources. A political economic approach is best for: (1) identifying and describing all of the significant groups of harvesters; (2) locating these same harvesters and marketers in the social, economic, regulatory, and environmental relationships which constrain and enable their continued work; and (3) exposing the consequences of media representations for producers (for other analyses of contemporary petty commodity producers see Blim 1992; Cook 1976; Kahn 1980; Koptiuch 1992).

Commercial fisheries production in the Galveston-Houston area is stratified between producers who target a

single species and those who target more than one species. The Gulf Shrimping Fleet relies predominantly on mature brown shrimp (*Penaeus aztecus*) found in the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf Shrimping Fleet is largely characterized by a labor relationship where trawl owners hire career captains to operate their boats (Maril 1983). A snapper fleet and a menhaden fleet also ply the Gulf of Mexico off the Texas coast, although occasionally the menhaden fishers follow their prey into the waters of the Galveston Bay complex.

In addition to the single species harvesters, there are harvesters who concentrate their efforts on the inside and near-shore outside waters. In the Galveston Bay complex, many of these harvesters share important political economic commonalities including: (1) their production strategy of mixed species harvesting and their small scale of production; (2) their economic position in the industry in relation to brokers, wholesalers, and processors; (3) their political position in relation to the political and governmental management hierarchy; and (4) their political position in relation to other user groups (Sullivan 1988).

Many harvesters plying the inside and near-shore outside waters rely on shrimping for an important part of their income and hence they are often called the Bay Shrimping Fleet by regulators, anthropologists (Maril 1995), and the press. However, many of these harvesters shift their capture between various marine species, depending on the harvester's age, seasonal availability of a species, and material resources. This point about the harvesters' mixed species capture practices is not readily apparent when these harvesters are represented as the Bay Shrimping Fleet, and yet different kinds of representations have significantly different material ramifications. These operators are most likely to be owner-captains or captains working someone else's boat just long enough to make enough money to acquire their own boats. Their crews are often composed of immediate family members including spouses, siblings, children, or extended family members including affinal relations. These crews generally do not leave home for extended periods of time. A number of the wives of these commercial harvesters also operate a bait shop or fish shop, thus capturing some of the benefits of vertical integration (Sullivan 1988).

Galveston Bay is an important site for Texas oyster production (*Crassostrea virginica* Gmelin). Natural oyster reefs in Texas are public and open to all harvesters with the appropriate license, in the appropriate season, provided the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and/or the Commissioner of Health has not declared a reason for closure. There are also private oyster leases in Galveston Bay. Leaseholders are generally associated with shucking and wholesaling firms. Only harvesters working for the leaseholder may harvest from a private lease. Some oyster harvesters and wholesalers working in the Galveston Bay complex deal almost exclusively in oysters while others are more diversified. Often, Galveston Bay harvesters who shrimp the inside and near-shore outside waters also oyster in season, especially when they are younger, more vigorous, and have more financial responsibilities (Sullivan 1988:42-44).

Crabs are commercially harvested in the Galveston Bay complex. Until limited entry in 1998, some harvesters relied exclusively on crabbing while others included crabs in their mixed species harvesting regime. At one time, commercial finfishing (using skiffs and trammel and gill nets) significantly contributed to the income of a number of small-scale, mixed species harvesters working the Galveston Bay complex. Regulatory changes in the 1980s, resulting directly from conflicts between the sport fishing industry and commercial fishers over marine resources, stopped gill netting and all commercial redfish and speckled trout harvesting. Many mixed species harvesters legally sold crabs and finfish from their shrimp trawl by-catch until such practices were curtailed by more stringent management regimes.

Historically in this region, smaller-scale, inside and near-shore outside waters, mixed species harvesting developed locally (Hildebrand 1981:6; Maril 1983:77). Commercial single targeted species harvesting regimes, such as snapper fishing and Gulf shrimping, developed out of state and moved into Texas (Maril 1983:75-97; 1995:115-145; Mullen 1978:xxviii-xxix). Regulatory changes during the last 25 years have steadily eroded the types of species that can be commercially harvested, restricted gear, and reduced both the time and physical terrain of commercial harvesting. Harvesters must now concentrate on fewer species in smaller territories, which exacerbates conflicts within and between segments of the commercial harvesting industry. Harvesters now invade territories once thought to be the preserve of competitive segments of the industry. At the same time, the expansion of claims on marine resources by other interested groups, especially sea turtle environmentalists, has motivated new, ephemeral political alliances between competitive segments of the commercial harvesting industry.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department manages the commercial and recreational exploitation of marine fisheries resources out to nine nautical miles. The Texas Health Commissioner can also prohibit commercial and recreational harvesting for reasons of pollution and biological contamination, and regularly curtails oyster harvesting. In spite of the loss of work and income, harvesters and wholesalers are generally publicly supportive of the Heath Commissioner's closures because any publicized news about the presence of diseased or contaminated oysters on the market damages all oyster sales. National Marine Fisheries Service and the Gulf of Mexico Management Council manage fisheries resources beyond nine nautical miles to two hundred miles. The National Marine Fisheries Service, Coast Guard, and Texas

Parks and Wildlife Department all have law enforcement agents working in the marine fisheries.

Newspaper Accounts of Commercial Harvesting, 1987-1994

Although television news figures more prominently in mass media–saturated United States society, the print media are directly and indirectly responsible for producing more news products for the U.S. market than is television (Schudson 1998:287). This section analyzes the general contours of print news about Texas commercial harvesters and their industry found the regional press. The two regional sources of print news in the Galveston Bay area at the time of this project were The *Houston Post* (*Post*), which ceased publication in early 1995, and the *Houston Chronicle* (*Chronicle*).

I analyzed all of the articles about the commercial fishing industry published in both papers from January 1987 through December 1994. I conclude that a reader, unfamiliar with the commercial industry, could not, solely on the basis of the articles, accurately reconstruct the ideological and material relations of power in the political and economic conflicts over marine fisheries resources. While a fair portion of the information necessary for an accurate reconstruction is embedded in the articles, in order to actually glean and assemble the pieces, a reader would need to know *a priori* the significant conflicts, various parties' interests, and their economic and political relationships. The reader would need to deploy a critical eye toward the arguments through which each party advances its own position, including that of the reporter or writer. The reader would also need to be critical enough to separate news stories from the Sports and Outdoors pieces as well as other regular columns in the paper. Because the various bits of pertinent information are presented over a very long time span, and in conjunction with a multitude of other unrelated topics and issues in the newspaper, even an astute reader would probably find the task of a reasonably accurate reconstruction daunting.

In the analysis that follows, unless otherwise specifically indicated, descriptive statistics and descriptions refer only to news items, that is, articles from the news and business sections of the papers. I included: (1) articles specifically about the industry as well as those roughly outlining the industry's worth to the Texas economy (including articles which began appearing in the *Chronicle* in the 1990s about Galveston Bay as an ecosystem, and those about oil spills that threatened commercial harvesting); (2) articles about the positions and interests of workers, owners, regulatory agencies, the courts, and/or oppositional user groups in conflicts over access, use, or regulation of marine fisheries resources; (3) human interest stories about harvesters; and (4) articles containing information specifically relevant to the commercial harvesting industry. Rare news articles about random non-business events were excluded. Sports and Outdoors sections, regular columns, and editorial opinions are treated separately because these writers were expected to argue from a well-defined editorial position. As expected, Sports and Outdoors writers evinced a bias in favor of the sport-fishing industry at the expense the commercial industry. Also as anticipated, sea turtle environmentalists' editorial opinions took a vehement position opposing commercial shrimp trawling.

The overall number of articles referencing or directly reporting on the commercial fisheries industry varied from year to year depending upon the occurrence of social or natural disasters, or political events, such as controversial regulatory changes. For example, from 1987, 1989, and 1990, when controversy over sea turtle strandings, shrimp trawls, and Turtle Excluder Devices was peaking, many more articles about the industry were published than in 1988 and the years 1991-1994, when there was no such controversy. Overall, the *Chronicle* published more news articles that pertained to commercial fisheries production than did the *Post*. If the pieces published in the Sports, Outdoors, and Editorial sections are included, the scales would tip even more heavily in the direction of the *Chronicle*.

From 1987 through 1994, *Post* reporters were inclined to represent commercial harvesters from a more openly sympathetic standpoint than did *Chronicle* reporters. This may in part appear to be the case because *Post* reporters simply quoted more people in the commercial fisheries industry than did *Chronicle* reporters. A simple year-by-year comparison of whose voices were quoted (i.e., people associated with the industry versus all others including governmental personnel, environmentalists, etc.) indicates that in the *Post*, in four of the eight years surveyed more industry people were quoted than all others. In the *Chronicle*, the same survey indicates that industry people were quoted more frequently than all others in only two of the eight years.

Whose quotes were used to represent the industry was also an important factor, and while the next section explores this in more detail, a few observations are relevant here. *Post* reporters tended to include a wider variety of people associated with the commercial fisheries industry (e.g., harvesters, wholesalers, retailers, seafood restaurateurs) than did *Chronicle* reporters. *Post* reporters often included quotes from the lower-income, and usually smaller-scale, participants along with quotes from the financially better-situated participants. Including quotes from a diversity of participants meant that the mixed species harvesting strategy was mentioned occasionally and that the plight of the lower-income participants was more accurately reported. *Chronicle* reporters did not evince the same populist tendency in their choice of industry interviewees.

Articles in which oystering or shrimping are the main topics appeared in both papers. In addition to articles about industry opposition to regulatory changes, fishers are featured in human interest stories. When floods or oil spills disrupted commercial fisheries harvesting, reporters often included the dollar value of the commercial industry to the Texas economy, along with the dollar value of the recreational fishing industry, as a way of conveying the seriousness of the disaster. Reporters often quoted commercial industry representatives' opinions on the disaster, especially oysterers and wholesalers. Commercial snapper fishing was never the subject of a news article in the eight years examined, although commercial snapper fishing was a recurring topic in the Sports and Outdoors sections. Snapper harvesters were never actually quoted in either paper. Menhaden capture was only a topic when a purse seine broke in the bay and a fish kill washed ashore. The actual menhaden harvesters were not quoted although the construction clean-up company representative was quoted. By 1987, long since banned commercial finfishing no longer appeared to be a newsworthy topic, but Sports and Outdoors writers continued to disparage commercial finfishers. I shall conclude this section with a brief overview of the Sports and Outdoors sections.

Sports and Outdoors writers consciously blend news with editorializing in a way that news reporters do not. In so doing, they contribute significant amounts of information (which is not always accurate) to the public forum and they reinforce certain themes and viewpoints. Both the *Post* and *Chronicle* published regular Sports and Outdoors writers, and the *Post* also had a regular environmental columnist (Harold Scarlett). Columns in these sections never took a sympathetic view toward commercial fisheries producers, nor were they supportive of continued commercial fisheries production. An analysis of the Sports and Outdoors pieces published in the *Chronicle* demonstrates the kinds of information and opinions contributed to the public forum by Sports and Outdoors writers.

The number of articles and columns in the *Chronicle* Outdoors and Sports sections varied from year to year, but generally the *Chronicle* published between a 1:1 ratio and a roughly 1:3 ratio of sports and outdoors pieces to news articles. Some of the articles in both the news sections and Sports and Outdoors sections were just informational pieces announcing upcoming events, such as the Texas Parks and Wildlife Public Hearings schedules. But the majority of Sports and Outdoors articles and regular columns are extended commentaries on the commercial and recreational fisheries industries.

Chronicle Sports and Outdoors writers favored the recreational fisheries industry in a way that the *Chronicle* news reporters did not. For example, even after commercial redfish and speckled trout harvesting and all gill and trammel nets were banned in Texas marine waters, sports writers continued to disparage this segment of the commercial industry for their alleged impact on redfish stocks, and their curtailed, but still blatantly lawless behavior. These writers repeatedly alluded to all commercial fishers as undisciplined lawbreakers, but portrayed lawbreakers in their own sport-fishing ranks as exceptions who were soon to be disciplined by the conscientious moral majority of sport-fishers. After 1990, Outdoors writers regularly discussed the alleged impacts of commercial long lines, seines, and trawls on snapper stocks. One regular Sports/Outdoors writer frequently and harshly disparaged shrimp trawlers for their by-catch, calling it "by-kill." He also wrote a yearly column or two instructing sport-fishers in the fine art of fishing down current for game fish that feed on that by-catch. This same writer emphasized that payment for both a cooler of chum and for tying-off on a shrimp trawler is to be made in beer, not in cash. I suggest that these payment instructions reinforce a negative cultural stereotype that the commercial harvesting industry is rife with alcoholics and transient workers, especially the Gulf Shrimping Fleet.

These observations about the kinds of information available in the public forum are not lightly made. The relations of power and economic competition which obtain between the sport-fishing industry and the commercial fisheries harvesting industry have repeatedly played out in such a way that the commercial industry loses access to marine fisheries resources. The segment of the commercial industry composed of the smallest scale, usually least economically resourceful, mixed species harvesters has consistently suffered the worst losses in the struggles.

Whose Voices, What Images, and What Themes Represent the Commercial Industry?

Commercial harvesters, retailers, and wholesalers working in the Galveston Bay area claim that the representations of themselves, their industry, and their products published in the mainstream press contribute to the political and economic conditions of operation for their industry. Commercial fisheries harvesters, government regulators, and law enforcers, as well as other marine resource user groups, including environmentalists, sport-fishers, and sport-fishing industry personnel, mobilize the mass media to assert their positions and interests with regard to the uses and regulation of marine fisheries resources. But the press is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a direct conduit between parties expressing an interest in common property resources and the larger public. Every article published in the *Post* and *Chronicle* was authored and circulated through a corporate production regime. These seemingly straightforward observations about the press' role in the public forum warrant both emphasis and further elaboration.

Critical mass media analysts contribute to our theoretical understanding of how the meanings which end up in circulation are produced, who produces them, and how different relationships between key players, including governments and media corporations, influence the public forum and the meanings circulating in it. They focus attention on the material and ideological dimensions of production practices, as well as the ideological content of the products (Curran and Gurevitch 1996; Grossberg et al. 1998; Hall et al. 1978; Kellner 1995; Yang 1997, 1999). The circulating meanings embody relations of power even before they are introduced into the public forum. Warner (1992) points out that the public forum is never simply a venue, in whatever stage of completion, where information, in whatever stage of accuracy, is shared and ideas debated. He argues that from its inception, the public forum itself is an embodiment of relations of power that define who can and cannot participate, and how participation will be conducted. Accounts of production practices on the newsroom floor also contribute to our understanding of how the stream of available representations is anchored in the cultural, political, and economic relations of their production.

Ethnographers studying newsrooms highlight the role of the cultural practices of news reporters and editors in the authoring of media texts. Reporters frame and represent the voices of the different user groups and agencies when crafting their stories. Editors reframe and select the stories that become the news. Soloski (1997:143-145) examined mainstream news production by conducting ethnographic field research in a newsroom. Although Soloski does not discount editorial intervention in the selection and even the construction of news stories, he argues that U.S. news reporters are guided mainly by professional norms of objectivity, and by the need to find and use reliable sources (also see Eliasoph 1997). Soloski defines objectivity as a balancing of different points of view in the crafting of stories. Eliasoph's (1997) ethnographic investigation of the production processes at an oppositional (left) news source confirms the deeply ingrained and pervasive presence of this norm of "balanced reporting" among U.S. reporters. However, her analysis also aptly demonstrates that just where the boundary of editorial intervention begins and ends is contested terrain and in practice that opens the notion of "balanced" to redefinition. Observations, like those of Soloski and Eliasoph, about cultural norms at work in newsrooms underscore the importance of cultural practices in the authoring of news stories. Schudson (1996: 154-155) argues that cultural content (values) and cultural form (historically specific literary traditions) fundamentally shape reporters' end products, the news stories. The themes which reporters select in writing their own narratives, the themes and arguments which their informants stress, and the informants' themes which reporters elect to stress, all contribute to the kinds of information which circulate in the public forum.

My empirical analysis of the stream of print press coverage found that not all voices and interests share equal access to expression in mainstream Galveston-Houston regional print publications. In the regional print press, white males were generally quoted about the industry point of view on regulatory changes and disasters such as flooding or oil spills. Speakers included fishhouse owners, wholesalers, and harvesters who were usually captains and very seldom deckhands. A pool of about 12 white males was regularly quoted in the *Chronicle*. A number of these men own established wholesale businesses in addition to their boats. Most of them have held offices in one of the trade organizations including Political Involvement of Seafood Concerned Enterprises (PISCES), Texas Shrimpers Association (TSA), and Concerned Shrimpers of America (CSA). TSA officers and executive directors were very heavily represented in the pool of both male and female voices quoted in the *Chronicle*. One expects that the president and the executive director of a trade organization representing an industry would be called upon for public commentary. Trade organization offices lend credibility to both the quote and the reporter's story. Some sources, and not just commercial fisheries industry members, actively seek out reporters or simply make themselves available to the press. The pool of industry speakers in the *Post* was mainly composed of white males, but was more diverse and repetitions were dramatically fewer. I note again, however, that fewer articles pertinent to this study were published in the *Post* than in the *Chronicle*.

Four women were also repeatedly quoted in *Chronicle* news articles. Two women in that group held offices in TSA, and another has devoted her life to a highly public campaign against environmental degradation caused by chemical plants on Lavaca Bay, which lies south of Galveston Bay. On rare occasions, a few other women were quoted and usually each of these women was defined by her relationship to her husband (e.g., Sharon, a shrimper's wife).

By the late 1980s, the Vietnamese community comprised a significant component of the full-time harvesters and retailers in the Galveston Bay complex. But in the *Post* and *Chronicle*, Vietnamese were rarely quoted or photographed. They generally only appeared on the printed page when the issue of racial antagonism was raised or when they were named as culprits in articles detailing the ticketing and arresting of lawbreakers. Even when a human interest story specifically focused on a Vietnamese family or the community, it was usually organized around the theme of Vietnamese integration into the larger community. These infrequent human interest stories were often juxtaposed with a story about one or a few non-Vietnamese harvesters that was also laced through with the theme of increasing tolerance in the face of economic

competition. Very rarely were people with Vietnamese names quoted about regulatory changes or disasters.

From January 1987 through December 1994, the *Chronicle* ran a number of articles that included information about TEDs violations and arrests. These articles commonly either made a blanket statement as to the number of violators cited and/or included a list of violators with Vietnamese last names. Much less frequently did reporters include violators' names that were not Vietnamese. Data on violators arranged by ethnic group was, of course, not available, and perhaps more violators did have Vietnamese last names. However I would submit that this observation as to when Vietnamese last names appeared in the news is significant, especially in light of the related observation that the Vietnamese were virtually absent in almost all other news articles about the commercial fisheries industry.

Thus far I have described the industry voices which were quoted in the print press. However, the way in which the industry was represented in the mass media cannot be derived solely from what industry spokespeople were quoted as saying about themselves and their industry. Representations of the commercial industry also depended upon who else was quoted, how reporters told their stories including which culturally important theme was emphasized, and what images and rhetorical devices were deployed. The images that accompanied the texts played a considerable role in building the portraits of the various segments of the industry that circulated in the public forum. I next address the roles of images, juxtaposed quotes from other user groups, and the historically and culturally grounded themes that reporters used in crafting their stories. I begin by examining the most commonly invoked cultural themes found in the *Post* and *Chronicle* articles.

Two salient and broad themes were discerned in the regional print media coverage. The first was that of the well-being of the local and state economies, and the second was that of conservation. Harvesters deployed both of these themes. They were also situated within these themes, sometimes in ambiguous and contradictory ways, by reporters as well as by the other user groups and government agents being quoted by reporters.

When the theme of local, regional, and state economic well-being was invoked with regard to commercial fisheries producers, the voice of the person quoted, or of the reporter acting as narrator, tended to point out the positive contribution of commercial fisheries production to local and state economies. Sometimes when deploying this theme, voices also emphasized one's economic right to make a living through productive labor. Photographic images of one or two white males with their gear and boat either working, returning from work, or being prevented from working, or images of men in the fishhouse sorting fish or husking oysters, often accompanied news articles. Women, although rarely photographed, were pictured in their places of work in their roles as retailers and managers in bait stands and fishhouses. Vietnamese, Asians, and other ethnic groups, were almost never pictured but when they were photographed the images were predominantly poses of men at work. Vietnamese men were often pictured in the company of their wives. Most of the pictures of harvesters captured a rather romantic image of a masculine, independent, very often economically beleaguered fisherman who works with his hands and who is also a businessman. However, these were not the only kind of images which accompanied news texts about the commercial fishing industry.

Different kinds of images reinforce different, often contradictory notions and cultural themes about commercial fisheries producers and production. In addition to the images described above, news articles about commercial fisheries production also included images of the Coast Guard boarding commercial harvesting boats, National Marine Fisheries Service and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department bureaucrats and law enforcers next to their own boats, and pictures of marine biologists. These kinds of images can either lend credibility to the notion that harvesters are independent businessmen who work with their hands or they can invoke the notion that harvesters are independent, difficult to discipline, and lawbreakers. Maril, who did not clarify where the press coverage he was discussing originated, felt that the pictures showing unshaven, tired, handcuffed shrimpers published during the enforcement of the Lacy Act in the early 1980s made the men look like outlaws, resonated with local negative stereotypes about shrimpers, and contributed to public misunderstanding of the issues (Maril 1995:163). In the same passage, Maril also points out that law officers were represented as just doing their jobs while shrimpers were not portrayed as just doing their jobs. Maril's observations about these representations of law enforcers also hold true for the press coverage that I analyzed. However, most of the print *news* pictures of harvesters published in the *Post* and *Chronicle* over the span of my analysis did not seem so harsh and print *news* coverage in the Galveston-Houston area portrayed commercial industry participants in a more complex way than Maril suggests. Again I emphasize the difference between news and the Sports and Outdoors sections of the papers. I also point out that pictures of spectacular social events, such as the commercial harvesters' blockade of Texas ports in 1989 over the mandatory use of Turtle Excluder Devices, were actually fairly uncommon, just as the events were.

Gurevitch (1996:219-221; also Gurevitch, Levy, and Roeh 1991) argues that verbal stories and especially visual images in the news are filled by news producers with local and culturally specific meanings that tap local and culturally specific myths. While certainly not absent, negative stereotypes about

commercial shrimpers as drinkers and transients may not be as prevalent in the Galveston-Houston area. The majority of local harvesters are very much integrated into their local communities in this area. They are not engaged in long trips away from home, their wives run local bait and seafood shops, and the blessing of the boats is a tourist attraction in Kemah and Galveston. Articles about both shrimping and oystering ran in the *Post* and *Chronicle*. Commercial oystering in this area engenders fewer environmental conflicts than does shrimping and this may mitigate a more derogatory portrait of commercial harvesting in the local news. In 1987 when the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department threatened to close the bays to commercial oyster harvesting due to an alleged stock shortage, news articles represented oysters as hard-working, beleaguered, economically important members of the community. But localized, culturally specific meanings and myths are not static. For example, the culturally specific theme of conservation has developed new and socially pressing dimensions in the last thirty years in the United States. In recent years, mechanized shrimp trawling has become a conservation issue in the public forum where some people argue that the practice devastates the bay floor and drowns sea turtles. These increasingly publicized conservation ideas about mechanized trawling serve to indict commercial harvesters in new ways.

The portrait of commercial harvesting in the Galveston-Houston mainstream print news was complicated by two other important kinds of pictorial images which accompanied news articles. Schematic images were commonly included in both the *Post* and *Chronicle* news articles. These images included maps, diagrams, and tables. Schematics serve three purposes. First and most superficially, they inform readers by presenting pictorial explanations about such things as TED construction and supposed operation, the location of oil spills and protests, and various marine species' biological habits. Second, these schematics are devices which distance the writer and the article from an appearance of political partisanship by reinforcing a sense that the article is impartial, factual news. Third, their format and style of data presentation serve to reconfirm the reader's sense that the reporter is knowledgeable about the people, economic relationships, processes, places, and species discussed in his or her piece. Schudson (1996:154-155) argues that because news is a culturally specific literary form, certain literary devices serve to establish a reporter's authority to speak about a topic. My second and third observations about schematics demonstrate Schudson's point. Schematics, like the facts that they convey, are always embedded in a tangle of cultural assumptions and material relationships of power. Schematics more often occurred in news articles deploying the theme of conservation.

A third and important kind of image accompanied news articles: pictures of animals, and especially sea turtles. The public forum has been the site of extensive conflict over the relationship between mechanized shrimp trawl operations and the drowning of endangered sea turtles. Baby turtles, turtles entangled in nets, and sketches of a turtle escaping through a TED inserted in a net sometimes appeared in news articles about sea turtle strandings, shrimp trawling, and TED usage. These can be powerful and evocative images which lend a great deal of weight to some of the arguments invoking the cultural theme of conservation. And in the context of a heated public debate such as that over TEDs, reporters and editors are also in a position to make subtle gestures about commercial harvesting. For example, those graphic illustrations of tiny baby turtles or a turtle struggling in a net also invoke the notion of the rapacious commercial fisherman.

Harvesters and wholesalers presented themselves as hard-working and beleaguered businessmen when I interviewed them. As the above discussion indicates, reporters also represented harvesters that way, at least some of the time. But the cultural theme of conservation complicates the way in which harvesters are represented in the mass mediated public forum. Commercial shrimping, which is at the center of several environmental conflicts, serves as an excellent pivot for discussing the complex way in which the theme of conservation was deployed in the regional print press.

News reports about the controversial TEDs took a number of twists through time. Initially quotes from harvesters in both the *Post* and *Chronicle* lodged two main objections. These were: (1) TEDs were unsafe, and furthermore harvesters could ill afford insurance premiums, and (2) TEDs would reduce catches below an economic rate of return feasible for continued operation. Harvesters were represented as feeling that this was deeply and economically unfair to them. These quotes, as well as some of the encompassing text, invoked the theme of local, regional, and statewide economic well-being by pointing to the financial contribution of commercial fisheries production as well as the economic rights of producers. Reporters occasionally included a commercial industry person who expressed a belligerent refusal to deploy TEDs, but generally those remarks were quoted in the context of the above reasoning. And harvesters were adamantly and publicly opposed to installing TEDs. However, as the social controversy heated, the theme of economic well-being gave way to the theme of conservation and the portrait of the commercial industry became more fluid and complicated.

Harvesters repeatedly lost their numerous political and legal skirmishes resisting the implementation of TEDs regulations. As that happened, diverse governmental representatives (e.g., career bureaucrats, law enforcers, officers of the court, spokespersons for politicians) assumed an increasingly dominant role as news sources about TEDs. Several reasons for this can be suggested. Government agents and politicians took a more public and proactive position in the controversy

because of a series of lawsuits, threatened lawsuits, and demonstrations by various conflicting user groups. When reporting about the lawsuits, reporters obtained and used more official press releases. The use of official sources also served to distance reporters from the appearance of political partisanship. As the lawsuits were decided, the editorial position of both papers came to rest on the notion that TED usage was the law, and the law is the law. This positioning became increasingly clearer in editorials. The *Post* and *Chronicle* reported violations and began to feature the Coast Guard doing their job. Through time, although never completely excluding commercial fisheries industry voices, many of the news reports about TEDs and by-catch assumed greater distance from the producers' voices.

What of the environmentalists also quoted by the news reporters? Quotes from people representing environmental NGOs were used in the majority of articles about TEDs, especially in the *Chronicle*. The quotes tended to come from a very small group of people representing an even smaller number of organizations and their position was consistently portrayed as being homogeneous. As were the fishers' quotes, environmentalists' quotes were passionate. They vehemently disparaged commercial harvesting and harvesters. Their quotes deployed the twinned themes of conservation and the rapacious, greedy, shortsighted fisherman. They were quoted as saying commercial harvesters were scofflaws, lawbreakers, and bullies who got their way by vehement, vocal, often illegal protest. Spectacular mass media events, like the July 1989 coast-wide blockade protesting the mandatory use of TEDs, may have fueled this image. The environmentalists claimed in the mass media that the blockade proved the fishers were lawbreakers. It bears noting that environmentalists' opinions were sometimes published in the editorial pages, but no commercial industry spokesperson's opinion was published in the same venue during the study's time span.

As mentioned above, Sports and Outdoors writers often deployed the theme of conservation by painting commercial harvesters as rapacious, greedy lawbreakers and sport-fishers as conservationists. When these writers deployed the theme of economic well-being, it was to emphasize that the gross financial contribution of the recreational industry far outweighed that of the commercial fisheries industry. Once again I point out that news coverage differs from the coverage found in the Sports and Outdoors sections. However, this is not to suggest that readers made that finer point of distinction between articles, especially since *Chronicle* Outdoors writers' columns were styled to look like news features.

The theme of conservation was not invoked solely by commercial fisheries industry outsiders. The presidents and executive directors of the Texas Shrimpers Association regularly depicted themselves as environmentally friendly, which they may have been, even supportive of TEDs, which they adamantly opposed, and supportive of strict law enforcement after TED usage became mandatory. However, TSA represents only the Gulf Shrimping Fleet owners and there is a longstanding economic competition between the Gulf Fleet and the other harvesters who commercially shrimp. For a very long time TSA has openly opposed continued commercial harvesting in the bays, and often claims that bay closures would be a conservationist practice that would protect juvenile shrimp. Their published quotes sometimes contained critical remarks about the anti-conservationist practices of the inshore and near-shore harvesters who shrimp in the bays. Initially TED regulations did not apply to trawls operating in the bays, and thus reporters may have sought out those industry members directly impacted. However, harvesters who work the bays were also involved in the anti-TED blockade of 1989. In the early 1990s, several harvesters who work the bays told me that they had no illusions about TEDs being confined to the Gulf. They believed it was simply a matter of time before the regulations applied to their production regime as well as to that of the Gulf Shrimping Fleet.

Over the eight-year time span covered by this study, I discerned an editorial shift toward a greater inclusion of the cultural theme of conservation, especially in the *Chronicle*. In resonance with shifts in the national mainstream print press' treatment of the "environment" during the early 1990s, *Post* and *Chronicle* reporters and editors placed greater emphasis on representing Galveston Bay as a complex ecosystem. The occurrence of three severe oil spills in 1990, the appearance of a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, and the Army Corps of Engineers' proposed enlargement of the Houston Ship Channel and proposed construction of Wallisville Dam in the early 1990s appear to have contributed to this shift in editorial focus. However, the theme of conservation did not completely displace the theme of the well-being of the state and local economies. *Chronicle* news coverage of disasters as well as the Army Corps's proposed construction projects, usually trotted out the economic contribution of the seafood industry to the Texas economy, especially the multi-million dollar shrimping industry, along with the economic worth of other marine resource-dependent industries. This practice underscores the complex way in which various historically and culturally specific themes contradict and reinforce each other over time in mass media news articles. As this analysis demonstrates, conservation is a very broad theme and many different groups of people fill it with many different and contradictory meanings.

Conclusion

This paper explores the relationships between the narratives and images available in the Galveston-Houston mainstream print news and the political economy of Texas

commercial fisheries production about which those newspapers publish. Observations deriving from an indepth analysis of mainstream print press coverage about commercial fishers motivate further reflection upon role of representations in the public forum.

In closing, I will briefly elaborate upon one example from the Texas fisheries illustrating some of the material and political impacts of representations. In my ethnographic portrait, I very pointedly do not identify fisheries producers primarily on the basis of the specific species that they target, nor the geographical locale in which they work. I avoid the common practice of defining contemporary fisheries producers, especially in developed countries like the United States, on the basis of an individual or single-target species. Rather, I use production practices and positioning within the larger web of economic and political relations to situate producers in relationship to each other, regulators, and other marine resource users. This analytical frame in conjunction with data based on extensive field observations more accurately captures production practices and the conditions of production for the whole range of commercial fisheries producers. Harvesters, fisheries managers, and local reporters know that many of the harvesters working inshore and near-shore waters shift their production between various species on the basis of seasonal availability of species, stage in the producer's life cycle, and social and economic positioning within the commercial industry. *In practice*, fisheries regulations are constructed around the governance of individual species. *In practice*, commercial harvesters identify themselves according to the species that they are currently harvesting (e.g., "I am a shrimper", "I am an oysterer"). And *in practice*, print press reporters define segments of the industry according to single-targeted species. While descriptions based on a single-target species adequately represent some segments of the commercial fishing industry, they also contribute to the political and economic marginalization of other segments of the industry.

Recently in Texas, limited entry or license management governance regimes have been implemented for Bay shrimping, bait shrimping, and commercial crabbing. Since limited entry programs are aimed at professionalizing fisheries production, they always establish criteria as to who can and who cannot continue to harvest the species under consideration. Usually these criteria specify some minimum percentage (51 percent) of one's income that must be derived from harvesting the species under consideration. Harvesters, who earn their living through mixed or multiple species harvesting practices, rely on their access to several different species and they can be placed at an extreme economic disadvantage when limited entry governance regimes are implemented. They are prevented from harvesting a species if that species does not comprise a majority of their productive income, even if that species contributes significantly to their income.[3]

Descriptions of fishers based first and foremost on targeted species find their way into mass media representations where they contribute to public understanding about producers. This, in turn, reinforces those descriptions even when the descriptions do not accurately reflect actual production practices. The effects of representing all fishers as single-target species harvesters, especially when designing regulatory regimes such as limited entry programs, illustrates just one way in which representations play out in the material livelihoods of producers, especially smaller-scale, mixed-species harvesters.

In media saturated U.S. society, the remark that mass media play a significant role in defining the contours of local and national environmental conflicts seems to be a statement of the obvious. But what processes can be theorized for the role of print mass media as a source of information and a form of communication in an environmentally-oriented public forum? What relationships are critically important? It is much more common to rigorously and critically theorize and evaluate the material production relations in mass media industries, and the authorship and circulation of mass media representations, than to theorize the reception and effects of those representations. This paper suggests that relating the mainstream print press narratives, images and cultural themes to the political economic conditions of the production process being represented, helps illuminate a dimension of the effects of representation not generally considered.

The relationship between economic issues and environmental conflicts is intertwined in complex and contradictory ways in the contemporary world. The causes for declining fisheries stocks, as well as conflicts over other marine resources, are multiple in origin, not always understood, and never easily reduced to simple cause-and-effect equations. Solutions that are equitable and palpable for everyone involved are not easily created or implemented. Furthermore, mainstream print press representations of resource conflicts are ubiquitous and work in very subtle ways to help define the contours of environmental issues and regulatory regimes. Deeper understanding of conflicts requires that these mass media representations in the public forum be critical reflected upon and assessed in light of the political, economic, and power relationships between and within all of the interested parties.

Notes

1. A shorter version of this paper was presented at the 1996 Society for Applied Anthropology Meetings in Baltimore. The author thanks Eve Darian-Smith, Mike Jepson, Sarah Meltzoff, Patrick Sharp, Susan Stonich, Priscilla Weeks, and the anonymous reviewer for *Culture & Agriculture* for their comments on various drafts of this paper.

2. Turtle Excluder Devices are hatches installed on mechanized shrimp trawls which shunt sea turtles out of the submerged and dragging trawl. Use is mandatory in all U.S. waters, however their effectiveness is a highly controversial subject.

3. The author thanks Priscilla Weeks for help in developing the specific example of the impact of limited entry, and also points out that in the early 1980s, Texas commercial redfish, speckled trout, gill net, and trammel net bans impacted mixed species harvesters in a very similar way.

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