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The Pensacola Outpouring: Reviving the press

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ABSTRACT

The Brownsville Revival, also known as the Pensacola Outpouring, is one of the longest-running locally based but internationally impacting movements in modern history purportedly inspired by the Holy Spirit. News coverage of it already has spanned more than fifteen years. This study looks to media literature on framing as well as research on journalistic portrayal of religion in formulating a coding scheme examining North American newspapers' stories on the Pensacola Outpouring. The work finds mostly positive coverage, with the balance of sources and tones of leads and overall story being favorable toward this movement. Examination identifies one major frame and several secondary ones.

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1. Introduction

That morning in 1906, the *Los Angeles Daily Times* comes to the door with a thud, the sound likely reverberating through hearts of those who had gathered at the city's 312 Azusa St. In looking at "Weird Babel of Tongues: New Sect of Fanatics Is Breaking Loose" on page 1, breaking news of a revival led by William Seymour.

Going into the story, the feeling only worsens for these faithful:

Breathing strange utterances and mouthing a creed which it would seem no sane mortal could understand, the newest religious sect has started in Los Angeles. Meetings are held in a tumble-down shack on Azusa street, near San Pedro street, and the devotees of the weird doctrine practice the most fanatical rites, preach the wildest theories and work themselves into a state of mad excitement in their peculiar zeal (Staff, p. 1).

One hundred years later, the pages of the paper tell a very different story, "Pentecostals Praise God in Many Tongues," in an account of the centennial festivities of the long-running Azusa Street Revival:

Under a large tent replicating the original size of the old church, event organizers, internationally known pastors, community leaders and invited guests held an opening ceremony and dedicatory prayer.

Then, with the blowing of the shofar – a ram's horn – by a contingent of Messianic Jews, the festivities began with hundreds of people spreading out across Noguchi Plaza singing and playing music.

Several thousand people, some with babies in strollers, lingered at the plaza well into midafternoon to worship with songs and dances.

Pentecostals are known for their spontaneous, fervent worship style and praying aloud (Kang, 2006, p. B3).

The contrast in tone of the articles is striking. Holy Spirit-focused believers form more than one-fourth of the Christian population worldwide, some 500 million people, including 90 million in North America (Pew Forum, 2011;

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Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches of North America, 2013). Yet their practices – speaking in tongues, prophecy, and working miracles, among them – are highly controversial within and without Christendom. Journalists historically are thought to be less enthusiastic about religion than the average person (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). But is it possible that these faithful get a fair hearing in the press?

To examine this, the present study looks at news stories on the last great Pentecostal revival in North America: the movement at Brownsville Assembly of God in Pensacola, Fla. Starting on Father's Day 1995, the revival stretches into the next decade and is still written about in today's media.

The media coverage of the Brownville Revival – also labeled the Pensacola Outpouring – is heavy and high profile. Looking at this coverage in North American newspapers, generally the media's opinion leaders, is vital to the faithful and secular alike. The more frequently a topic appears in the news pages, the more important it is to readers (McCombs, 2004).

Additionally, while there has been little in the way of journalism framing studies of religious activity, examining stories on this revival helps test a popular and comprehensive theory of how media cover spirituality.

2. Revivalism and journalism

Revivalism stirs the body, soul, nation and even the world. As Larson writes, "The New Light" preachers of the era of the Great Awakening are "master persuaders" who prove "a powerful instrument for reform" (Larson, 1971, p. 216). Charles Finney and Billy Graham follow in the footsteps of the revivalists of old, sowing seeds among the faithful and those who would be.

Religion has quantifiable effects. Koubek (1984) finds Christian high school students have positive correlations between religious commitment and academic achievement. This commitment can overcome problematic life situations (Jeynes, 1999).

Some of this life change is trumpeted in the past by the Penny Press, which, starting in the 1830s, seeks to cover stories of interest and excitement to the ordinary American – the proverbial "man on the street" (Buddenbaum, 1998). Indeed, the media have played an important role in revivals, talking of Wesley, used by Mather, and hyping Moody (Evensen, 1998).

Playing upon this, Mark Silk's *Unsecular Media* (1995) asserts that, contrary to Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) and the earlier study of Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter (1980), news reporters are not necessarily antireligious. "They do not approach [religion] from the standpoint of the secular confronting the sacred." (Silk, 1995, p. 55). "They are operating with ideas of what religion is and is not, of what it ought and ought not be – with topoi – that derive, to varying degrees, from religious sources."

These topoi are ways of identifying and classifying news about religion. According to Silk, they are: good works, tolerance, hypocrisy, false prophecy, inclusion, declension and, of most interest to the present study, supernatural belief.

Silk's book states that this last area is a constant struggle between religionists, who usually have little empirically

to support their assertions, and journalists, who demand such proof. The author declares media should simply report claims of the miraculous, but that unfortunately also treads on the territory of sensational tabloids.

Curiously enough, Silk's work, coming the first year of the Pensacola revival, relates "whatever journalists' personal beliefs, the mainstream news media's approach to the supernatural has become more tabloid than skeptical – often less skeptical than that of church authorities" (Silk, 1995, p. 122).

In looking for research confirming or denying Silk's observation, only a handful of studies look at how religion is framed, let alone Christianity or its Pentecostal subset. Such studies in the Christian realm generally examine through a mainly political lens, such as Kerr's study of Christian fundamentalism (2002), in which he finds a somewhat negative coverage over a two-decade span.

Very few works resemble Abbott's analysis of coverage of Promise Keepers (2006). Even Abbott's article, while well done, is not quantitative in nature. It does, however, suggest stories about theologically conservative Christians' beliefs and practices can be positive. Sitten (2011) reports fully one-third of her sample of major newspapers' religion stories concern this topos, but she does not examine affect of news items.

Countering what may seem like an emerging pattern of support for Silk's thinking is Moore's (2003) testing of the former's topos of hypocrisy on the case of the Rev. Jesse Jackson's marital infidelity, in which Moore finds media are more complex than conceived by Silk.

Adding to the difficulty in discernment is the statement by the highly respected Judith Buddenbaum that "religious journalism of the kind practiced openly by earlier generations" is now "the province of specialized publications" on religion (Buddenbaum, 1998, p. 92).

There is also the realization in studies of media and religion that though movements outside the mainstream may receive major coverage, this reporting still can marginalize (Chen, 2003; Clark & Hoover, 1997). Abbott (2006), through asserting stories on members of Promise Keepers tend to feminize the group, hints at this as well.

There then are at least two schools of thought contending in the present study: One, Silk's, sees the increasing likelihood of positive framing, while the other thinks marginalization may occur regardless of volume of coverage.

3. Method

Understanding media framing is vital to comprehending the current work. A frame is the central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning in a news story (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

A frame seeks to put a particular vision of the story and its meaning into the reader's head. In this way, it is like the well-known theory of agenda setting, in which it is generally acknowledged the media set the issue agenda for the consuming public, but the latter focuses more on sheer volume of messages rather than the qualities of the messages themselves (Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

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